



Title of Issue: The Ethnographic Edge Volume 1, Issue 1, 2017

Editors: Jacquie Kidd and Robert Rinehart

To cite this article: Fitzpartrick, Katie. 2017. "Research ethics versus ethical approval: A response to Tomaselli." *The Ethnographic Edge* 1, (1): 21–33. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14663/tee.v1i1.20>

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14663/tee.v1i1.20>

To link to this volume <http://dx.doi.org/10.14663/tee.v1i1>

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Research ethics versus ethical approval: A response to Tomaselli

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Keyan Tomaselli's opinion piece provides a great deal of food for thought about a wide range of issues in research. I want to pick up here on one point he makes, which I think is worth further consideration: the issue of research ethics and approvals in ethnography. He notes that "bio-medical ethical models are imposed on anthropologists" and he raises concerns about how universities engage in the gate keeping of research approvals. This is an important point and one that might usefully be explored further in future issues of this journal. It seems to me that ethical approval has, indeed, been divorced from the academic field of research ethics, especially in qualitative research. As Tomaselli notes, we might question the right of "organisations [to] claim jurisdiction over the right of adult individuals or researchers to make their own respective choices". I think we might also seek to uphold the rights of young people—not only adults—to make decisions about the kinds of research they engage in and how their voices are represented therein.

Ethical issues in ethnographic research are, indeed, complex, locally and culturally specific, and are difficult to regulate. Part of this difficulty lies in the fact that ethnographic research is, by definition, relational. Romero and Walker (2010, 209) observe that "some of the most prevalent methodological and ethical questions in contemporary ethnographic research concern whose voice is heard and how it is represented". They note that "in theory and in practice, Institutional Review Boards require that the identity of individuals be protected and remain anonymous or at very least confidential" [sic] (223). Many ethnographers adhere to this approach because they are committed to protecting the identities of their participants, especially when the research concerns personal, legal, sexual or other sensitive materials. However, an assumption that people's identities *should* and *will* be obscured in research representations is also problematic, especially when this decision is made prior to even entering the field.

In the field that I work in—education—many practitioners want their work to be recognised and their names associated with research studies (especially when that research is reporting on innovative critical practice). In a critical ethnography of a school I recently published (Fitzpatrick 2013) the teacher in the study had exemplary critical pedagogical practice. He was an expert at engaging diverse and marginalised young people in school (a site which often alienates), and he enacted a playful, political and caring approach to his teaching. After a great deal of discussion, we (he and I) decided to use his real name in reporting the study (and his photo graces the front cover of the book that resulted). This was as much an ethical decision as it was to obscure the identities of the students in the text. The students' names were changed because they disclosed information about themselves and others that would be compromising if their real identities were used. In the case of the teacher, however, I felt his practice should be acknowledged and celebrated in the book, and that changing his name would do a disservice to his achievements as a teacher. It was an intentionally political decision.



As a critical ethnographer, I believe it is not possible to separate the researcher/s from the contexts and people with whom we research. In this, of first and foremost importance, are the relationships (and responsibilities) we have with people, communities and environments. It is impossible to do critical ethnography without attending to ethical decisions along the way (Madison 2012), and this includes weighing up the right to anonymity with the right to visibility and recognition. However, this was not possible to know in advance. It was only as a result of the research process and the relationship of trust that Dan (the teacher) agreed to be named in the book (and that I came to understand this as the most ethical decision). An institutional review board could not possibly make a decision about this in advance. And so, ethnographic research ethics very much lie with the individual researcher.

Along with Tomaselli, I find it troubling that university review boards, who have no relationships with or knowledge of participants in a certain context, feel that they somehow ‘know better’ than the people in these contexts. This is a condescending and patriarchal approach to research, driven by a discourse of protection but underpinned with contempt and disrespect. In the context I work in, teachers are seldom trusted as the professionals they are. Instead, when they wish to do research (for Masters or PhD work) in their own schools, they are treated with suspicion.

I agree that we need to think carefully about the potential for research to be exploitative, to reinforce marginality, to misinterpret and to re-colonise, but as a researcher I always feel most obligated to the people in the setting I am working in, in articulation with the wider cultural politics (i.e., power relations in terms of gender, ethnicity, social class and so forth). Koivunen (2010, 683) observes that “ethnography serves as a flexible way of doing research that allows researchers to adapt to unforeseen contingencies and to subject their research experiences to investigation”. This very flexibility means that, in the end, questions of ethics rest with the ethnographer. We must make (sometimes daily) decisions about when and what to record, about what the conditions of consent are and whether our participants can possibly know all that they are consenting to. The ethnographer must decide what to report on and how, and what to leave out. They must resist taking over the research and making it about themselves, while also being clear about their own relational involvement, their responsibility to be clear and reflexive about the limits of their viewpoints and the depth of their theoretical and methodological commitments. Ethnographic texts are crafted, and writers must also decide how to balance aesthetics with authenticity, how to make texts readable without going beyond the bounds of what they are (ethically) able to claim. In many ways, it is impossible to regulate these myriad micro decisions. It is questionable whether review boards should try, and certainly worth considering how much trust can and should be placed in researchers. I share Tomaselli’s call for further debate about the power of institutional ethics review boards and the need for “critique of some ethical clearance assumptions”. I guess as a field we need to ask whether trust can or should be regulated and, in the end, whether we are most responsible to our institutions or the communities in which we work and research.

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