

**REVIEW**

# Ethics and research: A situated and relational approach

Philip D. Carter

School of Engineering, Computer and Mathematical Sciences, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

**Correspondence**

Philip D. Carter, School of Engineering, Computer and Mathematical Sciences, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.  
Email: pcarter@aut.ac.nz

**Abstract**

This article examines the dynamics between ethics and research. Ethics can be liberated through research and research empowered through ethics. The core precepts of consent, choice, and rights can be made more relevant and humane when they are not just external edicts but are cultivated as a living ethic within the relational system they operate in. The value of generating a vision that evokes participation is outlined. The call to be individuated and involve oneself in the immediate circumstances is embodied in the article. It is hoped that it will encourage ongoing examination of the core factors that impact on ethics and research and, more ambitiously, that people will be encouraged to participate and involve others.

**KEYWORDS**

consent, ethics, participation, reciprocity

This paper invites the reader to step back for a wider perspective of the factors that impact on ethics in research. It makes some examination of the nature of consent, the role of culture, and the movement between individual and group identities. It outlines the value of reciprocity in relationship and how it can be nurtured. It analyses core assumptions about how things work, including choice and rights. To illustrate these points, it takes a visit to the dementia ward to see if anything survives the onslaughts and degradations from within, before finally ascertaining the value of generating a vision.

## 1 | CONSENT

The following three scenarios illustrate different aspects of consent, highlighting how it is not always straightforward.

- Through the consent form, participants are informed that they have free choice and can withdraw at any time. Jenny read the information sheet. It is clearly important research that is going to benefit society. She doesn't have to participate if she doesn't want to.
- Peter has read the information sheet and is fully informed. He is excited that he can be involved in this important research. He admires the researcher too. He really wants to assist in any way he can.

- In order to mitigate possible feelings of embarrassment or obligation, the ethics committee requested Dave to ask the respondents if they are willing to receive an invitation. Dave is not sure if he should email them, text them, or perhaps phone. He wonders how he could first find out what their preferred medium of communication is.

There are many factors that impact on individuals' capability for freely given consent: their degree of personality development has and whether they have an internal locus of authority and do not abdicate responsibility; their inherited and instinctual drives to belong to a group and fit in; the habit of measuring their self-esteem through others' perceptions; the desire to make a worthwhile contribution. Implicit and explicit power is present in many relationships, in that a patient may wish to please a doctor, a student to impress their teacher, a client to please their therapist, a participant to assist the researcher, and so forth. There are a multitude of factors impacting on the individual giving consent.

Consent is typically required at the beginning of the work or relationship. However, the degree of consent able to be given will vary during the relationship's progression. If we consider psychotherapy and a client whose habit is to please others, then ability to give free consent is more a function of trust developing in the relationship as the work progresses. It is not something that can be considered a done deal at the beginning. A "yes" at the beginning is a beginning. This is well highlighted and illustrated in Daniel Larsen's (2013) exploration of consent in psychodrama therapy.

Ethics is not only a written code or set of regulations but also an attitude or posture towards what is present in the actual circumstances. Likewise consent. In response to circumstances that emerge and were not foreseeable, additional consent can be sought.

## 2 | CULTURE

Researching across, or between, cultures, where the researchers may be of a different culture from the researched, or the organisation supporting the research is different from them, gives rise to interesting dynamics. For example, Māori in New Zealand stress the relationship—with respect and trust being generated in a friendly field of reciprocity in an ongoing process of goodwill. There is the anticipation that if misunderstanding or distress arises, then this will be made known to the other and interventions will be made. All things do not have to be explicitly written. Anonymity may not be desirable from the participant's point of view, given the invisibility that has been endured at different times historically. The participants may also wish to continue to exercise some control over how the results are written up. Research protocols can be devised to incorporate these things for mutual benefit, and are explicit in research approaches such as action research.

Australia has had a different historical experience in relations between the indigenous and new settlers. Presently, some of those wishing to improve conditions for an indigenous group face multiple challenges. Emma Kowal's (2015) book, *Trapped in the Gap: Doing Good in Indigenous Australia*, named a "white stigma," where whiteness is associated with suppression. There are attempts to be "white anti-racists," where there is no further chance of exploitation. The non-indigenous person working with indigenous people may experience a great ambivalence in exercising agency.

A systematic review of seeking consent in research with indigenous communities (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016) concluded that ongoing consultation with the indigenous community is required in order to determine how consent can be sought and how the process can be evaluated.

The movement between an individual identity and a group identity is in a heightened state of flux for many groups and cultures. The emphasis on the individual self appears to be an historically recent one. Enormous benefits have been gained: self-responsibility, self-determination, individual rights, dignity, targeted action, and personal choice. A long list of negative effects can also be argued: fragmented and uncoordinated efforts, selfishness, entrenched self-referencing, isolation, alienation, fear, opinionated reactions, narcissism, self-interests, and ecological and environmental disregard.

There will be considerable challenges for ethics and research in this transitory period. One useful approach is cultivating reciprocity.

### 3 | RECIPROCITY IN RELATIONSHIP

Reciprocity can operate within differences of influence and power. It does not require equivalence in power. This is a very useful thing to appreciate; it makes reciprocity workable under conditions as they are and does not require that they first be changed.

The Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document of New Zealand, offers an example of how reciprocity in relationship may be workable in the midst of different world views and aspirations. The indigenous Māori people agreed to joint government under a core condition that there would be a partnership. It appears that at least some of the signatories of this treaty were farsighted and astute enough to realise that no stipulation of specific rights or laws could remain current through the passing of generations. The claim for this quality of insight appears justified by the reading of various accounts from the time. My own research into the experiences of my grandfather's Ngare Raumati iwi (a tribe of New Zealand) supports this and is well presented in Aison Jones and Kuni Kaa Jenkin's (2017) book *Tuaiti: A Traveller in Two Worlds*.

This commitment to the relationship, without specifying the logistical details, is the essence of the marriage vow. Perhaps it can be seen as lore sitting in the heart of law. It is also the essence of the Confucian system that facilitated substantial periods of well-being for the Chinese people.

If people were connected with their conscience, their inner code of care and respect for self and other; and if the actual experience of self and other were the basis of knowledge and action; and if the individual could stand on their own two feet and not defer to external authority; and if there were a commitment to be with things as they are, the complexities, ambiguities, and real difficulties; if all that had reached a critical mass, then human relations would be ethical with or without rules. The ethos or code would have been inhabited. But it isn't. This is a considerable challenge; law and enforcement cannot cause or result in a person inhabiting these required sensibilities, attitudes, and capabilities. The expression of a worthy ethos, no matter how simple and direct, is also not enough. For example, the ethos of equality can turn into an ideology that suppresses individuality and makes difference wrong. What then are the conditions in which the desired abilities can be developed?

There is a bounty of other useful research topics and questions that can be generated: Is the removal of all risk worth the cost of the removal of opportunities for professional practice? What are the conditions in which rules inhibit the capacity to be considerate and cultivate socially responsible behaviour? In what conditions will the sense of personal responsibility increase with a contraction of prescriptions? In what conditions is a person safe?

Insight into this last question could throw light on the dangers of sole emphasis on external conditions to create safety. If emphasis is only put on what the physical environment should be and what the authority in the situation must do, and not on what the conditions are that stimulate and encourage the individual to be present, then safety is severely compromised. If an individual gives all power to the external conditions being met, they will be weakened. An individual's degree of wakefulness and connection with their own senses and capabilities will have a large, if not critical, input into their ability to respond to circumstances in satisfactory ways.

I pass by the local primary school and the pedestrian crossing just before school starts. The stop signs at each end that swing out are operated by senior students; they look bored. There is an adult supervisor at each end. The supervisors are looking at the traffic and making the decisions; the students defer. This deference is probably systemic: the supervisors are deferring to a directive; the headmaster, to the fear of parents; the board, to the threat of public criticism. There are many short and long costs in not giving opportunities to these students to exercise judgement which could well outweigh the risks of doing so.

### 4 | CHOICE: ATTRACTION AND REPULSION

Personal choice is a foundation premise for self-responsibility at the heart of our institutions. However, choice is not straightforward. A person's awareness of the decision to act occurs after the act has already been initiated in the part

of the brain that precedes action (Libet, 2004). You are already moving towards or away from something before the part of your brain that makes conscious decisions has got going. The thing we experience as choice is more a compass to the conscience for something that is already happening. It is not the driver but it has vetoing power that can stall or abort an act that has already been initiated. Although “experience of conscious will is not evidence of mental causation, it does signal personal authorship of action to the individual and so influences both the sense of achievement and the acceptance of moral responsibility” (Wegner, 2002, p. 317).

Reason may set up a desired behaviour and will fortify it in the person, but is not necessarily always needed to be the dominant faculty in moment-by-moment living. If liberation from the domination of the will and mental reasoning is desired, and one wants to live with other sensibilities and faculties in operation, then appreciating that the actual moment of action is a function of attraction and repulsion and not a conscious decision will assist.

## 5 | RIGHTS: IT'S A WORK

Rights is another core ethos that is strengthened and made more relevant and humane when it is not just an external edict but is a living ethic within the relational system it operates in.

A pamphlet mailed to women to promote breast screening is a typical example of an expression of rights. “As with all health services, your rights are protected by the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers’ Rights. These are: respect and privacy, fair treatment, dignity and independence, appropriate standards, information, choice and consent.” This approach contains falsities. Take respect as an example: there is the false assumption that respect is the status quo, that it pre-exists and can be protected. This is not how respect works. Respect is developed from lived experience within a relationship. If respect is demanded and there is found to be no respect, then blame and accusation come easy. The hurt experienced is cycled outwards and fortified. It will not be so easy to consider that real difficulties can be worked through in the relationship, respect generated and some restoration achieved.

Dangerous people and conditions arise and so explicit expressions of ethics, legal protection, rights and standards of behaviour are useful, perhaps critical. However, for them to be humane and successful, then emphasis will be put on working from what is and not from what “must be”. A humane approach also requires everyone to be included. That has to also mean the least liked person. This work is neither straightforward nor easy.

McIntosh (2016) offered some approaches for how companionship, learning, and the building of cooperative working relationships can be done in fraught situations. She focused on work with people who have already transgressed a professional boundary, dealing with the fallout from punitive reactions and exclusion of the professional. The work also includes the organisation.

*Regulatory bodies could develop the understanding that boundary transgressions potentially provide an educational opportunity for an individual practitioner, and indeed for a profession as a whole, and develop an approach that expands the capacity for growth and limits blame, shame and punishment. (p. 84)*

It is easy to create a list of grievances about unjust laws, out-of-touch committees, and bureaucratic bullying and blundering. These can be compiled as irritations or annoyances to add to a perpetual list, but there are larger evolutionary forces at work. Appreciation of these forces and the enormity of the challenge may lead to a sense of calm, that here is something worthy of our attention.

## 6 | THE MEGAMACHINE: POWER AND PROGRESS

Lewis Mumford (1966, 1970) described a shift in human consciousness that occurred around five thousand years ago with the rising of the worship of a Sun God of power, profit, prestige, and progress. The bureaucratic division of labour to construct the pyramids birthed a megamachine that has dominated affairs right up into today and through into

tomorrow with the fresh blood of the mechanisation of language and memory in the computer. Mumford (1970) offered compelling illustrations of how progress has been the chief organising principle in human institutions:

*Change itself became not merely a fact of nature—as it is—but an urgent human value; and to resist change or to retard it in any way was to “go against nature”—and ultimately to endanger man by defying the Sun God and denying his commands. On these assumptions, since progress was ordained by Heaven, regression was no longer possible. (p. 208)*

Joseph Campbell (1972) highlighted the deep connection between monotheism and the imperative to progress and make decisions:

*Man is therefore not to put himself in accord with nature—as in the ancient and oriental worlds – but to make a decision for the good, put himself in accord with the good, fight for justice and the light, and correct nature . . . . Where formerly there had been, as the ideal, harmony with the whole, there was now discrimination, a decision to be made . . . effort, struggle, and zeal, in the name of a universal reform. (p. 16)*

That utopian visions of recent times have been so easily allied with totalitarian brutality does not necessarily mean the desire for progress is intrinsically corrupt. The slice of the brain that holds ideology must get better integrated with the other organs of humanity. Plainly it is not easy. Not the least is, we are not about to give up the emotional independence of our thinking.

The efforts required to turn a mechanistic society into a humane one could well be equal to the efforts that were used to set it up. Work will be required in different areas, with different means, by different people. We no longer have Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, or Mohammed Ali. We may expect some second coming or a new leader. We can also visit the dementia ward.

## 7 | THE SECURE DEMENTIA WARD: OMNIA VINCIT AMOR

What is left when memory dissolves, concentration evaporates, and language departs? I hold my mother's hand. I sit. I watch the other residents in the dementia ward. I watch the workers and the family members come visiting. I see the loss of things we hold precious. However, I find there is one thing that is not lost. One thing that each resident knows and can receive and give back—love. Not sympathy to soothe fright, or placation that it will be okay, or any kind of appeasement masquerading as empathy; but the expression and experience of goodness. Finding this, observing this, my spirits are uplifted. The jumbled words and angry outbursts do not feed my own fright. I can take in the extraordinary frustration and bewilderment. A deep-felt sense of stillness does not preclude anything. Even the rough treatment by some of the workers does not disturb it. Nor does it stop me taking action.

The authenticity and operation of this “love,” like choice and reciprocity, can be known by genuine and precise attention to the sensibilities in each person's experience. They can only be known directly in subjective experience. What I am attempting to describe could be termed an ethic. I prefer to have it as a conviction, a personal commitment based on experience. The commitment is to come to heart, either through a movement into myself, or in a movement toward the other, knowing that however painful and distraught the situation, no matter how bereft I am of hope, that being with the spaciousness that I call heart will be possible.

To be a companion to another requires an ability to be with the self, as you are, to break the shackles of self-pity and placating of self. It might be that in this place of being with another that one notices the ego is unattended, dissatisfaction and disapproval dissolved, and worry about the future is a passing cloud. There is a “beingness” with things as they are; a presence, which could also be called love, kindness, mindfulness, stillness, spaciousness.

## 8 | CREATING A VISION: WORKABLE FOR THINGS AS THEY ARE

Success of an ethic will be greatly enhanced by individuation of members, commitment to relationship and to being with things as they are. A vision will be very useful, perhaps even essential. The formation of a vision will appeal to the dignity of being humane and call for all to participate and be valued, posed as an invitation and taken up voluntarily. Perhaps the process of creating the vision will set up conditions for members to participate. There can be multiple expressions by different groups. Here is the one developed for the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand Psychodrama Association (AANZPA) that sits in the heart of their documentation:

*The vision is of able men and women all over the place expressing themselves relevantly in the ordinary here and now situations in which they live and work. This expression may be in silence, in building, in planning, in negotiating, in teaching, or in play, but it will be a responsive and creative expression, an expression that brings joy to the human spirit, that uplifts the soul, that makes us feel part of the universe again. (AANZPA, 2015, p. 2).*

## 9 | WRAP UP

Embracing a vision sets up a direction for work for the well-being of all, even when the details are not known and the path ahead only clear to the first step. Such an approach can be likened to traditional Chinese medicine; the attention is not put on the condition or cause of illness but into getting the different parts of the system alive and working with each other, and in that wellness, the condition will be adjusted accordingly.

A vision that finds purchase in the hearts and imagination will evoke a collective emergence from domination by fear-based survival instincts into learning and community. If the intellect has to function around the thing that has been identified as having value and will strive to protect it, then let the thing be something in accord with the deepest longing and worth.

There is the danger that a vision can turn into an object that is external to the members of the group and become something that is used to judge, punish, or exclude. Focus on self-responsibility and individuation to develop an internal locus of control will be very useful.

It is possible a leader will come. A visionary. Perhaps from religion, from the arts or politics or business, maybe academia. It won't matter. Our antennae for truth and heart of authenticity will provide discrimination. Meanwhile, seeking reciprocity in relationship will offer workable ways to be formulated within conditions of power imbalances. Ways to invite involvement and engagement will be generated.

Applying precise attention to assumptions will be necessary to see where there is entrapment. A willingness to put up cherished ideas such as consent, choice, and rights for scrutiny will offer reward. It will be very useful to be alert to something that has become a "must be" and to do whatever is needed to bring in a more expansive expression of it that includes learning.

Just as important as research being subject to ethics, so ethics to research. Ethics that are workable are kept current and realistic through an attitude of research, a knowing of the value of learning, that there are continually new things arising and no final state of completion. It is expected that things will go wrong, real difficulties will arise, people will make mistakes. It is not useful to react to every little thing as if it were some disastrous failing of some moral core.

A research mentality that embraces learning in a reciprocal relationship will be highly beneficial to the working of ethics. It appears that goodwill, what some might call love, will win out, if only because no other thing has stronger lasting motivational pull. Perhaps it can be a gentle revolution that does not feed public fright or grow an ideology: a simple, gentle, and spacious approach that doesn't have to remove complexities or ambiguities. There is a hunger and a readiness for liberation and forward movement. Coming into one's own experience, to enhance perception and intelligence, will be very useful at any stage of an endeavour. Companionship will assist this greatly; imagination and creativity prosper in a friendly field.

Success requires that the people involved are supported, supervised, guided and educated. Any worth or usefulness that a set of laws and guidelines has is directly due to the integrity, dedication, and connectedness of the people who administer, monitor, and apply them. Without the human participants applying an ethos of mutuality, curiosity, and heart, no formulation of ethics will ever be able to foster or uphold an approach that is ethical.

If instead of applying ethics to psychotherapy research, we reverse it and apply the central posture and core dynamic of psychotherapy to ethics, a marvellous opportunity arises. If we take the living encounter within the relationship and perceive ethics within that, to be defined by that, to be generated and nurtured in that, then there is an invitation to participation, ownership, and direct relevant action. When ethics is an attitude of commitment and intent within a relationship, then it is something that we can participate in, that we are responsible for, for which our efforts get rewarded. We count.

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**Philip D. Carter, PhD**, is a psychodramatist with two decades' experience using the psychodramatic method. He has applied the method to endeavours in research, teaching, computer usability, social inquiry, organisations, individual and couples work, leadership training, men's groups, and domestic violence.

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