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Institutional Ethics Requirements and Anthropological Research Techniques,

or, why I want to join a university ethics committee

LORENA GIBSON

Massey University, New Zealand

'There is a general consensus among the Committee that your research topic is ambitious and sounds too hard.'

Silence. The twelve members of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) seated around the large, round table taking up most of the space in the conference room looked at me expectantly. Clearly I was to provide some sort of response to this opening statement.

It was November 2005 and I was attending a meeting of the Wellington branch of MUHEC. The committee meets every month to assess and approve (or decline) applications to conduct research involving human participants. From the beginning I had heard many comments about the 'challenging' nature of my topic: a comparative study of grassroots women's groups organising for education and economic empowerment in urban poor areas of Kolkata (India) and Lae (Papua New Guinea). My two field sites, and the four groups with whom I am working, are certainly heterogeneous. In answering the committee I thought back to a recent conversation I'd had with my supervisors about this.

'Well, one of my supervisors said if you're not going to be ambitious in your PhD, when are you going to be?', I said with a smile to cover my nervousness.

'Post-doc!', replied three of the members in unison. One woman, who I'll call Mary, said that part of their job was to make sure they approved projects that looked as though they were going to succeed. From that I inferred that mine didn't. This was not how I had anticipated an ethics review would start.

I had been looking forward to having my research reviewed. I take my ethical responsibilities seriously (what PhD student doesn't?) and had spent a considerable amount of time thinking about the best way to design my research. In this article I reflect on my experiences with MUHEC, in particular the mismatch between institutional requirements and anthropological research techniques.

In October 2005, I had my PhD research peer reviewed and approved by members of the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand, a process I enjoyed and appreciated for the thoughtful advice and comments I received from those present. That same month I filled out the 83-question 'Application for Approval of Proposed Research/Training/Evaluation Involving Human Participants' and submitted it to MUHEC, along with the requested information sheets, consent forms, confidentiality agreements, and letters of support from groups interested in participating in my research. (It took me around 80 hours to put these documents together.) Although it is not mandatory for PhD students to attend MUHEC meetings, I asked to be present when the committee reviewed my proposed research so I could participate and learn from the evaluation process. My primary supervisor is on the Palmerston North branch of MUHEC and we often discuss ethical considerations involved in anthropological research. Valuing her ability to provide thoughtful and constructive criticism, I looked forward to having a similar discussion about my research with a panel of interested and experienced researchers.

After the unexpectedly challenging start, most of the hour-long meeting was productive. We went through my application question by question and two committee members in particular were very helpful, raising issues I hadn't thought of and offering good advice on how to anticipate and troubleshoot potentially difficult situations. We had fruitful discussions about issues of language and translation, obtaining written consent, working with illiterate women, using local research assistance, reasons why I hadn't provided a formal interview schedule, and power relations inherent in the research. Some committee members were unhappy about the 'politeness trips' I had made to each city to gauge whether there was any local interest in my project prior to starting the research proper. This gesture had been very well received by community members in Kolkata and Lae. Apparently I should have called this a 'pilot study' and sought approval from MUHEC beforehand. The committee's

most 'serious concerns', and the focus of this article, were about the comparative nature of my research and what it perceived as a lack of forward planning.

Early in the meeting Mary (who is not a social anthropologist) wanted to know how, exactly, I was going to carry out comparisons in my research. 'There is a very big difference in population size and ethnicity', she said, referring to the numerous notes she had made. 'I don't see how you are possibly going to compare these two very different sites.'

I was a little puzzled. This question seemed more about methods than ethics, but I answered anyway. 'The comparisons are something I will develop over the course of my project. I'm interested in comparing the answers to the specific research questions I have, and the answers will be shaped by the different cultural contexts.'

After some discussion I realised that Mary was concerned that I might make unfavourable cultural comparisons between the groups, comparisons that might somehow position one group as 'better' than another. I explained that I was interested in issues such as hope, which is generally accepted as a universal concept, and that I wanted to see how this manifested in different social situations. Another committee member seemed to approve of this strategy and suggested that I could also compare how the groups ran their various educational and income-generating initiatives. 'Yes, this is going to be an aspect of my research', I said.

Unfortunately my response did not satisfy all of the committee members, as the letter I received approving the first phase of my research contained the following stipulation:

> Note: It was agreed that the activities and processes of the NGOs could be compared, but that comparative evaluations of cultural practices that reflect badly on any community should be avoided.

I say 'first phase' of my research because the committee eventually approved my research in two parts. The committee considered Phase One of my research to involve meeting with group leaders and selecting the initiatives that would form the focus of my study; with Phase Two including 'the observation,

questionnaires and interviews' with group members. The rationale for the two phases was that:

> The Committee felt that there had not been sufficient forward planning to enable the researcher to provide the necessary details for Phase Two of the study, at this time.
>
> When sufficient information is available to provide a detailed plan for Phase Two of the research, a second application will be required at that point. The Committee were particularly concerned that you must clarify what is being compared, and in what way and that you must be able to provide information concerning the numbers of people to be questioned and interviewed and the kinds of observations you will make, with respect to each participating organization and initiative.

We spent a good proportion of the meeting discussing numbers. From the nature of the questions in the MUHEC Application form ('How many participants will be involved?', 'What is the reason for selecting this number?', 'How much time will participants have to give to the project?') I was aware that I might have some explaining to do about my numerically vague answers. I faced a barrage of questions about the number of people involved in my study, which I had estimated as being 'up to 60'. 'We need a more specific number than that', said Mary. 'How many women from the groups will be involved?'

I couldn't answer that with any certainty. Anthropological research is flexible (some might say 'messy') and highly dependent upon forming personal relationships based on trust. This was certainly an important component of my research. I couldn't know in advance how many participants I would have. It might be that I formed good relationships with all the members of one group, whereas another group might only have one or two members interested in talking to me. I had no control over whether or not anyone participated in my research, and I didn't want to produce an artificial number to which I might later be held.

I had also guessed at the amount of time participants would give to the project. 'In this question you have indicated 10–20 hours, but that isn't specific enough', Mary said as we worked through my application. 'Exactly how much time will each participant be asked to contribute?'

'Well, I've estimated 10–20 hours based on discussions with my supervisors', I replied. 'Some key participants will be asked to do interviews of 1–2 hours in length while others will be asked to take part in focus groups.'

'So you'll only interview key participants?' was Mary's next question. Other committee members added questions of their own:

'What about the rest of them?'

'How many focus groups will you have?'

'How many people will be in each focus group, and how long will they last?'

I fielded this rapid succession of questions, then waited while the committee calculated the numbers in my responses. 'What you've just told us will put you well over your 'up to 60 participants' limit', Mary informed me.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that this was supposed to be a beneficial process. 'I haven't started my fieldwork yet', I said for the second or third time. 'I don't know how many participants I will have or how long I will spend interviewing each one. All I can do at this stage is estimate and anticipate.' The raised eyebrows and pursed lips of several committee members suggested that this was not the answer they wanted.

We also spent time discussing the nature of participant-observation fieldwork – my primary research method. During the conversation I sensed that while committee members were familiar with the techniques of participation and direct observation, there was some confusion about what *participant-observation* fieldwork entailed. I left the meeting feeling simultaneously disheartened and determined to one day become a member of an ethics committee so researchers using ethnographic techniques (not just social anthropologists) could be better represented and understood.

A growing number of anthropologists, including Patricia Marshall and Rena Lederman, have discussed the challenges associated with research design that anthropologists face in ethics reviews, including the lack of experience that review board members have in assessing anthropological methods.[1] Shortly after the first MUHEC meeting in 2005 I travelled to Washington D.C. to attend an annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (thanks to the Fulbright Program), where ethical issues and Institutional Review Boards were

the subject of much debate. I attended several panel discussions about ethics, one of which was chaired by Robert Borofsky, author of *Yanomami: The Fierce Controversy and What We Can Learn from It*, and had the opportunity to discuss my recent experiences with Rena Lederman.[2] I came to understand that my uncertain and flexible research design might have contributed to the committee feeling that it couldn't carry out its responsibilities, either to the University or to participants of the research.

My main problem was that I hadn't found the right language to use in order to communicate that I *did* have a planned, structured, methodological approach to my research. Ethnographic fieldwork is not entirely predictable and I wanted to be honest in my application, but institutional requirements do not leave much room for guesswork, hence the committee found that 'there had not been sufficient forward planning'.

I learnt from this experience, and the Phase Two application I submitted in 2006 had more specific 'guestimates' framed in language I hoped would be acceptable to the committee. It was. But I struggled with the language, feeling that I was obliged to write one thing while knowing that I intended to do something different. I was reassured by many other researchers that 'you write what you have to so the University can protect itself and then just do what you were going to do in the first place'. I have much more confidence in the peer review process I went through with the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand, as I was able to discuss and reflect honestly on ethical and methodological issues with people experienced in anthropological research techniques. And I am convinced that people like me need to join committees like MUHEC to bring new perspectives to the research review process.

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[1] See Patricia A. Marshall, 'Human Subjects Protections, Institutional Review Boards, and Cultural Anthropological Research', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 76(2), 2003, pp. 269–85; Rena Lederman, 'The ethical is political', *American Ethnologist*, 33(4), 2006, pp. 545–48; Rena Lederman, 'Comparative 'research': A modest proposal concerning the object of ethics regulation', *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 30(2), 2007, pp. 305–27.

[2] Robert Borofsky, *Yanomami: The Fierce Controversy and What We Can Learn from It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).