

Great Ethical Divides: Bridging the Gap Between Institutional Review Boards and Researchers

by Annette Hemmings

This article addresses the difficulties that educational ethnographers and qualitative researchers have experienced with what appear to be great ethical divides between their research approaches and the approval processes of institutional review boards. The author begins with a brief discussion of ethical issues involving human subjects in education research, then explains the divides as largely a consequence of different ethical frameworks and orientations toward applications of the basic ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. She also discusses the challenges of bureaucratic arrangements established to ensure federal compliance. She concludes with strategies for bridging the divides, with emphasis on the importance of representation, communication, education, and practical academic acumen.

I was fortunate as a graduate student in the 1980s to have studied with seasoned educational ethnographers. Although there was some debate among them as to how to do research in schools and other educational settings, they conveyed common notions about what they thought it meant to do “good” ethnography and related qualitative research.¹ Good educational ethnographers and qualitative researchers, we were taught, are adventurous in their pursuit of thick descriptive data on how school administrators,

teachers, students, and other actors make sense of their schools, homes, and other worlds. Such researchers conduct fieldwork in classrooms, corridors, and other natural settings; position themselves as the primary instruments of data collection; and do their best to forge rapport with participants in order to capture “emic” viewpoints on various social and cultural phenomena. Although some ethnographers and qualitative researchers construct initial guiding questions before they begin their studies, most do not formulate testable hypotheses, nor do they rule out the pursuit of new research ventures that crop up along the way. They gather data by engaging in participant observation, conducting open-ended interviews, and collecting documents, pictures, art, artifacts, and other archival materials. And their data collection methods evolve, as do most other aspects of their research.

The ultimate aim of educational ethnographic and qualitative research and, for that matter, education research in general, is to generate knowledge that contributes to the well-being of human beings and is otherwise beneficial to scholarship, policy, practice, or the people who participate in the research (Hostetler, 2005). Good educational ethnographers and qualitative researchers not only strive to make beneficial contributions but also are ethical in their relations with research participants. They may, and often do, confront thorny ethical dilemmas during the course of their fieldwork, which, it is hoped, they resolve in a fashion that does not hurt participants or do serious damage to the research.

More specific ethical guidelines are explicated in association standards and disciplinary codes such as the Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association

(AAA).² The AERA standards include specific guidelines intended to reinforce and strengthen standards enforced by institutional review boards. Education researchers are to respect the “rights, privacy, dignity, and sensitivities of their research populations and also the integrity of the institutions within which the research occurs,” and protect human subjects by maintaining confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and adhering to other IRB policies and procedures. The standards endorsed by the AAA encourage ethnographers and qualitative researchers to avoid doing harm or wrong to people and to respect the well-being of individuals, even if it means altering or discontinuing the study.

I lay all of this out for a reason. Many faculty researchers and graduate students, despite well-established methodological traditions and well-intended ethical standards, are confounded by seemingly intractable divides between notions of good, ethical ethnography and qualitative research and the ethical frameworks and applications of basic ethical principles endorsed by local institutional review boards (IRBs). The divisions have compromised and, in some cases, scuttled the research despite its potential benefits. This has happened to researchers at my university and other institutions (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004; van den Hoonaard, 2002). In van den Hoonaard’s edited volume, there is a sense of frustration among contributors; one reported waiting for 5 months before her qualitative protocol was approved, and another presented the case of a longitudinal study that was terminated because members of the research team were unable to address an IRB request to predict what subjects might say in follow-up interviews.

I have been especially embroiled in the divides because I conduct educational ethnog-

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raphy, once served on my university's IRB, have had three protocols approved by the IRB, and teach graduate courses on qualitative research where doctoral students are required to seek IRB approval for pre-dissertation research projects. I have been on both sides of the aisle as a former IRB member and as a researcher/consultant/teacher. Like it or not, I am in an ideal position to explicate the divides and provide suggestions for bridging them.

In order to avoid the irony of seeking IRB approval, I use anecdotal accounts to illustrate the difficulties with the divides that graduate students, colleagues, and I have experienced.³ I then suggest bridging strategies that have met with some success. It is, I conclude, quite possible for IRBs and education researchers to work together in a mutually beneficial effort to comply with federal regulations, promote good ethnographic and qualitative research, and, of course, apply ethical principles in ways that protect human subjects.

Divisions: Ethical Frameworks and Application Orientations

Decades ago, there were instances of unethical research in the human sciences that prompted the U.S. federal government to intervene. Most of us are familiar with Milgram's research on obedience, the Tuskegee syphilis study, and other experiments that were egregiously harmful to human subjects. The ethics of ethnographers have also been questioned sometimes by researchers themselves. William Foote Whyte (1934), who conducted the classic study of young "street corner" men in an impoverished Italian neighborhood in Boston, admitted to having engaged in double voting in local elections, retrospective falsifications of data, and other violations of professional ethics.

Unlike other social science and behavioral research, education research was regarded as largely risk free and not something that needed to be closely scrutinized by IRBs for ethical violations. This view was reinforced in the 1970s by a national commission established for the protection of human subjects. A paragraph was crafted for inclusion in federal regulations that allowed IRBs to exempt education research conducted in educational settings involving normal educational practices.⁴ Such exemptions were routinely granted until the late 1980s, when ethnographic and qualitative research began to take hold. Such research muddied the

"ethical waters" because its most salient features—intimacy and open-endedness—heightened concern among IRB members about what exactly researchers might do to, or with, potential participants (Howe & Dougherty, 1993, p. 18).

The exemptions that IRBs granted were no longer the rule, and this change, more than any other, caused ethnographic and qualitative education researchers to reconsider their ethical frameworks. Rachels (2003) describes a number of ethical frameworks that researchers have adopted, including ethical subjectivism, morality rooted in religion, feminist ethics of care, Hobbes's social contract, utilitarianism, and Kantian respect for persons. But as Howe and Moses (1999) observe, the principles that IRBs employ in their assessments of research protocols are "de facto Kantian" (p. 23). Most IRBs endorse Kant's categorical principle that people must always be treated as ends in themselves and never solely as means. Essentially what this means for research involving human subjects is that participants must be given the opportunity to weigh the risks and benefits of their involvement in a study. Such decisions should not be made primarily or exclusively by researchers. Individual autonomy is fundamental and must be respected, with special protections for children, prisoners, and other people who, because of their diminished capacity or circumstances, cannot make autonomous decisions. Tied to the notion of autonomy is privacy, which is regarded as a basic human need and right that also must be protected.

Individual autonomy, privacy, and related ethical commitments are the cornerstones of the framework that supports the three basic ethical principles guiding IRB deliberations. These basic principles are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.⁵

For IRBs, as Vanderpool (1996) explains, *respect for persons* generally means that research subjects are to be treated as autonomous agents and that those with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection. This principle also means that informed consent must be secured from human subjects, usually, but not always, with some guarantee of privacy through assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. *Beneficence* is defined as an obligation on the part of researchers to do no harm, maximize possible benefits, and minimize possible harms. *Justice* has to do with who

should receive the benefits of research and bear its burdens.

Institutional review boards are all governed by similar ethical frameworks and the same federal regulations, but local boards are different in terms of their cultures and operations. Ethical divides do not always occur, but when they do the chasm may be the result of disagreements over ethical frameworks. But another, often more common reason for divides is differences between the orientations of local boards and researchers toward the applications of the three basic principles. Since their inception, IRBs have been largely modeled on standard clinical trials, where it is assumed that researchers have clearly stated hypotheses, bounded relationships with their research subjects, procedures that can be described in some detail, and assessments of risks and benefits that are clear enough for subjects to be fully informed about them (Bosk & De Vries, 2004). IRBs in their workings are also very much affected by bureaucratic arrangements, which, among other things, are intended to head off legal liability for unethical research. IRBs, it is important to note, are set up as much for the protection of research institutions as they are for human subjects (Lincoln & Tierney, 2004). The problem is the perception among ethnographers and qualitative researchers that IRBs are not oriented in a fashion conducive to all types of research—especially theirs. This has led to logistical, methodological, and political disputes that have widened the divides over applications of the three basic principles. In the next three sections I discuss these disputes as related to each principle in turn.

Respect for Persons

The divide over the first principle, respect for persons, is most apparent in the requirement to secure informed consent. Few disagree with the Kantian premise that research participants ought to be regarded as autonomous agents, and there is broad consensus on the principle that children, prisoners, and other vulnerable populations should be given special protections. Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity is something that ethnographers and qualitative researchers were doing long before IRBs existed. Disagreements, when they do occur, are mostly the result of the IRB requirement that researchers obtain informed consent

from everyone directly involved in, or in the vicinity of, the study. This is usually accomplished through the distribution of written consent forms. For education researchers, especially ethnographers conducting extensive, holistic fieldwork in school buildings, the idea of obtaining signatures on consent forms from every single teacher, administrator, staff person, student, and student parent or guardian is often an overwhelming if not unreasonable precondition for data collection. The National Research Council acknowledges the burden and suggests ways to ease it, but also makes it very clear that in schools and other “closed systems . . . informed consent should be obtained from all those who are at the facility on a regular basis” (Citro, Ilgen, & Marrett, 2003, p. 106). This requirement is even more onerous when there are people in the “system” who are underage, illiterate, or do not speak English well or at all. While guidelines do state that consent and assent may be verbal, the IRB on my campus and, no doubt, those in other institutions are hesitant to approve protocols that do not provide some kind of proof that human subjects actually have been informed and that consent is completely voluntary. Gathering signatures on written consent forms happens to be the most expedient way to do this.

Unfortunately, such methods for securing informed consent have had deleterious effects on ethnographic and qualitative research. We have had doctoral students at my institution who wanted to do holistic school ethnographies that involved observations in multiple classrooms and interviews with several teachers and students. They were so daunted by the belief that they had to obtain written informed consent from every single person in the school that they decided to limit their observations to one classroom and their interviews to a handful of people, especially literate adults who were over 18 years old and could meet with them in places located outside the school building. As if these drastic accommodations were not enough, our IRB sometimes imposed more restrictions by requiring the exclusion of teachers and students who did not turn in signed consent forms. Graduate student researchers were thus barred from documenting the words and deeds of excluded individuals even if they were inextricably entangled in the social life of the classroom.

Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity may also be easier said than done. This is especially true in schools where people constantly talk to one another and keeping secrets is quite a feat. There is no way in such situations that ethnographers and qualitative researchers can guarantee that participants will keep quiet about their involvement in the study and what they know about other participants—nor, for that matter, should they necessarily try. This is especially true for ethnographers who purposefully immerse themselves in participants’ ongoing exchanges of thoughts, opinions, and information, including information about who said or did what to whom. While social immersion in the field is ideal for data collection, this methodological strategy runs the risk of being rejected by IRBs if researchers claim they can contain identifying disclosures in interactions where identifying disclosures are the norm. This is often a major obstacle and has led to many back-and-forth exchanges between IRBs and educational ethnographers. Until an IRB is satisfied that confidentiality and anonymity are ensured in a given study, approval of the study will be delayed. These sorts of negotiations can, and do, compromise the integrity of good ethnography and qualitative research. Unfortunately, the difficulties do not end here.

Benevolence

There are also divisions over applications of the principle of beneficence. Most IRBs apply this principle by encouraging researchers to provide a systematic analysis of risks and benefits that can be summarized in consent forms. The ethnographic and qualitative orientation is such that identifying risks and benefits is not easy, much less informing participants about them. That is because, as Bosk and De Vries (2004) explain:

[T]he risks and benefits for subjects are not so different from those of normal interaction with a stranger who will become a close acquaintance, an everyday feature of the lifeworld, and then disappear, after observing intimate moments, exploring deep feelings, and asking embarrassing questions. There is risk inherent in any fleeting human relationship—the risk of bruised feelings that come from being used, the loss when a fixture in a social world disappears, or the hurt of realizing that how-

ever differently it felt in the moment, one was used as a means to an end. (p. 253)

There is also the possibility that ethnographers and qualitative researchers may create misunderstandings, ignite tempers, fall in love, or become the unwitting love objects of participants. While such “risks” should be avoided, they are impossible to predict and certainly are not the sort of thing that gets reported in the types of formal risk-benefit analysis that IRBs prefer.

Risks and benefits are murky in ethnographic and qualitative fieldwork, but IRBs do expect researchers to articulate them. When board members are uncertain about risks, they may become overly protective in their assessment of a project’s dangers. This happened to one of my graduate students, “Jane,” who wanted to do a study of sexual harassment among adolescent students in a public high school. The topic is an extremely important one because of the enormous psychological and sometimes physical harm that sexual harassment can cause teenagers. It is also a rather dicey issue that definitely carries research risks, including the possibility of public exposure of students who are victims of, or witnesses to, sexual harassment. Jane came up with what she thought was a good strategy to lessen the risk. She planned to observe student social interactions in corridor spaces without any obvious associations with particular students. Students would then be surreptitiously invited to participate in interviews with the help of a guidance counselor. Interviews would be conducted in private locations with the usual understanding that responses would not be shared with teachers, administrators, or other students and that real names would be changed in transcripts and published reports. While Jane could not guarantee that students would not divulge their involvement in interviews, the actual identities of other interviewees would not be revealed by her or the guidance counselor.

Jane had done the utmost to guard the identities of student participants and ensure confidentiality. The chair of the IRB thought otherwise. She concluded that the risks remained high, so high, in fact, that she scheduled Jane for a full board review. I accompanied Jane to the review, where board members grilled her with questions and speculations about the potential harms to students. Jane held up quite well

during the review. But when the IRB sent a list of revisions, with the understanding that the protocol would be approved if they were addressed, Jane decided to change the topic and methods of research rather than face another round of review. One could argue that such scrutiny is a valuable experience for doctoral students. But there is a difference between holding students accountable through the critiques of scholars experienced in their fields and doing so through the questions of IRB members, who may have little or no understanding of the research presented in protocols. Lack of understanding generates misunderstandings, which can cause students, like Jane, to abandon controversial or challenging inquiries in favor of more innocuous studies to minimize the risk of brutal IRB reviews.

Justice

The principle of justice has to do with who should receive the benefits of research and who should bear its burdens. Most IRBs encourage researchers to apply this principle through the development of fair procedures and expected outcomes for the selection of research subjects. Normally, what that entails is a sampling plan that, among other things, makes it clear that disadvantaged groups (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities, women, prison inmates) are included in beneficial research and are not the primary bearers of burdens for research from which they derive no benefits (Citro, Ilgen, & Marrett, 2003). Educational ethnographers and qualitative researchers have no quarrel with such applications. What troubles them are instances where IRBs interpret the requirement to include teachers, students, and other school personnel in studies where “fair” inclusion is difficult or nearly impossible.

When I was on the IRB, we would occasionally conduct full committee reviews of qualitative studies examining or evaluating the effectiveness of a pedagogical intervention or innovation on a limited number of students. In the real world of schooling and school research, studying entire classes is not always feasible. Nevertheless, some of my IRB colleagues would identify excluded students who, because of their disadvantaged backgrounds or low academic profiles, should be given an opportunity to benefit from the intervention or innovation—

assuming, of course, that it actually worked. This meant adding an extra and, some researchers thought, unreasonable component to the study.

Even more thorny were requirements, also related to the principle of respect for persons, that the IRB would attach to qualitative studies where the researcher was a school administrator or teacher who occupied a superordinate position of power over study participants. Such was the case with a school principal in one of our graduate programs who, for his dissertation, was interested in interviewing and observing teachers in his building to find out the nature and extent of their commitments to democratic education. Although he made it clear in his protocol that teachers did not have to participate and no negative sanctions would be imposed on participants who did not embrace democratic education, the IRB refused to approve the study because members judged the selection process to be too coercive. They made this judgment even though the study carried minimal risks, was inclusive (every teacher was invited to participate), and dealt with a potentially beneficial educational agenda that had been under consideration long before the study was proposed. Despite the principal’s attempt to convince the board that the selection process was fair and noncoercive, and that teachers were actually looking forward to participation, the IRB dug in its heels and told him to conduct the study in another school. The student was disappointed with the recommendation until he realized just how unethical it would have been to conduct research on people over whom he exercised power. This is an issue that advisors should be aware of and, hopefully, concerned about.

There were other cases where the IRB would essentially require “dual role” researchers to separate voluntary research activities from obligatory school responsibilities so that participants could withdraw from the research part whenever they wanted to. This kind of compartmentalization entails tricky methodological adjustments that can be challenging for administrators and teachers who want to conduct studies in their own schools. Such adjustments are even harder, as Lincoln and Tierney (2004) observe, for researchers who want to do “community-engaged”

action research framed by feminist, post-modernist, Foucauldian, or other ethical and theoretical commitments that are intended to be radical departures from positivist (clinical) research models. “IRBs appear to be having considerable difficulty with either understanding or with supporting such research,” they explain, “even though action research models (whatever their particular emphasis) show great promise of involving stakeholders at the research site in meaningful dialogue on their own, indigenous, contextually determined needs” (p. 228).

The issues that my institution’s IRB have had with these types of inquiry have less to do with “pressure from the political right . . . to discredit the products of post-modern theorizing” (p. 220), as Lincoln and Tierney (2004) believe is often the case, and more to do with board members’ lack of familiarity with action research and the various methodological forms it takes. Action researchers often use qualitative research methods, but their projects are distinctively “open-ended, collaborative, methodologically eclectic, and without specific methods, processes, or final goals determined in advance” (Brydon-Miller & Greenwood, 2006). The extent to which participants are involved in the research process is also greater than in qualitative research. In the case of practitioner action research, the researcher is a participant “insider” with responsibilities and relationships that are fundamentally different from those of “outsider” qualitative researchers. The ethical safeguards of anonymous informants and disguised settings typically adopted by outsiders are subverted in practitioner action research the moment insider researchers are identified (Zeni, 2001). Insiders often do not want to be, or simply cannot be, hidden behind the cloak of anonymity. They are also vulnerable to disapproval and recrimination from peers and administrators and may find themselves bearing the burden of written words that could place their institutions at risk (Shulman, 1990). These and other characteristics of action research present “unique ethical, political, and methodological puzzles” that can confound IRB members (Anderson & Herr, 1999, p. 14). IRBs are not inclined to approve puzzling protocols, and this inevitably leads to time-consuming bureaucratic slugs.

Bureaucratic Slogs

IRBs are governed by federal regulations that keep piling up. This necessitates the establishment, and continual upgrading, of IRB policies and operating procedures to ensure compliance. The protocols that researchers submit are reviewed by IRB chairs, who then determine whether they should be exempted, expedited, or subjected to full committee review. At my institution, there is a detailed checklist that the IRB chair and other members of the board use to make sure that protocols, consent forms, and conflict-of-interest forms comply with regulations. When checklist items are missed, unclear, or otherwise problematic, revisions are issued and addressed by the researchers until the IRB finally grants approval. This process generates bureaucratic slogs that can take weeks, sometimes months, to work through.

Slogs are a regular occurrence—even for the most seasoned researchers. I was recently asked to be a consultant on a multi-methods research project focusing on how departmental culture and other factors affect the completion rates of doctoral students. Everyone involved in the study was a researcher who had been through the IRB process more than once. We developed a protocol with close attention to the checklist and submitted our materials well in advance of the time when data collection was scheduled to begin. We waited for more than a month for the protocol to be reviewed (the chair said there was a huge backlog), and when the review was complete we received a list of 38 mostly minor revisions. On the list of revisions were self-evident questions (e.g., “Can a student skip questions?”); editorial comments (e.g., “The consent [form] should say ‘you are invited’ and not ‘you have been selected’”; “Remove bolding from all-capitalized statement at the end [of the consent form]”); and eye-rolling comments (“Protocol and consent form say *field notes*, please clarify”). We made the changes, resubmitted the protocol, and waited another month before it was finally approved. Despite the delays, we were among the lucky ones. We went through only one round of revisions.

The slog worsens when researchers are asked to make major revisions that are much more difficult to address. Lincoln and Tierney (2004) present several cases of graduate students whose research was de-

layed by rounds and rounds of IRB revisions. The situation may worsen as more regulations are heaped on IRBs or when, as is the case in my institution, accreditation is being sought.

A number of IRBs at research universities are seeking accreditation from the Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs (AAHRPP). To be accredited by the AAHRPP, institutions must require researchers to be trained and tested on human subject protections, and all protocols must be certified as scientifically and methodologically valid by department chairs or their designees. These policies are in effect at our institution. Faculty researchers and graduate students will not be granted IRB approval unless they take an online course and earn a passing score of 80% on course quizzes.⁶ Doctoral candidate advisors are also required to undergo the training and pass the quizzes. Moreover (I was told by the IRB chair), department chairs or their designees must sign a signature box on the submission form certifying that studies are not “silly.” As head of a division in our college, I do not relish the thought of judging whether each and every IRB protocol as silly. But I am more worried about whether there will be a serious dampening effect on ethnographic and qualitative education research if we do not find ways to bridge the divides.

Bridging the Divides

Despite federally mandated protections for human subjects, IRB-approved ethnographic and qualitative studies provide no guarantees that researchers will be ethical once they are in the field. Fieldwork ethics are highly situational and ultimately dependent on the moral judgments of the researcher. It is, therefore, incumbent upon those who conduct, and those who guide, education research in schools and other settings to be mindful of the ethical principles that may come into play in the resolution of ethical dilemmas.

Be that as it may, the great ethical divides between IRBs and ethnographic and qualitative orientations can, and must, be bridged. I have some bridging strategies to offer, the first of which emphasizes the importance of *representation* and two-way *communication*. With regard to representation, approval processes go much more smoothly when researchers who understand the na-

ture and nuances of ethnography and qualitative inquiry serve on IRBs. Howe and Dougherty (1993) also suggest that school staff, such as teachers and administrators, participate in protocol reviews, particularly those that involve judgments of what counts as “normal educational practice” (p. 18). Such representation on IRBs may not be possible or easily sustained as board members and consultants come and go. But it is always possible to establish informal lines of communication between an IRB and faculty researchers who effectively represent graduate students and colleagues.

At my institution, it has been faculty members teaching graduate-level research courses who have found the most productive ways to communicate with the IRB. Instructors have worked closely with the IRB chair and have also participated in focus groups where problems were discussed and solutions were proposed. Institutions may also consider funding researchers to attend conferences and workshops for IRB officials, such as those sponsored by the Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions, at Indiana University.

The second bridging strategy that I recommend is *education*. Researchers, regardless of their ethical frameworks, need to understand the three basic ethical principles and more specific IRB policies and local operating procedures. The online training and testing requirement on our campus has provided researchers with a much more thorough understanding of IRB ethical frameworks and application orientations. But IRBs also need to be educated about ethnography and qualitative research. Presentations and dialogues are not out of the question and may, in fact, be enlightening, especially for board members who have no background in, or are skeptical about, non-quantitative, nonexperimental, and non-clinical research. Brydon-Miller (Brydon-Miller & Greenwood, 2006), a colleague in my institution, provided training on action research to IRB members, and the program manager for our board has attended additional presentations to learn more about this form of inquiry.

There are also excellent resources that instructors, researchers, and IRB members can use to inform themselves and others. Some are general overviews of ethical issues and human subject protections in social and be-

havioral research (see Barnbaum & Byron, 2001; Kimmel, 1996; Penslar, 1995; Sieber, 1992; Strike, Anderson, Curren, van Geel, Pritchard, & Robertson, 2002). Others focus more specifically on ethnographic and qualitative research, most notably *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005); *Ethics in Qualitative Research* (Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, & Miller, 2002); *Walking the Tightrope: Ethical Issues for Qualitative Researchers* (van den Hoonaard, 2002); and *Ethical Issues in Practitioner Research* (Zeni, 2001).

The third strategy is *practical academic acumen*. While representation, communication, and education provide the foundation for building bridges, practical academic acumen is necessary for crossing them. Academically practical approaches to the IRB approval process are not all that different from those associated with review processes for refereed publications and presentations. It behooves researchers in both cases to submit polished manuscripts and to expect revisions. Like journal editors and external manuscript reviewers, IRB members are much more inclined to unleash a barrage of negative feedback if a protocol is ill conceived, confusing, badly written, or riddled with spelling and grammatical errors. It is not the responsibility of IRBs to clean up sloppy protocols. That responsibility rests with researchers, who should also accept the fact that even the most polished initial drafts usually need more work. Out-and-out rejections by IRBs are rare. Requests to revise and resubmit are standard.

There are also practical ways to deal with IRB orientations toward the applications of the three ethical principles. With regard to respect for persons, researchers should recognize that there is flexibility in securing informed consent and assent. Federal codes actually allow researchers, under certain circumstances, to dispense with written consent forms. Researchers may also tape-record consent; ask someone to witness it; or find other creative ways to obtain it. When I do school ethnography, I stuff teachers' mailboxes with one-page, easy-to-read descriptions of the study; introduce myself at meetings; send parental consent forms home with students before data collection begins; and walk around with extra consent forms when my fieldwork is under way. These tactics not only give me fairly free range in the field but also

are extremely effective means to begin the process of building rapport, because everyone knows who I am, and what I want to find out, before I begin data collection.

Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity is always challenging in fieldwork. But researchers need to realize that there are no federal regulations that require researchers to guarantee complete confidentiality or anonymity, or, for that matter, to use pseudonyms instead of real names. If such guarantees are not possible, this must be explained in IRB protocols and included in consent forms and other information provided to research participants. As long as participants are fully informed ahead of time that their confidences and identities may be inadvertently revealed or purposefully exposed, researchers are in a much better position to receive IRB approval. The most practical rule of thumb for respect for persons is that researchers must make sure that potential participants know exactly what they are getting into and who might be intentionally or unintentionally privy to the information they provide.

Handling the principle of beneficence is mostly a matter of articulating direct research benefits and risks associated with data collection methods. If a study is designed to directly benefit an educational setting or individual people, this needs to be spelled out in detail. Language such as "this study will lead to national school improvement" or "your participation will help the plight of under-achieving students" is largely rhetorical, and IRBs may recommend that the statements convey actual benefits or simply be deleted. There may be, in fact, no direct benefits to sites or participants. Researchers may state this or make no mention of benefits at all.

With regard to risks, it is not necessary in IRB protocols and informed consent to discuss the unpredictable social and psychological risks associated with "normal interactions" (Bosk & De Vries, 2004, p. 253). It is, however, imperative for researchers to articulate potential social stigmatization, psychological trauma, and other harms that may occur as a direct result of their data collection procedures. Such risks need to be clearly stated in IRB protocols and informed consent.

The most practical way to address the principle of justice is through thoughtful justifications of who will benefit from the

study and bear its risks, as well as who will be included or excluded. These justifications should be made with sensitivity to the social injustices experienced by, and the vulnerabilities of, racial and ethnic minorities, women, prison inmates, and other disadvantaged groups (Citro, Ilgen, & Marrett, 2003). They should not be based primarily on convenience or logistical issues. IRBs want to know that a selection process (sampling plan) represents the intent of the study, as well as the benefits and risks associated with it.

IRBs also want to make sure that researchers are not forcing people to participate in research projects and that participants can withdraw at will without negative sanctions. Power in hierarchical administrator-teacher and teacher-student relations is inherently unequal. While administrator and teacher researchers may be absolutely convinced that they are not being coercive in the recruitment of human subjects under their authority, IRBs are concerned, rightly so, about the subtle pressures that superordinates impose on subordinates. Consent under such circumstances is not completely voluntary. Peer pressure may also be an issue, especially in action research projects where people may regard their relations as equal or egalitarian but also feel a strong obligation to participate even if they would rather not. A good way to handle this requirement is to make a distinction between obligatory, or normal, activities and those that are directly tied to data collection. For example, researchers conducting classroom studies ought to make it very clear that while teachers and students are obliged to participate in regularly scheduled instructional and learning activities, they are under no obligation to participate in interviews, videotapings, or other data collection activities.

By far the best bridging strategy is for both sides to recognize and embrace the universal commitments to human subjects that underlie the three basic ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Education researchers and IRBs should strive to give people—all individually autonomous people—the rights, freedom, and truthful knowledge necessary for them to decide whether they want to participate in, or withdraw from, a research project and whether they are willing to face risks that might harm them or receive benefits

that could help them. These commitments are the ethical bulwark of human subject protections that form the basis not only of IRB requirements but also of “good” ethnographic and qualitative education research.

NOTES

I am grateful for the feedback of anonymous reviewers and am especially indebted to the reviewer who delved so deeply and in such an engaging manner into the substantive issues that I raised and also provided the wonderful list of references. We should all be so fortunate.

¹There are distinctive differences between ethnography and qualitative research. Ethnographers immerse themselves in fieldwork for prolonged periods of time in order to record holistic accounts of a group of people’s social and cultural way of life. Qualitative researchers have more delimited focuses, may not use the full range of fieldwork methods, and often spend much shorter periods of time collecting data.

²The ethical standards of AERA and AAA can be accessed by visiting the associations’ websites at <http://www.aera.net/aboutaera?id=717> and <http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethics.htm>, respectively.

³There is a dearth of research on the impact of IRB reviews on various types of scholarship and, in particular, on whether board recommendations unnecessarily restrict ethnographic and qualitative research. Even though such studies would require IRB approval, they, too, could help bridge the divides.

⁴Paragraph 46.101(b)(1) of the Code of Federal Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) identifies the following kinds of education research as exempt from IRB requirements:

Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings involving normal educational practices such as (i) research on regular and special educational instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula or classroom management methods.

The Code also has an exemption for research involving educational tests if the test information is recorded in such a manner that subjects can-

not be identified directly or through identifiers linked to them.

⁵The three principles were originally identified in the Belmont Report issued in 1979 by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research.

⁶Researchers and doctoral candidate advisors may fulfill the training and testing requirement by taking the online CITI Course entitled The Protection of Human Research Subjects, which can be accessed by visiting www.citiprogram.org.

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Manuscript received December 26, 2005

Revision received February 26, 2006

Accepted May 3, 2006