'Text -work' in ethics review: use of a review checklist in REC meetings

Abstract

This article analyzes how a formal text (the Ethics Review Form) available at National Health Service Research Ethics Committees (NHSRECs) in the UK was used in meetings. Derived from the work of Dorothy Smith on incorporating texts into institutional ethnography (IE), it proposes the concept of 'text work' as a way into understanding more about decision-making in ethics review and describes the extent to which this formal text shaped and influenced review work. The research study used observations of committee meetings, field-notes and interviews to produce an ethnographic mapping of RECs' work. This article draws on one aspect of the research which was the process of isolating a particular, ubiquitous text and analysing how it worked and was worked on in meetings. The analysis contributes to contemporary discussion offering an alternative to ongoing debates about idealised ways of conducting ethics review. Finally, some tentative suggestions are made about improving training, based on and starting from the work which reviewers undertake.

Introduction

Ethics regulation – institutionalised review

Research Ethics Committees (RECs) are instrumental in transforming ethics regulation and procedure into concrete decisions about research. Their authoritative reach extends beyond the mundane meeting as the consequences of their decision-making can potentially veto research and therefore limit knowledge creation. In the UK context, the Health Research Authority (HRA) is charged by the government to safeguard research. It is informed by related legislation on data and human rights for example, and by international directives (World Medical Association, Helsinki Agreement, continually revised since 1964). Appointed by the Secretary of State, NHS RECs are invested with considerable authority. RECs function as the sites where decisions about the *suitability* of research are made. The HRA summarizes RECs' work as 'safeguarding' *the rights, safety, dignity and well-being of research participants, independently of research sponsors. They review applications for research and give an opinion about the proposed participant involvement and whether the research is ethical.'* (HRA 2018) Protection (safeguarding) of participants then is in institutional terms, at the forefront of the description of the work of RECs.

Ethics regulation is highly bureaucratic, and this has partly arisen from greater drives for transparency and accountability in public institutions. This has arguably led to ethical principles becoming solely procedural requirements. For example, informed consent could be said to have become a transaction which meets bureaucratic needs to demonstrate accountability but might have little meaning for patients (O'Neill 2004; Manson and O'Neill 2007). Notwithstanding, the most obvious influence in procedural ethics remains a principle-based framework, conventionally summarised as autonomy, beneficence, maleficence and justice (Beauchamp and Childress 2013). These principles have had extensive reach informing professional codes of ethics (inside and outside of the medical domain) and they are

undoubtedly built in to procedures, formal documents and therefore, the everyday work of RECs. Given that forms, documents digital and other texts are imbued with these principles (as well as relevant legislation), a useful way of discovering how ethical principles are thought about and influence ethics review work is to analyse the use of texts.

There is no doubt that formal review of research (emerging as it did from a range of social, cultural and political drivers) is now an inevitable undertaking for almost all research involving human participants. 'Ethics-regimes', propelled by concerns about biomedical and experimental research have been continually extended and seem to be 'here to stay'. (Van Den Hoonaard 2011: 291). Given this, we need to find out more about what RECs actually do and yet descriptions of everyday ethics review work are uncommon.

The effect of procedure on research ethics is viewed as problematic. This critique has particularly but not exclusively come from researchers in the social science who consider that biomedically dominated research ethics is ill suited to research in health and society (Dingwall 2006; Dingwall 2016; Hammersley 2009), that RECs lack the expertise to make decisions about some methodologies for example, ethnography (Murphy & Dingwall 2007). Philosophical and sociological critiques have shown how procedure can skew the foundational principles embedded in ethics review. For example, in medical contexts autonomy is operationalised as informed consent (Kittay 2007). A parallel formulaic and procedural approach to consent can be seen in ethics review. Informed consent is often viewed central to research ethics (given prominence in review possibly above other ethical considerations) and has been described as functioning as an 'ethical panacea' functioning to counteract potentially paternalistic and autocratic practices (Corrigan 2003:769). This procedural and bureaucratic approach leads to ethical principles being reducible to formulaic and technical requirements, abstracted from the contexts of actual research. There has been an ongoing concern with the distance between procedural compliance and actual ethical conduct in the practice of research (Israel and Hay 2006; Guillemin and Gillam 2004).

Contemporary debate on the role of RECs

Recent debates have highlighted disagreement about how RECs should work and their role with fundamental concerns that researcher autonomy and the freedom to research and pursue knowledge is curtailed by mandatory and anticipatory review (Hammersley 2018). Acknowledging the authority of RECs and ongoing concerns about consistency and idiosyncrasy (Van Den Hoonaard 2011), the inevitability of disagreement in review is addressed by proposing that there is a need for a reliable method for making decisions and the need for ethical expertise (Sheehan et al. 2018) which goes beyond the straightforward, consistent application of procedure. This argument suggests that a mechanical application of procedure would not necessarily result in a sound decision on research. The influential codes and ethical principles which inform procedure are not straightforward. Furthermore, there is considerable debate about whether RECs should be aiming to achieve consistency in use and application of codes or consistency in the quality of decisions on ethics (Moore and Donnelly 2015). The impossibility of such a separation in the work of RECs is highlighted by Holm (2016) who argues

that both modes (code and ethical discourse) are required in review. Codes can never be the sole route to decision-making because they require interpretation (Savulescu 2017). Most recently accounts have stressed accountability in decision-making (Sheehan et al. 2018) in an argument which acknowledges difficulties with current review (here in the context of social, research) but nevertheless asserts the continuation of governance largely in its current form.

Criticisms of RECs have frequently been over-generalised, lacking in evidence and built inadequate arguments for change (Sheehan 2013). This article seeks to address two key problems with current critique. The first is that reviewers' perspectives are missing from the debate. Secondly that implicit in the criticisms seems to be a suggestion that reviewers may lack ethical expertise or knowledge of certain kinds of research. Yet though this would seem to point to training and education there is a lack of suggestion about what that training would be. This article addresses these two problems. It begins with the work of RECs, bringing reviewers' work into view. Rather than continuing discussion about code-consistency and /or ethical consistency, it analyzes how procedure shapes work by analysing a text available at every REC. Finally, using the analysis of a text at work, suggestions are made about the kind of training which might be helpful for reviewers and the research community.

'Everyday' work with texts

REC meetings themselves are useful starting points for discovering more about ethics review. IE potentially enables a deeper understanding of the difficulties inherent in review as the focus on work and practices provides context and depth. Use of secondary data, such as outcome letters, risks analyses which compare and contrast existing practices without progressing and improving ethics review. Instead, discovering how a text works in an organisation potentially helps us to gain more insight into how they (in this case, RECs) work. Studies of RECs have generally been quantitative with an absence of qualitative research on the language and concepts used by reviewers (Klitzman 2015). With some exceptions (Fitzgerald et al. 2006; Stark, on IRBs in the US, 2012, 2013); Hedgecoe (on RECs in England, 2008, 2012), there is limited research on what happens at REC meetings. It has been demonstrated that reviewers draw on personal and professional knowledge and experience when making decisions about applications (Stark 2011), while the post-meeting letters sent out to researchers contain explicit, procedural directions, refer to required language, ask for clarifications or require additional forms or detail (Clapp et al. 2017; O'Reilly et al. 2009).

 Despite drives for transparency in the HRA (in common with other public institutions) much of that actual, concrete work where decisions take place is hidden from view. Given the centrality of their role it remains unclear how RECs perform and evaluation of their activity tends to be associated with their adherence to procedure or legal compliance (Sherzinger and Bobbert 2017). Exploration of reviewers' understandings of their work and detailed examination of the processes of ethical review, scrutiny of what happens within the REC meetings are all scant. Discovering more about formal ethics review fills in the gap between what happens when researchers put an application in and the outcome letter which

is 'an often-decontextualized request or demand for additional information or changes in some aspect of the research.' (Fitzgerald et al. 2006: 378).

Methods

Theoretical orientation

Dorothy Smith developed IE in order to understand how people's 'everyday/every night' worlds (2001:161) were put together using their experiences and activities as a starting point. Theoretically IE starts with the forms of work that people do and is grounded in 'the concrete, empirically observable features of informants' activities and social experience' (Bisaillon, 2012:609). As part of her academic inquiry, Smith argued that an analysis of documents is essential to IE as they are 'of foundational ontological significance to the existence of anything we can call 'large scale organizations' or 'institutions' (Smith, 2001: 168). Though ubiquitous, she claimed, they are seldom incorporated into studies of organisations and institutions. In IE, 'texts' refers to a range of words, images or sounds, including digital information which are observable, 'words, images, or sounds that are set into a material form of some kind from which they can be read, seen, heard, watched….' (2006: 66). This definition of texts does not therefore necessarily relate to particular formal documents. Nevertheless, Smith showed how isolating a text could be helpful in inquiry. Attention is paid to how written and other texts produced by organisations direct the conduct of workers, customers and clients (Stanley 2018) with a focus on how they are actualised and used by people (para 40. Referred to in this article as 'text-work', it is proposed that this provides a way of seeing how review itself is regulated rather than how ethics review regulates research. An everyday text and its use in meetings was analyzed to discover how and to what extent reviewers' work was shaped.

Methods and materials

Methods employed were observation and interview. Data consisted of transcripts of observation, interviews and field-notes. Altogether, there were nine observations of RECs in a with a total of seventeen research applications heard. In addition, interviews were conducted with reviewers (n=12) and researchers (n=8). The study as a whole explored the conceptualisation and operationalisation of consent in ethics review. For this reason, RECs included in the study were those 'flagged' to review studies where capacity to consent was a potential issue.

Data were managed using NVivo software, organised into 'nodes' and then analyzed.

Figure 1: Nodes and frequency across data sets

'understanding design'

Nodes	Frequency
Concern with design	21
Concern with 'good' research	31

'researcher appraisal'

Judgements about researcher by committee and reviewers	19
Researchers' appraisal of committee	12

'moral and ethical dimensions'

Moral and ethical dimensions	32

'references to procedure'

Concerns with language	7
References to paperwork	24
Requirements	9
Seeking clarity on requirements	19

This article reports on a second stage of analysis, interpreting data with text work and the particular document 'The Ethics Checklist' in mind. Nodes illustrated in the table were cross referenced to extracts from transcripts. The analysis of the use of the checklist was informed by themes identified on writing about the benefits of isolating particular texts in IE research (Smith 2006). Smith insisted that she was not prescribing a method but nevertheless identified some themes or patterns which might be generalisable when analysing documents or texts. Using an example of an academic appeals procedure, Smith described some specific themes which emerged from the work of appraising the students appeal in the context of the procedure.

These (active) themes which can be identified from her description are:

- processes of establishing 'concepts or categories' of the text;
- looking for 'expressions of the regulatory text';
- seeking 'recognition of the categories or concepts in the text'.

These themes related to all of the nodes initially identified either directly or indirectly. This would be expected as IE insists that texts are active and can be identified in all aspects of everyday work. The remainder of this article describes how these active processes worked in the meetings and reviewers' perceptions of the checklist.

Results

The significance of the 'Ethics Review Form'

The text selected was a HRA checklist for RECs detailing the conditions (connected to ethical principles) which need to be met in ethics review. This was available and used at every meeting. As well as these

standard ethical considerations for research, the additional conditions for research where participants are unable to consent are detailed. These are directly informed by the MCA (2005). Figure 2 is a brief summary of this checklist with items extracted from the Ethics Review form (Version 2.2 Final 01.09.2017, HRA). This table indicates which of the items were subject to debate and those which seemed to be viewed as more straightforward matters. The requirements which provoked most debate in RECs were 'social and scientific value' and 'risk/benefit'. For these, reviewers made an overall judgement through engaging subjectively with the research. Matters such as consent and appointment of consultee, which are highly complex, were dealt with as more straightforward matters requiring the correct expression or form of words. This could be described as a filtering process where the complexity and detail of research applications has to be engaged with by reviewers but is 'cleaned up' and 'standardised' (Smith 2006: 70) in the meeting over the course of each application reviewed.

Figure 2: Summary of requirements on the checklist: Text work in REC meetings

Generic requirement	Additional MCA2005 requirements	Text work examples at stages in the REC meeting
Social or scientific value; scientific design and conduct of the study	Relevance of the research to impairing condition Justification for including adults lacking capacity to meet the research objectives	Debate – often lengthy between reviewers, with researcher and following researcher exchange.
Recruitment arrangements and access to health information and fair participant selection	Arrangements for appointing consultees The arrangements for recruitment in an emergency setting (if applicable)	Debate. With researcher. Translates into checking application – recognisable terms, form of letters and words in place.
Favourable risk benefit ratio, anticipated benefits/risks for research participants (present and future)	Balance between benefit and risk, burden and intrusion	Debate. Reviewers engage with research to understand it and seek clarification with researcher. Linked to social or scientific value in practice requirement.
Care and protection of research participants; respect for potential and enrolled research participants' welfare & dignity	Additional safeguards: The REC must be satisfied, from the information in the application and any further assurances given during the review that the additional safeguards set out in Section 33 of the Act will be complied with during the conduct of the research	Debate between reviewers and in researcher exchange. Example: Search for word 'safeguarding' in application. Check that researcher uses 'correct' words in their exchange. 'Feed the lines' if researcher not using correct expression.
Informed consent process and the adequacy and completeness of research participant information	Information for consultees. Strongly advised to provide.	Close examination of Participant Information Sheets and letters. Exchange with researcher. This becomes straightforward matter of recognition of required words, texts.

Smith distinguished active texts used in work settings and 'higher order' texts which are not always directly visible in work settings but which shape and influence what happens. Examples of 'active' texts as those which are provided, read or agreed to, forms which might be filled in or information letters while 'higher order' texts might be guidelines, business conditions or policies enacted in particular institutions (Prodinger and Turner 2013). The 'Ethics Review Form' is both. It is a higher order text with legal as well as regulatory authority. The legal requirements are distilled into a working document for use in the REC meetings and so also become active and visible. The steps through which the reviewer is taken in the list of questions/prompts, actually map out the process of what needs to be done. The text gives direction to review work with each REC accounting for the same set of questions with the intention of unifying and making review consistent. All conditions must be considered and addressed by researchers and reviewers. However, the text does not simply prescribe, it extends its authority to govern researcher and reviewer. The content of the text, the series of questions asked of the researcher becomes a script which regulates what happens.

Work on the text in REC meetings

Establishing concepts and categories

Discussion of the applications in meetings helps *to establish the concepts and categories* within ethical regulation. Underlying ethical concepts in regulation such as consent, safeguarding, anonymity or informed consent cannot be brought about as regulating concepts through the mere existence of the correct forms or the use of correct words. It is the process, the action at the REC which helps to establish them as requirements. The deliberations about these particular regulating concepts and categories become an *expression of the ethical requirements***.**

Text work occurred in every stage of ethics review meetings. Invested with authority, the REC reviewers examine the applications in order to find *recognisable concepts***.** If they are not able to be found, then this means that conditions are to be set which the researcher has to meet. Generally, if reviewers needed clarification or interpretation, they referred to the co-ordinators, administrators who are highly knowledgeable about regulation. (Stark refers to 'rule-experts' in US IRBs, (2012 p3)). The critical work is recognition work with the researcher's application (submitted online and available in hard-copy at meetings) which is 'worked on' in the meeting to find recognisable features of consent and other ethical requirements. Close examination of reviewers' work shows how texts can shape review but also how they become active by reviewers' reading of them. This analysis of how the text worked and was worked on shows how texts are active (Smith 1990) rather than static, as Smith puts it 'Our reading operates the text; in our reading it becomes active' (1999: 135). The Ethics Review Form in itself cannot completely govern decisions in RECs. Reviewers make the text active through their interpretation. This

is critical work and how it is done, what subjective processes are involved as well as how reviewers use knowledge of procedural codes and ethics is important to interrogate in training. This approach would be in contrast to one which sets up ethics and procedural knowledge as oppositional or advocates for one or the other in reviewers' training.

Text work with the researcher

Importantly, the recognition work continued from the application to the researcher. The Chair usually summarized the key points to be raised with the researcher. Although, the committees had broad questions, seeking out evidence and examples of the categories needed was important. This frequently centred on proxy arrangements for consent.

> *Chair: We need to see the protocol regarding consent and participants. They (the researchers) are so used to doing this they haven't written it down. It's a very brief document. It needs the words 'adult safeguarding' in the document*

> **Observation extract**

> Or, another example,
> *I think page 49 is wrong; the letter to the consultee. What about a consent form for the representative?*
> *Reviewer: The representative form is not right it needs to have the wording correct. Is anyone testing capacity?*

References were made to expression of the categories required and the judgement about research was in part made on the basis of the application though the reviewers also looked at overall design and purpose of research and made a judgement about it. Reviewers made judgements about research and researchers and in this way text requirements did not *totally* shape their work. They *actively* 'worked on' and with texts so that they made sense in the context of review. If the committee was satisfied with design, purpose of research and with the researcher, they would seek out the required categories and look for their expression, if not in the researcher application, then directly in dialogue with the researcher. The text does not in itself prescribe, rather, the work of ethics review involves searching for what 'might be recognisable as a proper instance of its (*the text's*) categories.' (My italics and parenthesis: Smith 2006:83).

Text shaping - the reviewer/researcher exchange

Following preliminary discussion of an application, the researcher was invited into the meetings. Researchers in the UK, unlike systems in other countries (for example, the United States) are welcomed at the REC and researchers were present at all the RECs I observed. Subjective practices in review meant that reviewers made judgements about researchers. If convinced of the researcher's merits, reviewers would not only look for the text categories but 'lead' the researcher into providing the 'correct'

response or responses which would lead to a more favourable opinion. Following on from an observation, one reviewer expressed it like this: '*The onus is on the researcher to make the case but I don't know if you noticed but we fed him (the researcher) the lines. We have to draw out the bits to satisfy the legal requirements. We're teasing bit out to satisfy ourselves*'.

In order for there to be a formal outcome, the REC usually continued their text work in the interview with the researcher even when they had already judged that the research was worthwhile and should go ahead. There seemed to be implicit acknowledgement that the correct words were all that were needed when one reviewer commented*: 'Can we just refer her to the actual (words that need to go in) rather than asking detailed questions today?' (*5. Informed consent process and the adequacy and completeness of research participant information *and* 5.1 Information for consultees

What is significant here is that reviewers had used their knowledge to make a judgement but they were nevertheless compelled to authenticate their judgement, transform it into a decision by ensuring that the correct terms were used in the application and confirmed by the researcher. (In the exchanges, reviewers use familiar and recognisable terms. The discussion of requirements itself becomes the expression of regulation and accomplishes the requirements of review. Practical and tacit knowledge of reviewers is then elided. Objective decisions have to be demonstrated in the correct, procedural form. Hidden assumptions and meanings guide actions whether or not research participants, in this case reviewers, see that. Such tacit knowledge transcends surface speech, texts or discursive materials (Tracy 2010). It is hard to access this and recognise its role when immersed in everyday work. This unearthing of unconscious and conscious processes would be helpful in education and training for reviewers. Firstly, it would recognise and value their competence and knowledge but would potentially offer a way for them to be critically analytical of what they are doing when making decisions highlighting good practice but importantly, what might be done differently.

Text shaping – reaching an 'opinion'

It is through recognisable processes, using specific words and terminology that all players with an investment are able to feel a sense of assurance that objectivity and rationality are maintained and ethical review has been achieved. The categories of the 'Ethics Review Form' and the supplementary detail need for MCA studies was referred to most extensively at this stage of meetings. This was because much of the RECs' discussion and debate is idiosyncratic and subjective. Decisions are made based on gut feeling, engagement with research and researchers, *ad hoc and dependent* upon information available at the time. Decision making is incremental and often not coherent, depending as it does on the ability of reviewers to identify and engage with the moral or ethical issues presented. So, decisions as identifiable items are not 'the crisp, goal-orientated, value-maximising assumptions of many theories of rational action' (Boden 1994: 183). So, in order to appear as rational, impartial and accountable, in this phase of the meetings reviewers aligned their judgements to the required categories of the text. In IE terms, the text has formulated a process, the final part of which is the production of a text which is the outcome of the review. The final sequence of text work is the agreement on a decision.
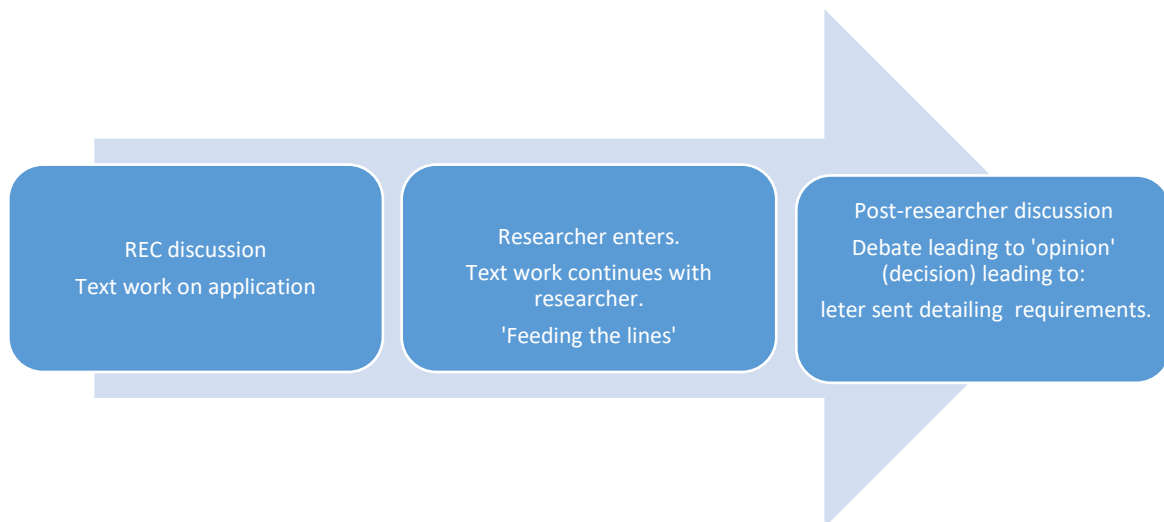
Closure

Post-hoc decision letters are then composed from the minutes of the meeting.

> *'Any further information or changes to the documentation etc. from the applicant which may have been requested by the Committee will be managed by the REC Manager who will liaise with nominated members of the Committee as appropriate'.*
> (HRA 2016)

 The outcome letters detail what the researcher needs to do in the application to address the concerns of the reviewers. O'Reilly et al (2009) pointed out that about two thirds of opinions made by RECs are 'favourable with conditions. The engagement by reviewers in recognition work is what established the required concepts and categories. This recognition work continued in seeking out the requirements in the applications, looking for the recognisable concepts in the correct form of expression required. The recognition work is taken up with the researcher. Further expressions of requirements are explored with the researcher and between reviewers. Finally, the 'gaps' in the text requirements are detailed in a letter sent from the REC and the researcher closes this gap by responding to the details of the letter by amending her/his application. Activating regulatory texts in review leads to the identification of work needed to produce requirements of the text which have been missed out. This circularity was referred to by Smith as 'intertextual circles' (2006: 86) which are developed as technologies of accountability. This engagement with texts in the various forms of requirements, applications, paper, and electronic, web-based information is needed to demonstrate RECs as accountable bodies. The letter sent out is significant in that it provides evidence of a decision and the conditions required to have the application approved. This again constrains and co-ordinates work. RECs have distinct characteristics but the work of all RECs is co-ordinated by these institutional processes.

Figure 3: Process of work on texts

REC discussion
Text work on application

Researcher enters.
Text work continues with researcher.
'Feeding the lines'

Post-researcher discussion
Debate leading to 'opinion' (decision) leading to:
leter sent detailing requirements.

Discussion

Beyond the committee: The reach of texts

The text itself by providing a sequence of prompts, suggests a direction, a course of action which needs to be followed leading to conclusion or resolution. RECs after all are efficient and reach decisions at every meeting on approval (or not) of research. Texts guide the researchers in their applications and the RECs in their decision-making. Therefore, researchers and reviewers in many sites have a common language which reduces complexity to a set of pronouncements on what ethical research is. In this way, texts have the power to determine what is ethical or not. Reviewers expressed some ambiguous feelings about this procedural approach, however, in the end, texts do not simply ensure repetition and (attempt) replication of decisions in RECs over multiple sites but they are the way in which the authority and power of RECs is accomplished by the wider institution and beyond, what Van Den Hoonaard views as a societal need for accountability through surveillance or a panopticon (2011: 22). Smith reminds us that texts are foundational and 'deliver power and agency of sometimes extraordinary scope' (2001 p164). Their significance certainly goes beyond the REC. They are fundamental to how review and research is shaped and structured.

Practices in the REC provide an illusion of objectivity and reliability. Boden et al (2009) examined the operation of power and its consequences in ethical bureaucracies in universities which *'reduce and codify ethics into sets of highly scripted rules, procedures and behaviours. Whilst they invoke an aura of objectivity, reliability and justifiability, we argue that this is a chimera because such schemes invariably mask the hidden operation of subjective power.'* (Boden, Epstein and Latimer 2009:734)

Of course, it is of concern that subjectivity is masked by the regulatory processes. On the other hand, it is difficult to accomplish work in most settings without drawing on subjective understandings. The existing knowledge gap seems to be in the reviewers' and the institution's awareness and acknowledgement that this occurs. Without this, a reflexive engagement with review and its institutional texts is impossible to achieve.

Interpreting principles

Though ethics regulation may have originated with explicit ethical principles (Dingwall 2016) they are not always explicit in the practice of review. As Dingwall highlights, ethical principles are not self-enacting and they are interpreted subjectively with human decisions being made about what they mean in the context of review. Much of the work carried out by reviewers requires knowledge of procedure but they have to subjectively engage with research and researchers in order to understand the meaning of principles in the context of their research proposed. It is difficult to access this active work. Ethical principles are processed in institutional regulation and distilled into documents, applications forms and other texts in an effort to make them (1) understandable to researchers and reviewers: and, (2) make the decisions accountable. This does not mean that principles are obvious or clear but they are reducible to a form which makes them appear so. Ethics regulation reflects the need of public bodies to be accountable and transparent and this accountability is mediated through the multiple texts at work in ethics review. Ambiguity and uncertainty about the use of procedure was revealed in this study. Reviewers are not passive but are active players in ethics review. The opportunity to express uncertainty, an important element of reflection, may be welcomed as the next section begins to argue.

The potential for critical reflection

Though texts govern local work, in this context and others, people do not passively accept dominant discourses and exercise some agency (Taber 2010).

 For example, one reviewer said during interview that the checklist (the Ethics Review Form) was helpful in thinking through capacity, but then:

> *Reviewer: Yes, we need a checklist, a directive. We are not a legal committee but are charged with a legal decision. We have to be satisfied that we have followed the law. We might think (something) is unethical but it satisfies the link, for example the research is linked to the impairing condition. Legal checklist and an ethical decision – these are not always compatible.*
> ▉*: Are you sometimes left unsure ethically?*
> *Reviewer: Yes, what is legal is not ethical.*

Reviewers held incommensurate positions - that of having to comply (in the same way as the researchers) and reduce complexity to bureaucratic requirements whilst feeling doubt and uncertainty about their decision making. In other words, thinking solely about what ought to be done to conform to text –mediated requirements lead to uncertainty about whether decisions were 'right'. It might be beneficial if this uncertainty could be acknowledged and become part of an ongoing reflexive dialogue between reviewers and researchers.

Conclusion

Despite acknowledging some of the (historic) limitations of RECs, commentators have identified the potential educative value of engaging with review systems (Wiles et al, 2011; Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Israel and Hay 2006) where ethical considerations become integral to the whole research process

from design to completion and review procedures as potentially helpful in assisting researchers to reflect on the ethical elements in a project. Even so, it is clear that in some aspects of review, broad ethical guidance and frameworks are superfluous with reviewers instead responding instinctively to research applications (Humphreys et al. 2014). Current systems discourage reflective approaches for researchers and reviewers so that what is of primary importance and what ultimately shapes ethics review is the institutional need for transparency and an attempt at consistency providing the illusion of objectivity.

Reviewers are committed to the task they undertake, concerned about researchers' perceptions of them (Van Den Hoonaard and Hamilton 2016) and invest time to provide ethical oversight, frequently offering constructive suggestions to improve the quality of research proposals (Israel and Hay 2006: 137). The centrality of work and emphasis on people's experiential ways of knowing about their worlds they work in (Bisaillon 2012:613) is respectful of that work. In this study, bringing in to view the actualities of sometimes hidden work has offered a counter-narrative to the perception of RECs as part of the faceless bureaucracy of ethics regulation.

There are of course limitations. The study is a snapshot of the work done with texts as there are many other texts which are important in review. For example, the application is read by reviewers prior to the meetings. This article has focussed solely on what happened at the meeting with this particular checklist.

Potential for impact on training

The analysis offered provides a contribution to ongoing debate about review. The analysis is important in that it keeps the reviewers' *work* in view. This orientation to work potentially could impact on reviewer training. Rather than a continued technical approach which focuses on outcome, it might be potentially more productive for people undertaking work to consider *how* they work.

There are however limits in the account as it has been contingent upon the particular RECs I observed and the people encountered. Transformation of ethics review is difficult to imagine because of multiple constraints including legislation and the requirements and procedures so embedded in ethical regulation. Committee work and training needs to incorporate critically reflective elements so that there is a continuum from the practice of ethically sensitive researchers to ethically sensitive reviewers.

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