Defending rights or defending privileges? Rethinking the ethics of research in public service organisations

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Abstract

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Introduction

Public service organisations are natural field sites for social scientists, not least because such services have such enormous impact on people's lives. Systematic, high quality study of such organisations is, arguably, a public responsibility, one increasingly in demand with the ascendancy of the evidence-based policy and practice movement (Nutley et al, 2007).   As important as generating evidence about "what works" the role of social science is even more critical for providing perspectives that challenge established orthodoxies and interests and for understanding processes of change and innovation in public services (Brown and Osborne, 2005). Yet conducting social science investigations in public service organisations is not without ethical challenges.

In this article, we focus on the ethical issues associated with social science inquiry into management and staff work practices in public service organisations. We explore how such research can cause uncomfortable strains with the current, culturally preferred categorisation of research subjects as potential victims, and we question whether public service managers and staff are owed the same protections and deference now institutionally prescribed as the entitlements of any other research subject. Such a discussion demands wider consideration of current understandings of what constitutes ethical research, and how bureaucratic institutions, conventions and processes for enacting 'ethics' constrain and shape practices of research (Bosk 2010). In offering this analysis, we seek to move beyond a position that sees ethics review as essentially unnecessary or even antithetical to a sound social science, but we advocate for a new role of ethics review as an honest broker between competing interests.

Ethical issues in studying public services organisations

We have become used to the idea that ethical issues arise whenever people are studied, though typically social science work does not tend to erupt into the kinds of scandals that are associated occasionally with medical research. Nonetheless, the social sciences are not immune from crisis about ethics. For example, the controversy that arose over Nancy Scheper-Hughes' ethnographic study of mental illness in Ireland in the 1970s – when the village ("Ballybran") she studied was outed, and the people she described recognised themselves and others and found her portrait not to their liking - is instructive. Managers and staff working in public service organisations are no different from any other subjects in not always welcoming the researcher's gaze or the representations researchers make of their lives or practices (Schrag, 2009).

The data collection process can be a source of concern, anxiety, or distress for managers and staff of public services, who, fear, not unreasonably, that publicly available data may threaten their interests or reputations. Studies that rely on public service staff submitting themselves directly to scrutiny, such as those that report on the relationship between behavioural markers and surgical outcomes (e.g. Carthey et al, 2003) may, for participants, result in unwelcome self-insights. Nor does research that involves no direct contact with staff escape having a potential impact: the former surgeons at the paediatric cardiac surgery programme in Bristol, UK may not have been pleased to find allegations of sub-standard performance confirmed by retrospective analysis of routinely available datasets (Aylin et al, 2001). Such revelations may fall into the category of "inflicted insight", where people are forced to confront knowledge about themselves that they do not want to – and have not asked to - confront (Schrag, 2009).

Many of the greatest risks to workers can occur when research is published (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007); there is considerable evidence of offence and hurt among those studied when they perceive that the published account of their work is unflattering and, perhaps, unjust. Even when they accept that the account that has been rendered by the researcher is accurate, workers may nonetheless still experience the description of the services that they provide as a form of betrayal - of friendship, of implicitly shared assumptions, of human decency (Bosk, 2008).

Institutional-level effects can also occur that affect workers well beyond the specific setting where a study was conducted. All types of study run the risk of producing – or reproducing – negative images of particular groups, or of provoking acknowledgement of uncomfortable realities. Punch's (1985) work, for example, identified rivalry, hostility, and non-cooperation between police units who were jealous of information and territory and who all sought juicy arrests and interesting cases; police in this study resorted to practices including paying informants with heroin, cutting corners, and "planting" of suspects. These kinds of findings

have the potential to smear or undermine the not just the target organization of the research, but also the entire set of organisations of a particular type.

Research findings also affect public service organizations when they inform large-scale changes to the way work is organised and carried out. Goffman's (1961) *Asylums* famously encouraged political activists, who were concerned about the abuse of patients' civil liberties, and administrators, who were concerned about rising state welfare expenditures, to join forces in a successful deinstitutionalization movement for those treated in state-run facilities (Scull 1981). More recently, the "broken windows hypothesis", which argued that tolerating even very minor infractions of law matters, has resulted in a redefining of the proper tasks of police work – the so-called "zero tolerance" approach (Kelling and Coles, 1995).

Warrants for studying public service organisations

Given the potential ethical troubles of studying public services organisations and the people who work in them, how can a "warrant" (Katz 1997) for such work be derived? The most plausible justification is founded on consequentialist or utilitarian grounds: the public interest to be served by such inquiry outweighs the potential for wrongs and harms that might be endured by the research subjects. This public interest arises because the services that these organisations provide are so fateful to the people served, and because a publicly funded service has a responsibility to the public to expose itself to scrutiny.

Inquiry into the performance of public service organisations is especially important in allowing examination of the link between formal policy, everyday practice and outcomes. Sometimes such work will provide a critical perspective that challenges current practices, and other times it will provide direct evidence that supports the design and optimal delivery of services. For example, White et al's (2009) fieldwork on the "Common Assessment Framework" for professionals working with children in England is important for understanding how lapses in child protection can occur, while Bevan and Hood's (2006) analysis of the targets-and-terror regime in the English health system is equally important for understanding how best to regulate and monitor the performance of health service workers.

In this sense, studying public sector organisations and their management and staff presents a unique set of opportunities and challenges. Such research is clearly of immense value, and arguably serves the public interest while addressing a democratic imperative. But the practical consequence of this position is the secondary argument that public sector management and staff are under a duty to allow themselves and their work to be studied, even if they would prefer not to be researched. Yet such an argument is in instant tension with current

conceptualisations of research ethics, which emphasise both the right of research subjects to exercise autonomy in determining whether or not to be studied and the protections and entitlements they are due if they do participate. This is the distinctive dilemma that an ethics of public services research must confront: getting answers to important questions may mean insisting that public sector workers tolerate the risks and discomforts of being studied. In the discussion that follows, we illustrate how current systems of ethical review in the social sciences are poorly structured for addressing this dilemma, and why Research Ethics Committees would do well to recast their role as one of honest broker.

Architectures of ethics control

In the last couple of decades, the social sciences have become increasingly subject to formalised systems of research governance. In comparison with the medical sciences, the turn towards a bureaucratised form of ethics within the social sciences is difficult to locate within a narrative of crisis and scandal (Dixon-Woods and Ashcroft, 2008). Rather, the process by which the social sciences became more like the medical sciences in terms of their research governance is best understood as one of gradual accretions. As such, these new modes of research oversight are part of a more general social movement that Michael Power (2004) identifies as "the risk management of everything": the massive growth in governance characteristic of high modernism (Moran 2003).   Universities and other institutions that employ social scientists, their funders, and publishers of research findings have succumbed to pressures to codify, control, and scrutinise the risks (real or supposed) associated with social research.

The forms taken by regulation and governance of social science faithfully mimic those used for the medical sciences. These kinds of mimetic processes, where institutions model themselves on others regarded as legitimate and/or successful, are common when an institution faces a problem with ambiguous causes or unclear solutions; modelled institutions provide established practices that may be borrowed (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983). In practice, this means that regulatory systems for research, regardless of what research they are governing, tend to take the form of having formalised systems and procedures in place to guide and record activity related to studies. The medical model for achieving this, described in the Declaration of Helsinki, provides that every experimental procedure involving human subjects requires approval by a research ethics committee working with pre-set ethical criteria. Applying this model to the social sciences has been a process often facilitated by recruiting administrative staff and committee chairpersons from the ranks of those already in charge of reviewing medical research.

Every medical ethics textbook teaches the salient principles for conducting such review. These principles include a respect for persons and for people's autonomy. From these principles,

human subjects derive specific rights. In particular, any participation in research should be voluntary, participants should give their consent to being involved in studies, and their privacy and confidentiality should be respected.

There are several notable features of this approach. Most Importantly, these rights accrue simply from being "human"; they are not seen as being open to modification simply because of the subject's occupation. Further, this approach relentlessly focuses on the rights of individuals, so that, for instance, the public interest is not allowed to triumph over the right of an individual to decline to participate in research. But the institutionalisation of these principles for medical research as the basis of a social science ethical review system is profoundly challenging to a well-founded social science inquiry of public service organisations.

Ethical review processes

Two ways in which the medical model has a marked impact on the social science system of ethical review are important for our discussion. First, it has resulted in the casting of the role of the research ethics committee as an advocate for research subjects, and second, it has exported a view of ethics-as-procedure.

The intended purpose of the research ethics committee (REC) is, in the medical sciences, unambiguously one of promoting the interests of research subjects. For instance, in the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) Research Governance Framework, which governs the conduct of research in all NHS settings in the UK, including social research in such settings, describes the REC role as one of protecting "the dignity, rights, safety and well-being of actual or potential research participants". This view has migrated directly into governance and ethics systems for the social sciences. For example, the UK's Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Research Ethics Framework similarly states that "the primary role of a REC is to protect the dignity, rights, and welfare of research participants". Though most ethical frameworks in the social sciences lack the force of legal rule, their requirements are nonetheless rigorously enforced. The ESRC will only fund institutions with processes that comply with its Framework, and will not release funds to any project until an institution confirms that the required ethical approval has been obtained.

RECs (and the higher level institutional structures that govern them) have overwhelmingly sought to exercise their responsibilities by converting ethical aspirations into procedural form, the better to permit explicitness and transparency. Thus, much of the modern architecture of research governance and research ethics is organised to produce an audit trail. Indeed the production of "auditable moments" might be said to be the organising logic of the proceduralisation of ethics. The combined effect of REC-as-research-subject's-advocate and ethics-as-procedure is to create a new bureaucratic world of roles, categories, classifications, and potential violations- a world that designates responsibility to job titles and is described in a

manual of procedures that specifies what constitutes compliance and what sanctions occur when researchers' and institutions violate the rules.

Categories and classifications in ethics

The currently institutionalised form that ethics review assumes in the social sciences results in a specific ordering of social relations between researchers and research subjects. It does this through strongly reinforced role identities or "membership" categories. The importance of membership categories is that they are a conventional basis for ascribing characteristics to people that are especially relevant to the activity at hand (Drew 1978). Membership categorisation can easily be appropriated as a technology of control, especially in the development of elaborated and formalised systems of social control (Suchman, 1994).

As currently prescribed by the ethical review process, the social identities of research subject and researcher set up a number of contests and imply the appropriate means of their resolution. One such contest is between the public interest and the private interest. The category of "research subject" and its associated entitlements clearly claims a direct lineage from the category formulations applied to those who are subjects of experimental medical research. In such research, society accepts that generally individuals should not be expected to submit to medical experiments that are potentially harmful and carry little potential individual benefit, even if experimental results would serve the public good by advancing science. The contest, in medical research, is thus resolved in favour of the individual. Whether the contest should be constructed and resolved in the same way when conducting social research in public services organisations, and when the subject and object of research is the public sector worker, is less easily resolved.

One side of the argument takes the ethical standing of the research subject as universal and unassailable. On this view, human subjects should have the same rights regardless of the type of research to be conducted or the status of the subject. Criticism (Armitage, 2005) of the ethics of a non-participant observational study of nurses' drug administration techniques is evidence of a turn towards regarding staff in public services organisations as deserving of the same protections and entitlements as any other research subjects. Armitage complained that incomplete and inaccurate information had been given to nurses in the study, who were told that the researchers were investigating common problems of intravenous drug preparation and administration, when in fact they were investigating causes of error. He queries whether this "deception" was justified in this study. But an examination of this argument suggests a position that may lead to an impoverished social science, where the interests of public service workers organise and structure what research questions social scientists may ask, and thus what answers the public may expect.

Tensions about the entitlements of "human subjects"

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The tensions about the entitlements of public service workers when they are research subjects can be traced through a discussion of the ethical issues in: agreeing to be researched; privacy; informed consent; intervening; and structuring of the research agenda.

Agreeing to be researched
Research projects in which the unit of analysis in not the individual, but, rather the administrative unit, the organisation or the community as a whole, are not straightforward when the ethical model being applied is one preoccupied with individual rights and protections. One key question concerns the extent to which public services organisations have, at an organisational level, an obligation to participate in research about them, or the right to require their workers to subject themselves to study. Social scientists claiming an interest in advancing the public good can sometimes make life uncomfortable for (official) elites of public services organisations. Senior managers in such organisations have, however, many means of evading scrutiny. They can, for example, simply deny access, frustrate attempts to collect data, or attempt to suppress or modify research findings. It could be argued that such behaviour, when produced in response to a legitimate research question in the public interest, is a violation of duties of public accountability.

It is therefore especially ironic that organizational elites are able to justify refusal to participate by invoking protections intended to protect research subjects whose ability to deny consent is compromised by their dependence on medical personnel. Thus, institutionalised forms of research ethics, designed to protect the rights of vulnerable subjects, may be used strategically to defend the privileges of the powerful. RECs, as honest brokers, need to be alert to and sensitive to these possibilities. It could be suggested that such organisations should make themselves available for social science inquiry because the need for evidence about them is overwhelmingly in the public interest, and because selective refusal to take part results in bias and other unwanted effects. But that hardly means that every school, prison, hospital or job centre must be open to all-comers, and allow itself to be examined by everyone who claims they want to do research. Here, we suggest, a REC charged with protecting the interests of research subjects as its most pressing duty is not well placed to arbitrate between the organisation that wants to resist and the social scientist eager to initiate study. Rather, the role of the REC needs to be one of determining the balance to be struck. Rather than sticking to a manual of procedures that defaults to "protecting" those to be researched, the role of the REC is more properly conceived as that of an honest broker.

A second and related issue focuses on the extent to which the individuals who work within organisations should be expected to allow themselves, or their work, to be examined by social scientists, even when that research might be contrary to their preferences and interests. There are good reasons for wanting to understand how organizational rules are defined and used in

practice, what happens when the application of organisational rules and requirements deviates from what was formally or officially intended, and where the pinch-points are for catastrophe.   Staff at the very tip of the sharp end may therefore be especially important as subjects, though in organisational terms far removed from the apex of power. Lipsky's classic *Street-Level Bureaucracy* (1980), for instance, emphasises how the implementation of policy depends critically on the people who implement it. The domestic on the hospital ward charged with implementing policies on cleanliness, the clerk in the housing office charged with ensuring non-discriminatory implementation of allocation criteria, and the social worker charged with ensuring the protection of children at risk are all examples of workers who are required to navigate the cramped channel between rules and their implementation in the delivery of public services. Most critically, they are all examples of the exercise of power in relation to client groups. Complicated questions about the vulnerable status of the various parties in providing and using public services cannot easily be settled by a simplistic application by RECs of the rights of research subjects to public service employees: the honest broker needs to conduct a more nuanced and context-specific consideration.

This is especially important when research threatens the interests of workers or has the potential for causing discomforts. Research that involves performance assessment, for example, threatens to overturn established routines for 'getting things done around here'. One category of research allows evaluation of performance potentially to be done without the intervention of those whose performance is being scrutinised: for example, educational attainment scores, client satisfaction scores, and infection rates may all be obtained through routine bureaucratic processes. Different challenges arise in a second category of things where there is more direct access – for example when the researcher wants to sit and watch in the classroom or to survey housing officers' experiences of interaction with their clients. The difference between first category of things and the second is not so much in the potential for staff to be harmed or wrong, but in the extent to which staff cooperation must explicitly be sought. In either case, the question of whether staff in public services organisations should be expected to expose themselves to research scrutiny is the relevant one. Again, an honest broker role for RECs that defaults not to the "protection" of individual subjects, but to assessing the extent to which the proposed research is legitimately in the public interest and worth tolerating any risks to subjects, would be a more useful one.

Privacy
Many of the tensions we have discussed thus far can be illustrated by considering entitlements to privacy. Research subjects are generally constructed in statements on research ethics as being due protection from invasions of privacy. This applies even when something is in the nature of a "public fact" – known by all in a setting – since it may be distressing and troubling to see it publicly reported. But should the domain of work – especially when that work involves

caring for or serving other people in public services organisations – be properly regarded as "private", or does its "public" nature create different obligations? For example, were the nurses in the study that Armitage (cited earlier) complained of entitled to privacy in the execution of their work, even when the study was able to identify avoidable errors in drug administration that could have harmed patients? An honest broker must avoid defaults to favouring the research subject, as otherwise it cannot hope to engage in the kind of debate needed to address this question directly.

Informed consent

The most prominent of all of the many procedural requirements aimed at protecting research subjects against the enthusiasms and motives of researchers is the insistence that research subjects must give their voluntary, informed consent to participation. The ESRC ethical framework specifies that:

> *Informed consent entails giving as much information as possible about the research so that prospective participants can make an informed decision on their possible involvement. Typically, this information should be provided in written form and signed off by the research subjects. Where consent is not to be secured a full statement justifying this should be provided… The primary objective is to conduct research openly and without deception. Deception (i.e. research without consent) should only be used as a last resort….*

Accordingly, RECs routinely require the fullest of disclosures and signed consent forms, and resist authorising concealment or deception by researchers. A number of problems with this approach from the perspective of researchers can be identified. The first concerns the response bias that results from telling people exactly what you are doing (assuming you know that much), why, and what the possible consequences might be. People may, for example, alter what they do when they are observed, or that they may give accounts with a view to how those accounts will be used. Telling people that some kinds of sensitive subjects are being researched is especially likely to provoke distorting effects. For instance, telling members of a police force that you are investigating racism or corruption is very unlikely to enable access to those situations where evidence of racism or corruption is most likely to surface. Telling staff in a public prosecutor's office that you want to understand whether they are more lenient towards "white collar" crime is likely to frustrate the purpose of the research. Whether these examples would satisfy an ethics committee as meeting the criteria for being a "last resort" is unclear, yet a well-founded ethics of public service research requires that these issues be considered critically, by an honest broker.

A second problem concerns whether the formalised practice of making people read information sheets and sign consent forms does in fact protect subjects (workers or not). Signing

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documents to show that one has understood and agreed to what is happening is in the realm of such things as affixing a signature to contracts, insurance documents, and internet orders; everyone knows that ticking the box saying, "I have read the terms and conditions" is a necessary passage point to the next step in the process. Ticking the box indicates a readiness 'to get on with things' rather than an understanding of what one is getting on with. Signatures on consent forms may signify the enactment of a ritual that may serve institutional interests far more than it serves the research subject's. For staff in public services organisations, signed consent forms function primarily as evidentiary artifacts in the event of a dispute. This invests the act of consent with a peculiar significance: it can be used to demonstrate a voluntary acquiescence, and thus suppress any subsequent protest at the account the researcher renders. RECs, as honest brokers, need to be careful about insisting on obtaining signed consent forms from public sector workers (and more generally).

Third, the nature of social research, with its constant engagements in social realities often defies easy or straightforward administrative solutions. Murphy and Dingwall (2007) have suggested that the current bureaucratisation of research risks undermining the moral and ethical responsibilities of researchers as 'rule-following replaces a commitment to working out the 'right thing to do'. In the field, it is often necessary to resort to forms of improvisation and on-the-hoof decisions, as Hoyle (1998) describes in her ethnographic study of police response to domestic violence. "Fast swerves" when the research design specified at the outset of the study meets reality requires high level critical skills and moral commitments on the part of researchers; again, an honest broker should be capable of valuing these where appropriate, but also of recognising when researchers are being thoughtless, careless, or sloppy in their planning.

Intervening
Social science researchers often confront problems in the field where there is the potential for human intervention. Such situations always involve dilemmas, in part because they trouble the status of the research subject as having unquestioned rights to privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy. They can also sharpen the researcher's discomfort by making her feel more like spy, whose false cover is the "kindly ethnographer" – working without the interests of the group she studies at heart, but nonetheless relying on their indulgence to gain access (Fine 1992).

In studying public services organisations, such dilemmas may become especially intense. As long as researchers make it their business to study work that has murky everyday ethical decision-making, they have to learn live with the ethical mess of other people's work. When to suspend judgment, when to offer an opinion, when to suggest an alternative, when to intervene actively are not easy decisions for fieldworkers trying to understand the problem of how to enhance performance in difficult human service domains, especially when decisions are

made in time-pressured situations that contain irreducible uncertainty (Bosk, 2008). Such challenges may be especially acute in the face of extreme field events, such as undertaking research on public sector provision or performance in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Gaining access and collecting data in a hospital that has been exposed as having excessive mortality or a school where children have committed suicide will all require a balance to be struck between procedural forms of ethics and the character and virtues of researchers.

In qualitative work, especially of an ethnographic nature, distinctive problems arise. Researchers may come to see questionable practices as normal and acceptable, possibly because they become so acclimated to study settings, or because they feel uncomfortable about "betraying" the staff who allowed them access. Researchers may be poorly qualified to judge whether what they see and hear is genuinely a problem, or be uncertain about whether they can intervene. But this may happen whether the data are qualitative or quantitative; it is not unknown for researchers to identify that particular individuals or organisations are displaying markedly poor performance, and to worry about whether to do something about, for example, a surgeon who seems to have excessive death rates. There may be anxieties that reporting concerns to official authorities might muddy the research field, leaving it difficult for future researchers to enter. It is clear that such dilemmas would benefit more from an honest broker engaging in well-informed debate and reflection than the imposition of procedure.

Structuring of the research agenda
These selected examples of how the protections and entitlements due to research subjects are in tension with the need of a democratic society to understand more about the services it provides should not obscure the deeper structuring effects on the work of social scientists. These apply even when ethical frameworks, such as that adopted by the ESRC, allow (in principle) for covert studies, without explicit or signed consent, and contrary to the interests of research subjects. The ESRC framework acknowledges that "some" research that poses risks to research subjects is legitimate, and that research may be deliberately and legitimately opposed to the interest of subjects, though it cautions that this applies "*where the objectives of the research are to reveal and critique fundamental economic, political or cultural disadvantage or exploitation. Much social science research has a critical role to play in exploring and questioning social, cultural and economic structures and processes (for example relating to patterns of power and social inequality), and institutional dynamics and regimes that disadvantage some social groups over others, intentionally or not.*"

The ESRC framework further accepts that informed consent may be impracticable, meaningless, create unnecessary risks for research subjects or be contrary to research design. It suggests that covert research may be undertaken "*when it may provide unique forms of evidence or where overt observation might alter the phenomenon being studied. The broad principle should be that*

covert research must not be undertaken lightly or routinely. It is only justified if important issues are being addressed and if matters of social significance which cannot be uncovered in other ways are likely to be discovered...."

Though welcome indications of a tolerance of difference, the language of exceptionalism may have a number of chilling, if unintended, effects.   One potential effect is to induce forms of laziness or cowardice in both institutions and researchers. This works on a number of different levels. Much, for example, depends on how RECs understand and execute their roles and responsibilities. Though systematic, high quality evidence is scant, there are significant risks that RECs in the social sciences may adopt the kind of rule-based approach often found in the medical sciences. It would unsurprising if RECs were to act in a relatively conservative way, and to default to ethics-as-procedure. Such a strategy, while ostensibly safe, has its risks. As Michael Power (2009) describes in the distinct context of financial services regulation, it simultaneously creates a cognitively comfortable world that functions as a defence against anxiety and enables people to feel that their work conforms to legitimised principles.

This rule-based world is both attractive to those at the operational level, and dangerous at the institutional level. A possible impact of the proceduralisation of ethics is to discourage rather than encourage the development of the qualities of moral reflection and virtue that are potentially better marks of the ethical researcher than the extent to which the correct forms have been completed. Ethics-as-procedure may encourage a form of moral lethargy, where it is safer and more comfortable to do the required rather than the right thing; to get the person to sign the consent form rather than leave them more safely anonymous; to tell the person you are looking for age discrimination, even when you know that means you will never witness any; to stick to the protocol as specified, even when experience in the field tells you that you have discovered an important but unanticipated line of inquiry. In a paradoxical way, ethics-as-procedure makes life too comfortable for social scientists.

More insidious, perhaps, is the impact of the discourse of exceptionalism on the projects researchers are prepared to propose. The questions asked by social science may then become structured and constrained not so much by what happens when a proposal is submitted to a REC, as by the awful vision of what might happen. Faced with the prospect of an uncertain outcome from ethical review (and the possibility of loss of funding), researchers might naturally migrate to safer shores. They may ask comfortable, but perhaps less necessary, social questions that allow them to access the kinds of research subjects who are willing to volunteer and to sign consent forms. They may also design their studies so that they avoid conflicts, anguishes and moral turmoil. Rather than proposing ethnographic work, with its attendant messy challenges and ongoing dilemmas, researchers may instead, for example, propose interview-based or survey work, whose episodic character lends itself to much neater regulation. But

research projects that are "nice", their often valuable findings notwithstanding, rarely produce the challenges a socially useful social science of public services organisations should attempt.

The honest broker as a defence against poor social science

Nothing in our discussion thus far should be interpreted as meaning that we believe that ethical review of social science research in public service organisations is unnecessary. Though social scientists have often been bitterly resentful of a process seen as ill-suited to the task at hand, intrusive, incompetent, and burdensome (Dingwall, 2006; Hammersley 2009), we argue that REC review is essential to securing the moral licence (Dixon-Woods and Ashcroft, 2008) for social science research and protecting the interests both of researchers and researcher.

This is an especially important role because, despite all the claims made for the virtues and competences of social scientists, not all social science is socially useful, properly conceived, well conducted, sufficiently well-resourced or – put bluntly – worth the risks for the research subjects. On occasion researchers are thoughtless or ill-disciplined when designing studies and collecting and reporting data, and insufficiently sensitive to the hurt, offence and harm they can cause people. Sometimes they re-enter fields, causing fresh wounds without adding to the existing literature when a re-analysis or synthesis of work already done would much better have served the aims of the research. Sometimes researchers are ignorant, arrogant, too intent upon making sensational claims, too partial to particular interests, or too committed to producing an unflattering picture of an unpopular organisation or institution. Given these problems, there is much to be said for having independent oversight of what researchers want to do, rather than leaving researchers to make decisions for themselves. But, as we have argued throughout this paper, such oversight must be provided by a REC acting as an honest broker, not as defender of procedure.

Conclusions

The ethics review system now implemented throughout the social sciences is one that codifies and formalises not only what is do-able, but also a cultural logic for understanding the roles and identities of researchers and researched. However, these membership categories are far from unproblematic when applied to the study of public service organisations. The categories of "researcher" and "research subject" grant certain important forms of control to the research subjects while ignoring that the category "public service employee" implies some level of accountability. The current ethics review system makes it more likely that the wishes of potential research subjects shape what research questions are asked and how they are answered in studies of public service organisations rather more than it favours the asking of demanding and uncomfortable questions. There are substantial risks that, pushed too far, genuinely critical social science research in public service organisations will diminish, replaced by "normal science" research using off-the-shelf datasets.

We have challenged the wisdom and ethics of treating managers and staff in public services as 'vulnerable subjects', but also note that that the stakes for them from social science research can sometimes be high. These are problems that are also being confronted in other fields, including anthropology, where questions about researchers' responsibilities to powerful and wealthy communities are now being debated (Sridhar, 2005). We make two proposals. First, there is a need to reconceive the project of ethical review in the social sciences as one where the role of the ethics committee is one of honest broker rather than advocate for the research subject. RECs would have an explicit role in balancing the public interest in gaining knowledge, and the legitimate interests of public service employees and organisations. This is likely to involve many challenges, including those of practical nature.

Second, we argue for a form of ethics that stresses responsibility, character, and virtue on the part of researchers. These qualities need to be disciplined by careful training, constant reflexivity, and continuous engagement with an honest broker. This is part of a move towards a more critical and thoughtful form of governance, including Power's (2009) proposal that we turn from rule-bound systems that create auditable facts toward the "critical imagination of available futures", in which an uncomfortable process of confronting risks and ambiguities is engaged.

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