

AUTHOR:

Professor SM Maistry¹ 

AFFILIATION:

¹University of KwaZulu-Natal

EMAIL:

makina@unisa.ac.za

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TRANSACTIONAL ETHICS AND “DAMAGE-CENTRED” RESEARCH: OF BANALITY AND OBLIVION

ABSTRACT

The recent article by Nieuwoudt, Dickie, Coetsee, Engelbrecht and Terblanche (2019) entitled “Age- and education-related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored South African women” published in the journal Aging, Neuropsychology, and Cognition, attracted considerable negative attention, leading to its official withdrawal from circulation. While it may be argued that this unfortunate piece of “scholarship” had “slipped through the cracks”, there is certainly a need for a more nuanced analysis of what constitutes ethical social research practice. In this article, the issue of intentionality and (un)witting Othering is contemplated by invoking Tuck’s notion of “damage-centred” research, an approach that continues to frame contemporary investigations in the name of social justice. It is argued that there is a need to reconsider the practice of transactional ethics. Arendt’s concept of the banality (of evil) has resonance, as it speaks to the notion of “blissful oblivion of complicity”, even in the context of a widespread contemporary discourse of social transformation and decolonisation in South African higher education.

Keywords: *ethics, banality, damage-centred research, oblivion*

1. INTRODUCTION

The ethical standards of the academic industrial complex are a recent development, and like so many post-civil rights reforms, do not always do enough to ensure that social science research is deeply ethical, meaningful, or useful for the individual or community being researched (Tuck & Yang, 2014: 233).

The jury is out as to the extent to which the South African academy has engaged in any substantive way with what deeply ethical social science research might entail. This may be understandable, given the academy’s preoccupation with streamlining a national policy framework (and provision), now that the country has emerged from a fragmented academic and social history. Centuries of racial hierarchisation in particular have meant that research and scholarship occur in a South African society that is still afflicted by racial stratification. It is not inconceivable that the lingering effects



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of 350 years of political, economic and ideological control by settlers are not likely to have been eroded in the short, 25-year post-apartheid phase of the country's history.

The notion of a shared or common humanity remains an elusive national project. In fact, public circulation of the article by Nieuwoudt, Dickie, Coetsee, Engelbrecht and Terblanche (2019) entitled “Age- and education-related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored South African women”, published in the journal *Aging, Neuropsychology, and Cognition: A Journal on Normal and Dysfunctional Development*, might well be considered a lingering symptom of the country's diabolical history (Le Grange, 2019). At a time when there appears to be elevated discourse on reconciliation, transformation and decolonisation in the higher education space, this kind of scholarship appears still to have a place in the local academy. Its occurrence demands analysis and an openness to intellectual conversations about what might be deemed socially, morally and ethically acceptable research.

Clearly the universal principles of research, as outlined in the seminal work of Beauchamp and Childress (Beauchamp & Childress, 1979), do not appear to be sufficiently robust for the peculiarities that might manifest in post-conflict societies such as South Africa. Social divisions and racial hierarchies were the normative (legislated) structure of the country for many years. However, researching across race and culture has not been sufficiently theorised or debated in any profound way.

It is not unexpected that this contentious article would generate an acrimonious response (Le Grange, 2019). It was in fact a stark reminder that the proverbial “rainbow nation” and the national social cohesion project of South Africa's fledgling democracy is still very much in its infancy. Given the apology from the institution's public relations office on behalf of the researchers, one might infer that this was certainly not brazen defiance (on the part of the researchers) meant to (re)create racial divisions. How, then, might we analyse and make sense of this occurrence, given that institutional ethical review committees are a common feature in the South African context, and tasked to apply and oversee adherence to the basic, generally accepted principles of research ethics?

As a point of entry into this analysis, it might be useful to trace back how historical violations led to the genesis of contemporary research ethics principles, guidelines that have become mandatory in postgraduate research programmes around the world.

2. THE GENESIS OF AN ETHICAL CODE

The work of Beauchamp and Childress (1979) has framed the ethical code in western research institutions, almost acquiring a canonical status. It offers key insights into the principles of respect and dignity, justice and beneficence, as well as non-maleficence. However, the formalising of ethical principles can be traced back to the judicial tribunal established during the Nuremberg Trials after World War II. The revelations at this landmark trial were arguably the most publicised exposé of human atrocities relating to biomedical research on prisoners. This marked the first public deliberations on ethical principles for research on human subjects.

The 1964 Helsinki Declaration also signalled the international research community's quest for a universally acceptable code of ethics (Carlson, Boyd & Webb, 2004). Despite this international acknowledgement of an ethical code by which researchers ought to abide, ethical violations of various kinds persisted in different countries across the world. For example, the “Tuskegee *Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male*” remains a reprehensible piece

of America's racist history, conducted over a 40-year period from 1932 to 1972 (Alsan & Wanamaker, 2018). Its exposé forced the then United States (US) government to set up a commission to develop a set of guiding principles for research on human participants. The subsequent Belmont Report, released in the US in 1979, foregrounded three fundamental ethical principles, namely, respect for persons, beneficence and justice (Alsan & Wanamaker, 2018). However, while these principles came into 'theoretical' effect in 1979, it was only in 1997 that the then US President, Bill Clinton, offered a somewhat belated apology to the victims and their families. This was significant, as it marked the first public acknowledgement and official assumption of responsibility for the atrocities committed against poor, unsuspecting African-American men, many of whom perished over the study period. The jury is out as to whether the compensation and apology were enough to offset the generational effect on the wives and offspring of the victims. It was clear that several ethical violations, among others against beneficence, informed consent, respect and justice, with significant maleficence, took place in the Tuskegee Study (Shavers, Lynch & Burmeister, 2000).

Three key issues that emerged then continue to plague the world of research involving humans. Firstly, while at face value biomedical ethics principles have appeal in guiding research and the work of the institutional ethics committees of the world, it has become apparent that despite the relative robustness of the framework, the potential for selective appropriation and application that might lead to (un)witting harm, is very real (Pittaway, Bartolomei & Hugman, 2010). That the principles are culturally neutral is also a moot point (Westra, Willems, & Smit, 2009). In fact, principlism and the principlist model of Beauchamp and Childress in particular are somewhat benign in factoring cultural peculiarities into the conduct of research (Padela, Malik, Curlin & De Fries, 2015). There is also contention as to the extent to which they are able to capture universal moral principles (Christen, Ineichen & Tanner, 2014).

More than a decade ago suggestions for unique principles that should guide research with indigenous communities were mooted (see Castellano, 2004 for example). Similarly, there have been appeals for research methodologies that are culturally sensitive and which entail reciprocal relations with vulnerable communities (Wilson & Neville, 2009), and a review of the applicability and contemporary usefulness of Beauchamp and Childress' four principles (de Castro & Valero, 2018). Clearly, the Beauchamp and Childress framework is not without its shortcomings.

The second key issue emerging from the Tuskegee Study is that the poor and most vulnerable continue to be the subjects of experimentation. The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples makes explicit that historical markers of prejudice (race, gender, ethnicity, religion and culture) cannot and should no longer be tolerated in the academic research space. Yet research practices such as the study under scrutiny happened in plain sight.

The third issue is that race remains a distinct determining factor as to who might be the source of data for studies that involve harm to human beings. Brazen racism and paternalism were at play in the Niewoudt *et al.* study, and it begs the question as to the extent to which these issues – which are particularly germane in the South African context – have received the attention they deserve. This is an argument that this paper takes up.

The question, then, is what explains why – despite widespread awareness of ethical principles in the academe – research studies such as the study in question came to fruition? I want to argue that dispositions of racism and paternalism are cultivated over generations,

and while some members of the contemporary generation can and have shaken off unhealthy learnt behaviour, an unknown quantity who are oblivious to their racialised socialisation remain. Ajam (2019: 1) in her critique of this same study contends that “racial thinking persists in the South African academe, despite a growing global scientific consensus that race as a biological construct holds no legitimacy”

The article by Nieuwoudt *et al.* (2019) was an important trigger piece that has reawakened the somewhat complacent level of engagement on ethics as it relates to research in South Africa. The purpose of this current article is not an analysis of the specifics of the contents of this withdrawn article, and neither is it meant to be an attack on these colleagues *per se*. Rather, the focus is on the key systemic issues at play in the South African research arena that are conducive to this kind of research.

In an attempt to unpack these issues, it might be useful to trace the genealogy of racism and paternalism, which may offer an explanation as to why these social injustices have endured.

3. THE GENESIS OF RACISM AND PATERNALISM

South Africa’s peculiar history, as arguably the last bastion of institutional settler totalitarianism, unwittingly makes racism and paternalism susceptible to what might be described as “the recency effect”. The relative “freshness” of legislated racism and paternalism has the misguided effect of locating the genesis of these social phenomena as uniquely South African, and as originating in South Africa. On the contrary, Grosfoguel (2013) asserts that the genesis of racism can be traced right back to Columbus’s so-called “discovery” of the Americas in the 1400s. Grosfoguel (2013) argues that the conquest of the Americas was not purely an economic manoeuvre for trade, but marked the genesis of the construction of racial hierarchies. Of note, though, is that religious racism was the precursor to colour racism.

The following brief description of the social construction of a racial hierarchy runs the risk of over-simplification and reductionism (or a linearity) of what was indeed a heinous process that occurred over a period of more than 500 years. Race did not exist as a demographic classification or social construct in the periods prior to the 1400s. The same can be said for the ascription of hierarchical ranking (Grosfoguel, 2007). In fact, European colonialists and the European empire struggled to make sense of the indigenous communities that inhabited the Americas (and Africa). At the time, what distinguished indigenous peoples outside of continental Europe were their peculiar societal systems and spirituality.

While for obvious reasons they were not Christian, these peoples were constructed as entities without religion (Grosfoguel, 2009). Eurocentric Christianity was premised on the possession of a soul – of Christians having a soul that rendered them human. People with a soul and with a religion were deemed God-like. It follows that people without a “recognisable” Christian religion (at the time) were deemed not to have souls. Maldonado-Torres (2007) refers to this as misanthropic scepticism, an unfounded uncertainty as to whether others (human beings) had souls or not.

Not having a soul and not being God-like relegated such living entities to being classified as animal-like. The ascription of a sub-human animality to people who were non-Christians legitimated their being utilised as expendable slave labour for the advancement of European capitalism and exploitative colonial conquests. All of this was enforceable through a military superiority: the possession and use of guns and ammunition.

The prototypical, socially fabricated slave was non-Christian, non-European and of dermatologically darker pigmentation than the European colonist, and was African, indigenous American or Asian. Please note that this grossly abbreviated account is certainly not meant to diminish the hundreds of years of systematic, brutal torture and inhumanity meted out to generations of subjugated peoples. It does, however, intend to offer an abstraction of how a sustained epistemicide (the obliteration of indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing) and genocide (the brutal extermination of millions of people at the hands of colonisers) occurred and, importantly, to reflect on how narratives of contemporary racial hierarchisation have come to maintain its hegemony.

Grosfoguel (2009) offers a more sophisticated account of what he describes as the “zones of being” and “non-being”. He argues that Eurocentric hierarchisation has mutated beyond the dermatological white-skinned – that even people of dermatologically darker shades, through their assimilation of various degrees of Eurocentricism and economic and social class, have self-assigned or self-located in the zone of being (Grosfoguel, 2009). Similarly, Ajam (2019: 1) asserts that “ingrained racist mental models are still prevalent across institutions of higher learning, and that they are by no means confined to white academics”.

Note, though, that paternalism and racism are a contingent fabrication of history, and masquerade as normal social practice. Paternalism and racism can be described as performative (Butler, 1990), or essentially learnt behaviour. It is not a kind of learning (“competence”) that one acquires in a single sitting. Learning to be paternalistic and racist comes through immersion, observation and repeated practice in social environments that consciously and unconsciously teach this. It is likely to occur in settings where racism and paternalism have been normalised and reified over generations, to a degree that the practising individual develops a level of oblivion. Note that when race is invoked as the conceptual premise in research “politically constructed racial categories are reproduced, thereby perpetuating stigma, discrimination, and racism” (Hendricks, Kramer & Kopano, 2019: 308).

4. THEORISING OBLIVION

“[T]he dissonant use of the past” makes the study of oblivion highly relevant in the present day (Kaasik-Krogerus, Čeginskis, & Sääskilahti, 2020: 272). Plate (2016) notes however that this barren field lacks a coherent theoretical and methodological framework for the study of the *production* of oblivion. Oblivion is a state of unconsciousness: a state of mind in which the individual becomes immune to certain stimuli in his/her environment. While the individual is in fact very responsive to some pertinent stimuli, they are completely disconnected from others. Being oblivious may be akin to being in a meditative state of sorts, akin to where the meditator has been trained or has trained him-/herself to shut out irrelevant stimuli automatically and systematically in order to maintain a singular focus. Plate reminds us that “oblivion is culturally produced” (Plate, 2016: 146). When the meditator repeatedly “practises” marinating in this state of unconsciousness, such a state becomes normalised or naturalised, and may acquire an element of fixity in the psyche of the practising meditator. The meditator is able to acquire and be in this state, without much effort. A state of oblivion then becomes a refined state of “unawareness” that can either be produced actively or passively (Plate, 2016).

Note that different individuals experience a state of oblivion to different kinds of stimuli. Usually, being oblivious to certain stimuli in the environment is quite harmless, as the individual proceeds with his/her daily life. Note though, that “purposeful oblivion is an active process that

serves particular interests and needs” (Kaasik-Krogerus *et al.*, 2020:272). There are, however, overt instances where the individuals’ oblivion to their behaviour might well be a nuisance to others who inhabit the same space; for example, individuals who converse loudly on their cell phones, unaware that they may be intruding on the noise/sound space of others around them. Such individuals may check themselves if they become self-aware or if someone alerts them to the superfluous noise they are emitting. Similarly, male chauvinism might be regarded as shaped by high levels of oblivion to the ridiculousness of self-ascribed superiority based on physiology. In the context of social research, what might be the implications of researcher oblivion, and how did it play itself out in the now infamous research project and subsequent publication of the findings?

For the purposes of this discussion, I want to focus very specifically on the degrees or levels of oblivion that appear to be pervasive, especially as this relates to the research project being critiqued. Deleuze and Guatarri’s (1987) concept of assemblage has resonance, as it draws our attention to the fact that academic researchers – members of a particular assemblage – do not exist in isolation of the fraternity to which they belong. They shape and are shaped by the fraternity (Lorraine, 2011). An assemblage, a discursive practice in Foucauldian (Foucault, 2001) terms, is “signifying and interpreting activities we engage in ... they entail enacted rule...of the social field” (Lorraine, 2011: 13). The academic researchers in question could well argue that they were, in fact, working within the parameters of an established and sanctioned, discursive practice or assemblage. The constitution of this particular assemblage is worthy of further analysis, as this will demonstrate that the responsibility or the burden of criticism should be borne by a wider set of complicit agents.

5. MOVING BEYOND THE FALL GUYS

In tracing back to its genesis, it is clear that the research project under scrutiny passed (‘undetected’) through various institutional control systems. In the first instance, the conceptualisation of the project by the project team, comprising experienced and relatively novice researchers, had deemed the ethicality of the project to be in order. The conceived project would have received departmental approval at the host institution (the University of Stellenbosch, in this instance). Similarly, the academic leadership gave this project its endorsement. The Research and Higher Degrees Committee, comprising academic experts in the field, would have approved the research project proposal. It would subsequently have come before the University Research Ethics Committee, where research ethics experts would have applied the basic principles of research ethics to ascertain the ethical integrity of the proposal. This latter committee subsequently consented to the research project.

In essence, this project did not simply “fall through the cracks” – it was sanctioned in accordance with due institutional process. Of significance is that the multiple agents and committees that subjected this project to scrutiny failed to raise concerns about its ethicality. This makes the case for oblivion particularly compelling, especially since high-level, PhD-qualified academics/professors appeared unperturbed by the nature of this project.

The assemblage to which the implicated colleagues belong extends beyond the institution/university. For instance, the funding agency adjudged this project to be one that was worthy of financial backing. Arguments would have been made for its significance and contribution to knowledge. Whether there was discussion as to it trampling on the humanity of the research participants, is a moot question. Arguably the most disconcerting aspect of this debacle was

the endorsement by the journal of this “scholarship”, and the authority given to its “knowledge” at that time. It was only after sustained pressure from various sectors of the academy and civil society that the article was withdrawn. The managing editor, as first line of defence of the scholarship that the journal publishes, proved to be somewhat unwary that the article submitted for consideration might prove to be controversial and may have violated an acceptable ethical code. A similar analysis applies in relation to the sensitivity of the “blind” reviewers (experts in the field) who sanctioned the contents of the article. That these high-level experts were in fact blind to the ethical oversights suggests that the expertise might well be of a truncated kind. The same argument holds for the members of the editorial board of the journal.

It is not unreasonable to conclude that the entire assemblage (the various agents in that particular fraternity) cannot make claim to having the requisite levels of sensitivity to racial, gender and economic class-related issues, as the research project in question and its manifest outcome – the article and its ethical frailties – passed through its echelons completely undetected.

However, the hovering ghosts of modernity and positivism have to share complicity (Le Grange, 2019). Modernity and the western intellectual tradition’s hegemony can be traced back to Rene Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* – “I think therefore I am”. This marked the death of spirituality and ushered in an era signalled by a disconnect with nature, the environment and human beings. It assumes and advocates for a distant, non-partisan researcher – a clinical separation of the researcher and research participant. That the positivist tradition may have had an influence on the research “culture” of the researchers in question is certainly an argument that should not be discounted. Le Grange reminds us of the phenomenon of ethics creep, namely the application of pure science ethics in the human and social sciences (Le Grange, 2019). That said, even research in this tradition has largely been able to work within the ethical “boundary”.

The fact that this study and its outcomes was paraded in the public academic space suggests a thoughtlessness on the part of this fraternity as to the effects that this kind of research may have on the research participants and associated communities. It marks a banality with which the research study was executed, a discussion of which follows.

6. ABOUT BANALITY

Hannah Arendt’s controversial concept, the “banality” (of evil) (Arendt, 1998) received widespread critique in the period following the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the notorious Nazi commander responsible for executing millions of Jews during World War II. In attempting to analyse what predisposed Eichmann to this kind of act, Arendt came to the conclusion that people are not innately evil, but that everyone has the propensity to commit evil deeds. In describing Eichmann and his actions, Arendt invoked the concept of “banality”, a condition where the actor carries out atrocious deeds with an inexplicable thoughtlessness, an acute yet authentic inability to think. She described Eichmann as not pathological nor overtly wicked, an analysis that drew serious condemnation at the time.

This analysis might be useful as we extend its tenets to the participating researchers in question. The concept of banality, then, might be described as a state of mind in which human conscience has receded into an abysmal dormancy or hibernation. People trapped in this condition may not be inherently sinister or have an inhuman disposition, but they wilfully undertake sinister acts. These acts are not those of stupidity; they do, however, characterise a thoughtlessness. Such individuals do not demonstrate “any diabolic or demonic profundity”

(Arendt, 1998: 237). Often these acts are carried out in pursuit of personal advancement. In this instance, it might well be related to research profile enhancement. In this manner, it becomes merely the application of a transactional ethical code, without any level of realisation of the repercussions of such behaviour, especially for those on the receiving end. Transactional ethics then represents a contract of exploitative exchange in which the researcher secures data from unsuspecting participants to whom promises of benefit are made, but seldom materialise in any substantive form. It is the outcome of asymmetrical power relations between researchers and research subjects in which subjugated research subjects have little or no knowledge of the dynamics of their participation in the “exchange” and have limited recourse post-consequence. Transactional ethics thus constitutes an inherent venality in plain sight.

There may not have been any overt affiliation to any institutional vision or ideological conviction on the part of the perpetrators, but it could be argued that this kind of research is premised on a misguided theory of social change – of litigation-motivated change (Tuck, 2009). The challenge with this approach to social change is that it essentialises the research endeavour to becoming a transaction, a trade of sorts: give us access to the worst of your conditions and let us magnify your adverse conditions as leverage for institutional action. The assumption here is that of a well-functioning legal/judicial system that is responsive, and that the poor have the ability to harness the data effectively to make a legal case for interventions to alleviate their plight. However, the reality is that legal systems are notorious for lethargy and ineptness in following through to a conclusion in such cases (if they get to court at all). The real beneficiaries of the transaction are the researchers, as manifested in the research outputs that they produce, from which they gain academic mileage.

The question as to which race groups remain the most “researchable” for this kind of social justice research (even in disguised form) is moot. However, it does bring into sharp purview who might constitute a convenient, available and accessible research population in the South African context. South Africa’s ailing socio-economic situation, and its vast numbers of poor and unemployed, present as an appealing and lucrative research field. It is no secret as to who the poor and most vulnerable populations are. Data from Statistics South Africa (2017) unequivocally indicate that the poverty gap for Blacks was a high 32.5%, while it was 16.9% for Coloureds, 1.5% for Indians, and under 1% for White South Africans. For Black and Coloured South Africans, this affected group comprised children, women and people living in rural areas.

The data are indeed telling, as they reveal quite explicitly the race groups that are most susceptible to all kinds of social and medical research. Of concern is when selective expedience by researchers overshadows any bona fide social justice intent (Zulu, 2013), a research approach that designates and elevates damaged and broken (human beings) as evidence for intervention.

7. TROUBLING DAMAGE-CENTRED RESEARCH

Eve Tuck, an indigenous scholar reflecting on research on native American communities in Canada and the US, argues that the time for damage-centred research is now long past (Tuck, 2009). She contends that damage-centred research has served its purpose, and is likely to create more harm to research participants than the benefits that might accrue. The argument is premised on the fact that historically social science research has had, as a key objective, the need to expose frailties in social settings. The idea was that this kind of

exposé through empirical research will draw attention to areas of need/intervention, and that resources will be harnessed in the direction of where the deficit occurs.

At face value, this appears to be a noble intent, and as such should receive support. So, in an effort to amplify the plight of oppressed subjects, researchers reveal explicit details of the extent of the deprivation with “good” intent. In essence, then, the more one can reveal/demonstrate deprivation, the more likely it is that such social conditions might receive due attention. What in fact happens is that this kind of construction inadvertently crosses the border into depictions of “damage”, of people as broken, as pathology. Tuck reminds us that,

[t]hese characterizations frame our communities as sites of disinvestment and dispossession; our communities become spaces in which under-resourced health and economic infrastructures are endemic. They become spaces saturated in the fantasies of outsiders (Tuck, 2009: 412).

While attention is drawn to the condition being reported on, this comes at the expense of essentialising the plight of such communities. Even when studies are completed, and the findings reported, researchers do little to restore the dignity of the participants that they had patronised. The narrative of deficit and deprivation lives on. Tuck argues that researchers have to reconsider how even the most atrocious contexts/conditions being reported on need to factor in, in a highly sensitive way, the humanity of the participants (Tuck, 2009). Failure to do so simply renders such research as surreptitious, as it solicits narratives with an exclusive focus on dispossession and powerlessness. In other words: “Tell us your tragic stories, we will commandeer help”. This is not a new phenomenon or approach to constructing research participants. It is, however, timely to revisit what this might mean and how researchers (research supervisors included) might envisage this re-alert or re-consciousness as it relates to the human beings that they work with in the research field.

The contention with damage-centred research is that it fails to centre human dignity as an important point of departure. In fact, damage-centred research alters and shapes the very way in which researchers approach the research field and the manner in which they engage with research subjects. Damage-centred research conceives of research subjects in a particular way and might degenerate into research that patronises instead of creating conditions for empowerment. It might also have the effect of reducing research participants to mere repositories of data, as opposed to sources of knowledge, or understanding the research participant as moral agent (Pittaway *et al.*, 2010). It also has the effect of reinforcing racial stereotypes (Hendricks *et al.*, 2019).

8. ABOUT SYMPATHY, PITY AND EMPATHY

Dispositions of pity and mere sympathy are not particularly useful, as they position research subjects as victims (to be rescued). The location of power and agency resides in the researcher. Victim constructions suggest the need for rescue of sorts – rescue by some outside force. The subjects in this instance are maintained in a state of paralysis, which may well endure beyond the life of the project, especially when the interventions/rescue/recommendations that are lobbied for do not materialise.

The reality is that, very often, recommendations from academic research remain at a theoretical (paper) level, contained within theses and journals. They are rarely taken up or alter policy in the short term. This kind of research does not guarantee that there will be

any change in the material and emotional well-being of the participants. Indeed, it might well have the effect of reifying the condition in the psyche of the research subjects, as somewhat doomed to remain in a “condemned” state, denying any recognition of the intrinsic ability or potential of research participants.

An empathetic approach, however, frames the research subject in a qualitatively different fashion. The premise is to recognise the potential in subjects – to see subjects as able and capable. This involves being acutely sensitive to projecting a disposition of respect, of deep regard and, importantly, recognising and acknowledging innate agency. Ascribing innate agency is the recognition, even in the most despairing of contexts, of the intrinsic ability/potential of people. It locates the locus of control and power within subjects. Being an empathetic researcher is thus a high-level competence. It requires high levels of perception, acute sensitivity to the environment, and the ability to glean information from non-verbal cues (body language, tone, mood, emotions projected). It might be described as an approach that requires a “listening” with one’s entire body. Empathetic researchers work hard at building relationships and trust, in ways that enable research participants to recognise the researcher’s authentic intent.

9. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Several (research) issues emerge from the deliberations presented in this paper. While many institutions have stand-alone ethics courses for postgraduate students, or have this aspect integrated into research methodology modules, how does the academy invoke the notion of researchers “living” ethical principles, as opposed to engaging mere paper ethics and bureaucratic compliance?

Internalising ethical principles as they relate to research cannot be reduced to a mere tick-box exercise where researchers merely parrot research ethics theory and principles. Given the tight timeframes within which researchers have to access the field, collect data and see projects to completion, it is not unusual to expect that deep, deliberative conversations about the application of an ethical code seldom happen. Pinar’s (2004) insights about complicated conversations have salience here.

The idea of complicated conversations refers to the notion of troubling the self, in the first instance, as it relates to the impact of one’s behaviour and actions. It might require an introspection of learnt social behaviours and prejudice, especially those that have become normalised in our individual psyche, with a view to interrogating the assumptions we make about fellow human beings. Implicated in this introspection is a recognition of relations of power that exist between researchers and participants, and how this power might produce particular behaviours and actions in a Foucauldian sense – an acknowledgement of the flawed assumption that researchers often make as to who has power and who does not, and power’s productive potential (Foucault, 1979).

Complicated conversations need to move beyond individuals engaging with themselves; there is a need for deliberative conversations in the academic assemblage. How might complicit structures – departments, disciplines, higher degrees committees, university research committees, journal reviewers, editors, editorial boards – review and reconsider the robustness of ethics protocols that prevail? How might the research community contemplate candid discussions of how social justice issues of race, gender and class, for example, are implicated in the selection of research participants?

The multiple agents implicated in the assemblage discussed above might well find this paper accusatory. The consequences of not paying attention to having these complicated conversations might well be another shameful research project that tramples on the humanity of its research subjects in the name of societal transformation. Should this recommendation be embraced, there might be much potential for growth and the application of justice as ethical principle. It might well spawn paradigmatic innovations as we search for an Arendt-inspired reconciliation between modernity and spirituality (Arendt, 1998).

Given that the researchers implicated in the offending study might well be traumatised by the fall-out that the research study has created, how might we apply an immanent ethics (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) in a positive spirit of reconciliation, as opposed to attempting to ostracise such colleagues? Instead of seeking to punish and alienate/vilify, how might we become prospective, as opposed to applying retrospective condemnation?

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