

# **‘Like the stranger at a funeral who cries more than the bereaved’: ethical dilemmas in ethnographic research with children**

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## **Abstract**

This article contributes to debates on the practicality and utility of prior ethical review in ethnography and qualitative research using an ethnography of children’s involvement in artisanal gold mining work in Ghana as a case study. Reflecting on dilemmas and obstacles encountered in attempts to employ prescribed institutional ethical guidance modelled for childhood research in the UK during the fieldwork, the discussion brings to attention some of the problems that can arise when ethical guidance is not anchored in the lived realities or value systems of the setting in which fieldwork is conducted. The article seeks to rejuvenate calls for more flexible and socio-culturally responsive ethical review and practice as an alternative to the prescriptive ethical regimes.

## **Keywords**

childhood, ethical review, ethnography, informed consent, research ethics

## **Introduction**

In 1969, shortly after the Declaration of Helsinki (1964), the sociologist Gresham Sykes predicted that the social sciences were in for a very long debate on application of such ethical principles in social research (1967: 9). Sykes’ prediction has proven accurate. Proceeding years have indeed witnessed heated exchanges across universities, research funding bodies and beyond on social science research ethics principles, protocols, and practices. A particularly divisive issue is the suitability of anticipatory or prescriptive ethical regimes that presently dominate social science research ethics governance. For

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reference, anticipatory regimes refer to the system of obligatory prior review of research designs or plans by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) to enable its members judge whether the proposal conforms to sets of predefined standards for addressing informed consent, privacy, safety, anonymity and other ethical principles; whether researchers have reflected adequately enough on potential ethical dilemmas that may be encountered during the study; and whether their proposals for navigating these and other unforeseen events are convincing enough (Strathern 2000; Boulton and Parker, 2007; Murphy and Dingwall, 2007).

In the United Kingdom, debates on anticipatory ethical review became particularly heated following the decision by the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC), the main source of funding for social research in the country, to make prior ethical review and approval by RECs a precondition for all research funding applications (ESRC, 2010). Indeed, the genealogy of RECs in UK universities is itself traceable to an earlier version of the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics which made the establishment of RECs by UK universities a precondition for research grant applications by their staff (ESRC, 2005; Boden et al., 2009; Dyer and Demeritt, 2009; Holmwood, 2010; Hammersley, 2009; 2010; Stanley and Wise, 2010; Melrose, 2011). The latest version of the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics at the time of writing this article (ESRC, 2015) no longer requires ethical approval of research proposals prior to applications for research funding or written confirmation of ethical approval from applicants' institutions prior to the release of funds. However, the debate has been sustained by the fact that prior ethical review and approval by RECs remains an obligatory requirement for the commencement of fieldwork.

Opponents of this system of ethical regulation, the rapid expansion of RECs and associated bureaucratic ethical controls have denounced the regime as 'ethics creep' (Haggerty 2004: 391). It is deemed to be premised on 'defective assumptions' (Hammersley, 2010: 1) and is forcing UK social science research towards a market oriented supervisory trajectory (Savage et al., 2011: 150). Following examination of the genesis of prior ethical review in UK social research, Boden et al. (2009: 734) have also concluded that its roll out by the ESRC and UK universities has occurred without any 'cogent or convincing explanation of its added value' to social research ethics. Further, given that 'the improvisational subtlety' of ethics cannot be managed by fetishised form filling, box-ticking and other bureaucratised processes (Lederman, 2007: 306; Rossman and Rallis, 2010), it has been argued that prior ethical review risks promoting an erroneous impression among students and inexperienced researchers that ethical responsibility ends once approval is granted by the REC (Hardy et. al, 2001).

Reviews can also be over-zealous or hostile towards qualitative studies and therefore threaten the practice of qualitative research (Lincoln and Tierney, 2004; Dingwall 2008; Hammersley 2010; Reed 2010; Schrag, 2010; Melrose, 2011). For Boden et al. (2009: 733), behind the 'aura of objectivity, reliability and justifiability' invoked by anticipatory reviews and RECs lies a discharge of subjective power that ought to be scrutinised. Others add that RECs may not be adequately knowledgeable of some research topics and contexts to be able to make informed judgements about related ethical dimensions (Fassin 2006; patterson 2008). In this light, prior ethical review sometimes appears to be primarily concerned with protecting universities, funding bodies and publishers from

liability and insurance risk associated with research and not necessarily with protecting research participants per se (Adler and Adler, 2002; Strathern, 2000; Guillemin et al., 2012). In place of the anticipatory ethical regime or ethical plans premised on limited knowledge of the research setting, Adler and Adler (2016: 87) propose that a 'pre-research phase' is permitted to ensure that the ethical clearance application or considerations for the substantive study are premised on more informed knowledge.

Some of the most vociferous critiques of the anticipatory research ethics regime relate to ethnography (D'Agostino, 1998; Murphy and Dingwall, 2003; Schwartz, 2007; Parker, 2007; Boser, 2007; Simpson, 2011) and cross-cultural research (Chattopadhyay and De Vries, 2008; Ekberg, 2012; Morris, 2015). The points of contention are far too extensive to be discussed in this article, but broadly, the system of prior ethical review is deemed a threat to the moral, political, ontological and epistemological underpinnings of ethnography. 'Ethics in advance', pushes the exploratory, indeterminate and unpredictable nature of social relations between ethnographer and informants onto a 'point of production' which belittles the creative power of social relations' Strathern (2000: 295) has argued. In cross cultural research, REC or institutional ethical guidance is said to carry the risk of perpetuating the 'colonial assumption' that the researcher has more wisdom and power than informants' (Kovats-Bernats 2002: 214, cited in Hodge, 2013: 290).

Prior ethical review is also said to be incompatible with the dynamic, fluid, and complex nature of ethnography as it was modelled on the principles of deductive and positivist epistemological standpoints for biomedical and clinical trials and a hypothesis informed approach to knowledge production (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007: 2224; Bosk, 2004, 2007; Faubion, 2009). Further, the potential for participant abuse or harm in ethnography and social science research generally is minimal in comparison to biomedical and clinical research Murphy and Dingwall (2007) have argued. Prior ethical review in ethnography is therefore 'a solution in search of a problem' (Schrag, 2011: 122), 'an inappropriate model' (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007: 2232) and a blind imposition (Penn and Soothill, 2007; Patterson, 2008; Reed, 2010) brought on by moral panic (Fitzgerald, 2005: 316; Van den Hoonaard, 2001).

These critical voices dominate the debate, but RECs and anticipatory ethical regimes have supportive voices too. Notably, Hedgecoe points out that researchers are 'not the best people to decide on the risks and benefits of their work, having, as they do, a tendency to underestimate the former and overestimate the latter' (Hedgecoe 2008: 880). Thus, RECs and prior ethical reviews have a necessary and legitimate duty of overseeing the relationship between researchers and participants (Hedgecoe, 2008: 882). Ethical scrutiny must necessarily occur before a study goes ahead because participants may have already been victimised if studies were reviewed after they have taken place, Kent et al., (2002) have added. Mills (2002) also insists that cooperating with RECs demonstrates collegiality and can lead to refinements in research proposals and research quality (Kent et al., 2002). For Mills (2002) and Guta et al., (2013) the presence of RECs and the system of prior ethical review in sociology, anthropology and the social sciences ought to be celebrated as a marker of professionalism instead of the tendency to see these as a threat to the practice of qualitative studies or social research generally.

Laura Stark (2007) accepts the argument that social science research poses minimal harm to participants in comparison to clinical and biomedical research. However, she

argues that harm prevention is not the only goal of ethical regulation in the social sciences. The system primarily seeks to safeguard 'people's rights not to be researched, even when everyone involved regarded the practices as harmless by any definition' (Stark, 2007: 778). Thus, she argues that proponents of the 'social science victim narrative', or the view that RECs and prior ethical review have no place in the social sciences, may be motivated by interests that are 'less noble than concern for academic freedom' (Stark, 2007: 785).

In what follows, this article aims to contribute to the evidently polarised debate on the utility, appropriateness, and place of the system of prior ethical review in ethnography and social science research. The article's intervention draws on 'real world evidence' from an ethnography of children's income seeking activities in an artisanal gold mining community. The article begins with an outline of the research, including the experience of securing REC approval for the fieldwork under the system of prior ethical review. Next, I focus on how this process impacted on the fieldwork. I discuss several ethical and practical dilemmas resulting from attempts to implement institutional and REC prescribed ethical guidelines during the fieldwork. In a discussion section which follows, the article examines the merits and demerits of arguments in the debate vis-à-vis the evidence from this specific case study. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of reflexivity and ethical subjectivity, situated ethics and flexibility in social research ethical review and practice.

## The research

This article benefits from data collected during an ethnographic study of children's income seeking activities at an artisanal gold mining site at Kenyasi, a rural district in the Brong-Ahafo region of Ghana. The study's main objective was to critically examine similarities and differences between the children's accounts and those featured in policy and popular representations on the worst forms of child labour (WFCL). The choice of ethnography was informed by an ambition to provide in-depth and accurate records of the children's narratives and lived experiences or their 'perspective modes of life' (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 2). Again, within the sociology of childhood literature, ethnography is regarded as an effective means of learning about children's lives and co-producing knowledge with child research participants (James and James, 2004; Levine, 2007) because it 'allows children a more direct voice in the production of sociological data' than other methods (James and Prout, 1997: 5).

The fieldwork lasted for 15 weeks, between June and September 2010. Some purists of ethnography might argue that the relative brevity of the fieldwork is a deviation from the authentic anthropological tradition inspired by Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, Evans Prichard and others who spent a much longer period in the field. However, it is also a truism that these anthropologists had to spend many months travelling and acclimatising to the field context before they could begin to make any meaningful sense of what was said or observed in the community.

In contrast, my flight from the UK to Ghana lasted 6 hours, prior to which I had already made contact with people in the research setting via telephone in relation to accommodation, access to the artisanal gold mining site and other pre-fieldwork

considerations. Of equal significance, I speak the local language and understand various customs and practices of the area where I was going to conduct the fieldwork. I was therefore able to start collecting valuable data immediately upon my arrival in the field. The comparative brevity of the fieldwork was therefore very much in keeping with focused ethnography, 'a peculiar form of sociological ethnography that differs from the anthropological tradition in the sense that it is marked by a relatively shorter visit and characterised by intensive spurts of data collection' (Knoblauch, 2005: 2).

Data was collected at the artisanal gold mining site, in child research participants' homes and at other spaces in the research setting using unstructured interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions and photo-elicitation. Snowball sampling was used to recruit a total of 57 children between the ages of 14 and 17 as primary fieldwork informants. As discussed elsewhere (Okyere, 2013), the study did not purposefully recruit children in this age bracket; 14 to 17 was the representative age bracket for children working at the gold mining site. The significance of this finding to the ethical dimensions of the study is discussed by the article later.

## **Securing REC ethical approval for the fieldwork**

As a doctoral student at the time of the research, thought of the requirement to secure ethical approval prior to the fieldwork filled me with trepidation for a number of reasons. The target participants were children, a group classed by default as vulnerable due to their relative (im)maturity and (in)competence (King and Churchill, 2000). The level of ethical scrutiny towards the proposed fieldwork was further heightened by the fact that the participants were deemed as an 'at risk' population due to their involvement in an occupation considered exploitative and hazardous. A third issue was that the proposed research setting, an artisanal gold mining site, is a place popularly imagined as a space of illegality, violence and criminality. All of these would flag ethical concerns and so in light of critics' claims about RECs' hostility towards ethnography (Murphy and Dingwall, 2003; Boser, 2007; Simpson, 2011), I was concerned that approval might be declined on the basis that the fieldwork presented far too many risks to be approved.

I therefore devoted time to read extensively on the ethics of childhood research and ethnographies similar to the kind of research I was planning. I also spent many supervision sessions talking through the ethical considerations and preparing the ethics approval forms with the assistance of my supervisors, who also had substantial experience of the topic based on their own research with young carers and with children in the global sex trade. Considering the ever-expanding remit of prior ethical review (Boden et al., 2009), I consider myself fortunate that at the time, the list of expectations and demands by universities in relation to research ethics meant that procedures in my School were more attuned to sociological, ethnography and qualitative research methods. The detailed consideration set out in my application was respected and ethical approval granted for the fieldwork without any major difficulty.

There were, nevertheless, a number of areas which were non-negotiable in the eyes of the REC due to the aforementioned vulnerabilities associated with my target participants. The School's ethics form included, as standard, an undertaking that participation of all children in all research would be secured through their parents, guardians, or other

responsible adult gatekeepers. Ethical approval was thus provided on the basis that I had to contact children's parents or guardians in the first instance to inform them of the study and to seek their consent to speak with their child. With the parental agreement, I could then go through the same information with the child to check whether they might be interested in taking part in the research. If the child showed interest, the next step was to go through the participant information forms and other details with them and their parents or guardians to ensure that both adult gatekeepers and potential child research participants were sufficiently informed before data collection could begin.

### **'The stranger at a funeral who mourned more than the bereaved'**

Soon upon my arrival in the research setting, it became evident that sticking to the undertaking to which I had committed myself back at my university was going to be extremely difficult. The first area where problems with compliance emerged was the requirement to involve adult gatekeepers in securing access to child research participants for informed consent, among other purposes. I discovered that majority of children working at site were not from Kenyasi or its environs. Many were independent child migrants who had made a journey of almost 200 miles from northern Ghana to work at the site. They had made these journeys without parents, guardians or adult gatekeepers to be consulted in relation to their involvement in the study. It was initially decided to discount these children from the study and engage only with those whose parents or adult gatekeepers were available and could be consulted per the ethics agreement with my School. However, this plan also soon unravelled. Most of the parents I managed to approach appreciated the fact that I had come to see them about their children's potential involvement in the study. Yet, they were also amused or perplexed that I had done so and often sent me back to speak to their wards instead. The quote below from one of such encounters epitomises the parental reactions:

. . . (man laughs) so this is why you have come to see me? (man laughs again). I [even] thought it was something urgent when I saw you approaching. There was no need to come; it is no problem at all for me . . . you saw him at the pits so go back and ask him because he is the one going to do it. You could have just asked him instead of coming (laughs again)

I was consistently told by parents and guardians themselves that it was unnecessary to come to seek their permission first to discuss the research with their sons or daughters given that it was the latter whose permission or consent I really needed. The situation was further compounded when a boy at the site bluntly informed me that his peers found my insistence on seeking their parents' or guardians' permission before allowing them to take part in the study to be discourteous:

. . . that is what the three boys were saying . . . you have come here as a stranger who says he needs information or help or something like that from us here . . . one of them said he wanted to help you when he heard this, but you said you want to speak to his mother or father first.

They are all angry with you . . . don't you think they will tell you if you needed permission from parents? Many of them are saying 'I am my own man' so you don't need permission.

His friend, sitting nearby chimed in with a local proverb about my conduct, which translates as:

You're behaving like someone who is not from here or does not know our culture; like the stranger at a funeral who cries more than the bereaved.

My attempt to recruit children according to my university's ethical guidance was causing agitation among those with whom I should have been building friendships and rapport instead. Questions were being asked not only about the research and the real motives behind my presence in the community, but also about the authenticity of my identity as someone with whom they shared nationality, ethnicity, language and various customs. There was a feeling that I should know how things ought to be done in community but I had chosen to ignore these norms and values. Instead I was carrying myself around like the worst kind of stranger; one whose' actions and utterances undermined or offended his hosts.

Such pitfalls can occur in ethnographies carried out in one's 'own nest' or in a setting with which the researcher has shared affinity (Chock, 1986; Roberts, 2007; Karp and Kendall, 1982). However, in this specific case, adherence to the institutional ethical instruction that researchers must necessarily access and seek consent for children's participation in research through parents and adult gatekeepers had regretfully offended the very people whom the measure was meant to benefit and also soured the start of the fieldwork. The requirement was based on an assumption that there were always parents and guardians to be consulted and that they themselves felt that this specific matter was an issue on which they needed to be consulted, which did not hold good in most cases. It increasingly seemed unethical to keep applying the guidelines given that parents deemed it a waste of time and it was also causing offence to children who deemed it an affront to the status afforded them by their own parents and communities.

Faced with this discovery, I sought advice from my supervisors back in the UK. We all agreed that it would be better and indeed more ethical to value and respect the culture and wishes of the community by listening to parents and by treating the children as they were treated by their own society instead of clinging onto practices and ideas which caused offence and distrust. My supervisors discussed this position with the ethics committee, which was at that time organised in such a way as to be able to respond flexibly to developments in the field. With their agreement, where no adult gatekeepers were available or where they declined my request to discuss the study with them, I was allowed to defer to the children themselves if they had volunteered to participate.

In every case, in keeping with the principle of informed consent, I ensured that the prospective child participants were provided clear and unambiguous information about everything I personally knew about the study at that point – what the research was about, how I intended to collect data from them, how said data was to be stored and used, their rights to withdraw from the research and their information discarded, information on possible risks arising from their involvement and so on. Potential child research



participants were told not to make a decision immediately after being provided with these details. Instead, I asked them to go away and think things over for a while before deciding. They were given mobile recharge cards to ring me after a few days to confirm if they were interested in taking part or to ignore the conversation entirely and use the cards for their own calls if they did not want to participate. At regular points in the fieldwork, I had discussions with the participants individually and collectively to provide updates, discuss any questions or concerns and other measures to ensure that they were still voluntary, informed and willing participants.

Perhaps there are some who would say that for child protection reasons, where no adult gatekeeper could be found to give consent on behalf of child research participants, that child should not have been included in the study. Yet, that would amount to a distortion of the idea of 'child protection' in research ethics. It would also have meant something profoundly more offensive than infantilising, demeaning and dishonouring their social status and reputation as young adults as all had made clear to me they were. Beyond such reputational harm, denying independent child migrants in particular the chance to participate in the study because it was not possible to consult their parents at the time would have meant entirely ignoring a section of young people who were already among the most excluded, marginalised and discriminated against in the country (Whitehead, 2006) and at the site. Refusing to listen to and shed light on their lived experiences would have mirrored and further entrenched their wider socio-political exclusion and voicelessness in the country (Kwankye et al., 2007).

## Discussion

A concern in the social research ethics and ethnography literature is that the current system of ethical regulation of social research in the UK and elsewhere is inappropriate and threatens the space for ethnography (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007; Patterson, 2008; Reed, 2010). RECs are suspected of being over-zealous or hostile in their scrutiny of fieldwork ethical applications, resulting in outright rejection of applications or directives which may have an adverse impact on fieldwork (Strathern 2000; Boser, 2007; Simpson, 2011). The relative ease with which ethical approval was secured for this fieldwork despite the considerable ethical issues which surrounded it corroborates Hedgecoe's (2008) contention that such fears may be misplaced. However, the dilemmas encountered in the field because of the institutional and REC prescribed ethical guidelines do support the assertion that the system can place constraints fieldwork or ethnographic practice. It would have been impractical and unethical to continue sticking to the letter of the original REC and institutional prescribed ethical guidelines in the field, given the offence it caused.

The field experience also reflects the view that appropriate responses to 'ethically important moments' in the field necessitate a Foucauldian approach characterised by flexibility, reflexivity and situated ethical conduct (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 261). No set of ethical codes or guidance can take all field eventualities into account (Morris 2015: 229). Additionally, prior ethical reviews, RECs and institutional ethical commands can have very little bearing on 'ethics in practice' or on the realities of field encounters (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 263; Wiles et. al, 2006; Boden et al., 2009). Deontological ethical reviews or practices which prioritise strict adherence to ethical commands and



institutional ethical guidance over reflexive ethical conduct must therefore be rejected as accepted by voices on both sides of the debate (Stark, 2007; Burgess, 2007; Calvey, 2008; Rossman and Rallis, 2010; Hodge, 2013; Morris, 2015).

The study also raises several issues of relevance to cross cultural research ethics. The prescribed institutional guidance for recruiting children in the field foreclosed discussions on the importance of striking a balance between respect for cultural norms in the UK where my university was located and those in the socio-cultural space in which the study was to be carried out. The prescribed ethical guidance for recruiting child participants was based on the understanding that anyone under 18 years is a child and supposedly incapable of providing fully informed consent independently. There was a presumption that these ideas about childhood and engagements with young people were accepted cross-culturally, despite substantial evidence showing that constructions of childhood, vulnerability and (in)competence' are not universal (James and Prout 1997; White, 2002; Punch, 2003; James and Prout, 2004; Clark-Kazak, 2009; Morrow, 2013).

At Kenyasi, those aged 14 and over were not regarded as 'children' in much the same sense as those below this age. This observation has been similarly made by other studies involving children elsewhere (Punch, 2003; Grier, 2004; Thorne, 2008, 2009). Those who participated in the study were regarded as young adults or people capable of various 'adult-like' responsibilities and independent decision making about many facets of their lives; such as weighing up the pros and cons of taking part in a research study or not. This societal belief about the child research participants' relative maturity and competence was a key reason their parents and other adults in the community permitted their income earning activities in artisanal gold mining work. It was also a crucial determinant in the case of independent child migrants, whose' parents and guardians had given them their support to make the 200-mile round trip to work at Kenyasi on their own or with siblings and friends. In this light, I agree with Abebe and Bessell (2014: 131) when they argue that promoting ethical practice in such cases requires recognition of local ethos and commitment to engaging seriously with child research participants around the nature and meaning of ethics.

It is a truism that arguments about the need to respect local ethos, socio-cultural norms and moral relativism have been used to justify blatant abuse of participants in some ethnography and cross-cultural studies (Tierney, 2001; Borofsky, 2005, Pels 2005). Nonetheless, this study also shows that importing ethical regimes or guidance into other cultures is not necessarily the right response. It can similarly yield inappropriate, insensitive and outright unethical outcomes (Chattopadhyay and De Vries, 2008; Patterson 2008; Smith, 2012, Cheah and Parker, 2015), including the accusation that ethnographers, RECs and the system of ethical regulation inadvertently reproduce the colonial ideology that people in certain research settings are empty vessels to be filled or enlightened on moral and ethical conduct (Marshall and Koenig, 2004; Reissman, 2005; Hodge, 2013; Morris 2015: 224, citing Chilisa, 2005: 676).

Consideration of ethical dilemmas in ethnography and cross-cultural research should involve 'negotiation and reinterpretation rather than reification outside the research context' (Monaghan et al., 2013: 68, cited in Morris 2015). Ideally, RECs and researchers must aim for an ethical middle-ground in which the approach to ethical principles such as informed consent are modelled around the socio-cultural values and specificities of

the research setting (Benatar, 2002; Pellegrino, 1992; Campbell, 1999; Molyneux and Geissler, 2008; Morris, 2015). But even in such cases, it is worth remembering, as Hammersley (2015: 433) cautions, that ethical principles are themselves 'useful, so long as they are treated as reminders of what ought to be taken into account, rather than as premises from which specific ethical judgments can be derived'.

Another contribution this case study makes to the debate is how the current system of ethical review could be improved or completely overhauled. The study gives a practical sense of how the 'pre-research' concept proposed by Adler and Adler (2016: 87) looks like. In prior ethical review, RECs and ethnographers may not be well informed of realities in the field at the time of considering ethical implications associated with the proposed study. Adler and Adler (2016) therefore suggest that where necessary ethnographers could be given the opportunity of an initial visit to the proposed research sites to learn about gatekeepers; entry negotiation mechanisms; sensitive means of accessing or recruiting participants; empirical, conceptual and other issues that might be meaningful to explore in the given field, among other crucial information which could be used for submission of a better informed ethical clearance application to the REC for the substantive study.

The pre-research phase does not involve collection of research data or participant recruitment. Nonetheless, it raises several questions such time, cost and safeguarding of researchers' and community members' safety during 'pre-research' field activities. Data might also be inadvertently collected before ethical clearance has been sought and approved. These notwithstanding, the experience of going back to renegotiate for a more culturally or contextually appropriate means of recruiting participants for this study after having gained better understanding of the field suggests that there is merit in integrating the pre-research concept into the current ethical regime or promoting it as an alternative to 'prior review'. It may address the criticism that the system of prior ethics review requires ethnographers to provide details of encounters in unfamiliar or unknown research settings (Bosk and DeVries, 2004).

## Conclusion

This article is a contribution to debates on the practicality, utility and relevance of the system of prior ethical review and RECs in ethnography and qualitative research generally. Drawing on experiences from an ethnography of children's income seeking activities at an artisanal gold mining site, the article has demonstrated an example of the problems that can arise from REC and institutional ethical prescriptions. Cases of this nature lend credence to the concern that the system of prior ethical review can present serious obstacles to ethnography practice (D'Agostino, 1998; Murphy and Dingwall, 2003; Boser, 2007; Simpson, 2011). The example similarly buttresses the view that virtuous ethical conduct in the field is not reliant on prescriptive institutional ethical regimes or REC and ethical review 'prescriptions and proscriptions' (Hammersley 2015: 444).

The above notwithstanding, the article does not entirely agree with Dingwall's (2012: 3) view that the system of prior ethical review has no place in ethnography and social research. Despite my first-hand experience of its imperfections, I share Bond's (2012: 18) position that prior ethical reviews are not so deeply flawed to be abandoned outright.

Properly constituted and adequately attuned to the complex ethical dynamics in ethnography, RECs and the review process can serve to further reinforce the now widely accepted position that virtuous ethical conduct in the field requires a reflexive and situated approach over ethical commands and institutional codes that may be discussed during the review.


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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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