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Investigating the Dilemmas of Ethical Social Research

By Helen Johnson

Abstract

The author's work with a university ethics committee and field research in Pacific New Caledonia is used as a basis to problematise the biomedical research models used by universities in Australia for assessing social research as ethical. The article explores how culturally specific Western emotional bases for ethical decisions are often unexamined. It expresses concerns about gaps in biomedical models by linking the author's description of field interactions with research participants to debates about the creation of knowledge.

Key Words: New Caledonia, ethics of social research, biomedical research

Introduction

How have my research experiences in Pacific New Caledonia shaped my thoughts about the ways that universities conceptualise ethical social research? In what ways can cross-cultural researchers contribute to broader debates in academia about ethical social research? Both questions are becoming increasingly urgent as Australian scholars engage in research with multicultural communities and across globalising yet locally different societies. This paper suggests that there is a problem with the ideas that frame ethical social research in the Western academy that can help scholars negotiate, but not fully resolve, the dilemmas that arise when conducting social research across cultures.

I begin by problematising the concept of ethical social research used in Australian universities. I move to examine the ways that emotion as an organising category can be constructed in different cultures in order to suggest that university ethics committee members seldom acknowledge the cultural specificity of the emotional bases of their responses to, and decisions about, ethical social research. I then connect emotion to an analysis of gender, linking both to my research in Pacific New Caledonia. From my research I propose that Western theories of ethical social research require the flexibility to recognise the diversity of women's discursive contexts across cultures. I make this proposal because women's constructions, interpretations and assertions about how gender shapes their lived experiences are not only complex, sophisticated, and contextual but are embedded in intricate histories of shifting relations of power, particularly relative to the production of knowledge. To not recognise the diversity of women's discursive contexts risks a further imposition of Western theories upon people whose voices are rarely acknowledged and heard. I conclude by presenting the implications and limitations of my proposal to social research practices.

To initiate my discussion I examine the ways that Australian universities may limit notions of ethical social research by reducing dynamic and unpredictable social relations and discursive interactions to a static and inappropriate biomedical model.

Universities and Biomedical Research Models

I became aware of the potential for biomedical models to be used as a template for judging ethical social research during four years service with an Australian university ethics committee. When a new ethical problem arose the proposed research project committee members would turn to Australia's National Health and Medical

Research Council's (NH&MRC) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (1999). The Statement has the authority to develop guidelines that are applicable to all research involving humans, a process that Susan Dobbs recognises as "appropriate and as contributing significantly to the culture of research ethics in Australia" (2000:19). While the guidelines provide a framework for considering how research should be conducted in general, they do not specifically address the ways that social research can be enacted across cultures.

Given the Statement's authority, why should social researchers problematise its basis in a biomedical model? I argued that a more effective model of ethical research should address the distinctive dilemmas of social research across cultures and should have a greater capacity to recognise and work with other people, particularly women, as active human agents. Mark Hobart has eloquently argued for "the value of treating local knowledges seriously and examining their potential contribution to peoples' material, intellectual and general welfare" (1993:5). Yet Western political discourse frequently constructs indigenous women as disadvantaged. Indeed, Australia's guide to the *UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) produced by the Office of the Status of Women argues that indigenous women, among other groups of women, "have special difficulties which require special action to compensate them" (1983:1). Yet Article 7 conveys a general call for "measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life" (1983:2), and Article 11 "deals with employment, covers recruitment and promotion opportunities, conditions of employment and benefits, occupational health and safety ..." (1983:3), while many others construct 'women' via a middle-class stereotype that has little or no relevance to indigenous women's ways of being. The Articles reflect the perspectives, sensitivities and language of lawyers and political economists from arenas where men hold overwhelming and formal power. As indigenous women's perspectives and input are missing CEDAW can serve to reinforce dominant Western relations of power and knowledge-production.

Although fellow ethics committee members frequently expressed disquiet about the type of power relations that may develop between a researcher and their participant(s), sadly, their reliance on the NH&MRC's *National Statement* meant their concerns remained predicated on a biomedical model of a powerful, educated, scientist from an advanced industrial society imposing upon a helpless research subject. In contrast, many Oceanic scholars argue that indigenous peoples frequently contest inadequate Western research theories and practices, and that non-Western women 'talk back' against shallow theories of their social power (Huggins 1998, Moreton-Robinson 2000, Tuhiwai Smith 1999). University ethics committee members must therefore question privileging the Western researcher as sole knowledge-maker, which sustains the presumption that all women in non-Western communities are always powerless. Chandra Mohanty has argued eloquently against Western feminist constructions of women of colour as "normed on a white, Western (read progressive/modern)/ non-Western (read backward/traditional) hierarchy [which freezes] third world women in time, space, and history" (1991:6). She chides limited perceptions that "exhaust the meaning of women's day-to-day lives [and collapse] the everyday, fluid, fundamentally historical and dynamic nature of the lives of third world women" (1991:6).

Emma Zapata provides examples of the dynamic and fluid nature of socially oppressed women's lives and their power, proposing, "power cannot be studied as an abstraction or an isolated event. Self-empowerment, the capacity for power, is a complex process, as [a] woman can change, go back, halt on the way, reflect, look behind, think and go on" (in Townsend et al 1999:151). Conversely, Catherine Lutz

problematizes the advantaged researcher when writing about Ifaluk perceptions of her as a needy female (1988:32 – 34). She shows how anthropologists may be supplicants for knowledge rather than scientists who impose their knowledge on others through relations of power in which they always remain privileged. Furthermore, I have argued that it is necessary to recognize participants, not as subjects of research or as ‘others’, but as *people* who may wish to contribute, who may consider themselves empowered by their narrativisations about themselves and their community. Participants who become friends may want to be acknowledged as collaborators in the production of knowledge, and people do have the capacity to walk away from an irritating researcher when they become annoyed, busy, or bored (Johnson 2000). Arguments from these standpoints produced a paragraph that was included in my former university’s proforma consent form to enable participants to choose to be named as a contributor or collaborator. Nonetheless, this small change to the biomedical research model used does not provide a framework to examine the power of the researcher to shape the project and its findings. Nor does it address the significant issues of the culturally different constructions of emotion and the cultural specificity of Western emotions in decisions about what constitutes ethical social research.

How Do Cultural Constructions of Emotion Shape Perceptions of Ethical Social Research?

Talk about emotions is simultaneously talk about society – about power and politics, about kinship and marriage, about normality and deviance. (Lutz 1988:6)

In the Western academy frameworks for ethical social research are constructed from a range of intellectually and socially appropriate emotional bases. For example, anthropology is anchored in a quest for scientific objectivity that stems from the desire of early twentieth century practitioners to establish the discipline as equal to the biomedical sciences that were gaining prestige at that time. Some aspects of anthropology have been reconstructed via interpretive and poststructural critiques (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Di Leonardo 1991, Wikan 1990 among many), and some theorists such as Kay Milton contend that researchers should work to “understand exactly what it means to objectify the things we analyse [precisely because science] is a process of *interaction or engagement* between scientist and object” (my emphasis 1993:7). Nonetheless, by applying a biomedical model of scientist interacting with object-of-knowledge, ethics committees can produce social research models that construct an antinomy between researcher and researched rather than enable a knowledge-production relationship to evolve.

But let me take Milton’s idea one-step further. The very process of interaction/engagement between scientist and object-of-knowledge can be questioned when the ‘object’ is female, for gendered, cross-cultural, and academic relations of power are crucial to understanding a woman’s performative context: the what, how, why and when she is articulating her ideas, her subjectivity, her sense of who she is in relation to others. As a consequence I propose it is more helpful to engage with the work of feminist anthropologists such as Lila Abu-Lughod (1990, 1993), who privileges her research participants’ expressions and, with Lutz (1988, 1990), focuses on how discourses of ethics acquire precedence over discourses of gender. In arguing that emotion is not a universal mode of feeling but has a socioculturally discursive character they problematise the interplay between Western biomedical constructions of

ethical social research, the social constitution of emotions, gendered relations of power, and academic processes of knowledge-production. Australia's preferred biomedical models of ethical social research do not recognise cross-cultural differences in the social and cultural construction of emotions as they are based on a preference for distanced scientific objectivity. Nor do Australia's preferred models recognise how gender may shape the researcher's field practices and participants' ways of being and responses to the researcher. As Abu-Lughod contends, the predominant Western intellectual model of scientific objectivity assumes "emotions can be detached in meaning and consequences from the flow of social life" (1990:25). Her alternative is to conceptualise emotion as discursive practice, to analyse "how emotion discourses are deployed in social contexts", to focus on practice rather than meaning, and to pay attention to "the place in social and political life of what is said" (Abu-Lughod 1990:27, 28, 33).

Lutz's work supports Abu-Lughod's focus on discursive practice and connects the organising category gender to that of emotion, contributing to a problematisation of the ways both categories may intersect in Western scholarly analyses.¹ Arguing that emotion is, in Western thought, predominantly associated with 'the female', Lutz contends, "any discourse on emotion is also, at least implicitly, a discourse on gender" (1990:69). The notion that emotion should be controlled, as biomedical models assume will be the case when a researcher is interacting with participants in the field, is linked via popular culture discourse to the parallel discourse of the control of sexuality. It is the rhetoric of control, Lutz asserts, that "directs attention away from the socially constructed nature of the idea of emotion" (1990:72). The Western definition of emotion as something inside an individual provides, she suggests, "an important symbolic vehicle by which the problem of the maintenance of social order can be voiced" (1990:73). Both Lutz and Abu-Lughod propose that researchers should perceive emotional discourse as "a form of social action that creates effects in the world, effects that are read in a culturally informed way by the audience for emotion talk" (1990:12). It is then possible to perceive how non-Western notions of emotion and effect in the world can contest Western judgments (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990:16) and lead to the progressive recognition that research participants feel and respond in a range of ways.

Like feminist scholars critical of scientific objectivity's potential for reification in social research (Alcoff 1993, Harding 1998), Lutz contends "the problem of the referential and reified view of language is found in even more extreme form in the domain of emotion words than it is elsewhere in language" (1988:9). She maintains that interpreting and translating emotions across cultures is fraught with the difficulties of presenting others as 'sensible' yet not succumbing to a reductive universalism, and quotes Jean Briggs (1970) and Vincent Crapanzano (1980) to propose that anthropologists make explicit the ways in which fieldwork is both "shocking and fascinating, comforting and disturbing [as one learns about] the immense and elaborate ethnopsychological belief system[s]" that shape everyday interactions (1988:11). Lutz concludes it is the emotional worldview of the anthropologist that demands attention because it is "to this emotional self that we implicitly compare the emotional lives of others" (1988:12).

Recognising that one has an emotional self, and acknowledging the emotional selfhood of research participants is, I propose, important for Western knowledge-production. The problems of not acknowledging either possibility became important to me when I attended an Australian bioethics conference at which a male philosopher presented an ethical conundrum. He proposed that Bosnian soldiers would experience

an ethical dilemma when faced with the choice about whether or not they should rape enemy women in the course of enacting their military duty. The example turned on the consciousness of the male soldiers and the ways in which they could or could not justify their actions. As the philosopher continued his presentation I became profoundly disturbed. At no stage did he address the range of emotions that women may experience as subjects of militarised sexual violence. He did not examine the soldiers' potential for emotional response, his own emotional preferences as an academic framing this particular problem, nor did he problematise the threat to women's psychoemotional condition contained in his example. His presentation also suggested that he had no inkling of how gendered relations of power, enacted within and across cultures, were shaping his perception of ethics. The philosopher's example presented rape as acceptable military male practice within which the ethical issue became how men perceived themselves in relation to the label of rapist, and his intellectual preconceptions about women created them as objects for male self-knowledge and 'social' knowledge-production.

Recognising the ways that emotion is interwoven with the complex and gendered meaning systems generated by the social interactions of researchers and participants is significant. Lutz's ideas therefore have ramifications for the ways that ethics committees judge researchers whose projects are to be enacted in multicultural and non-Western societies. If particular sociocultural forms of emotion shape researchers' subjectivity and emotion is imbricated in the relations of power that structure cross-cultural research, gender should be central to Western debates about ethical social research.

Gender in Pacific New Caledonia

New Caledonia, an archipelago comprising the main island (called Kanaky by its indigenous inhabitants), the Isle of Pines (Kunié), and the Loyalty Islands, is one of two French overseas territories in the south Pacific - the other is French Polynesia (Tahiti). Kanak peoples' 32 languages and customs continue to thrive despite unfavourable conditions created by 150 years of French colonisation. The descendents of the initial wave of French convicts, later French settlers (les Caldoches), and continuing territorial administration by metropolitan French bureaucrats maintain French presence, with descendents of Vietnamese and Javanese migrant contract labourers and Wallisian and Futunan Islanders forming new communities.

During postdoctoral research in New Caledonia I found myself urging New Caledonian women to narrate their lived experiences as I sought to learn how they created active cultural agency within a framework of profound social change. In particular I worked with indigenous Kunié women of the Isle of Pines. Through ongoing discussions about out-migration of family members to the capital, their views about ancestors, kinship relations that were changing due to processes of modernisation, and their succession plans for household goods and land, Kunié women taught me how they strategise to ensure that their interests are incorporated into community decisions (Johnson 2002). Later research with Vietnamese-Caledonian women and men in the capital Nouméa, whose narratives were profoundly shaped by 'emotional' descriptions of migration and diaspora, alerted me to the ways that people in their community used life stories to cohere past remembrances with present life experiences, how they have been compelled to evolve new ways of thinking in order to negotiate the fragmentation of their families and social networks through migration, forced relocation and war, and how they gender their perceptions of being individuals within a community (Johnson. In press).

I also learnt that it would be easy to perceive New Caledonian women as disempowered in relation to the intervention of French administrative authorities and patriarchal family and/or clan structures in their daily lives. But the combined authority of Mohanty's (1991) critique of Western feminist constructions of non-Western women as defenceless and women's discursive counter narratives persuaded me that such a perception would be intellectually arrogant and would deny women's resilience and resistance to the ways in which gender and power shaped their ways of being. Three anecdotes from my field research may better illustrate what I mean.

Friendships in the field and the distress of narration

While a Visiting Scholar at the French University of the Pacific, I met Justine, a woman of Vietnamese heritage who has since become a close friend. I have visited her home during every trip to Nouméa: staying with her family, accompanying her on outings, remaining in contact via email on my return, meeting with her when she visits Australia. During our interactions, as with many other social relations engendered by my field research, we worked toward what Ardra Cole and J. Gary Knowles describe as the "co-creation of a conversational space" in which we shared views, stories and perceptions as women (2001:29).

Justine's stories, and those of her family members, stimulated my desire to extend my research to the broader diasporic Vietnamese-Caledonian community. Over time I began to recognise how her family's migration experiences were both common to and emblematic of the changes occurring in the Vietnamese-Caledonian community at the turn of the 21st century (Johnson. In press). In 2001 I returned. I noted that, as with Kunié research participants, Vietnamese-Caledonians created 'story' as a socially appropriate way to express perceptions, describe lived experiences, and organise a collective and subjective sense of sociality. But their narratives also created ethical dilemmas for me about how I should interact with and write about their experiences. During my last visit Justine was enduring a family crisis. I remember meeting her one afternoon when we sat in her office, both in tears at the injustice of her situation, as she explained the latest development. She told me

My father has dismissed me from my position in one of our family companies. I've worked there for 27 years, and ensured we were in profit every year, even though it was the most difficult of our businesses. He's only doing it because I have rebelled against his wishes and begun to live with my lover, who is not Vietnamese.

On my return to Australia, I was torn between the need to protect her privacy (which I have done here by renaming her and limiting details of her profession) while wishing to describe the appalling effects of patriarchal actions on her life and career in the twenty-first century (Johnson. In press).

A further example illustrates the ethical dilemmas created from friendships that developed from my project. Some descendents of Vietnamese contract labour migrants from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had returned to Tonkin (North Vietnam) during the voluntary repatriation of the community from New Caledonia in the 1960s. Their stories of flight from North Vietnam's ensuing 'war with the Americans', their loss of family members as boat people travelling along the south China coast to the Hong Kong relocation camps, and the difficulties they endured reinserting themselves into New Caledonian society twenty years later meant that many

Vietnamese participants recounted their stories with tears in their eyes. Having been introduced to them through Justine's network and having built a rapport during long sociable lunches or gracious meandering afternoon conversations, I found myself interacting with research participants who were visibly distressed by the process of remembering. For example, Eric told me how the outbreak of the war between the north and the south 'exploded' his family.

Because they were forced to choose between taking Vietnamese or French nationality, and chose French, they were considered by the South Vietnamese authorities to be unpatriotic, and were consequently forced to leave their home country. Every member left for a different part of the world: the United States, France, New Caledonia. I was, at that time, at an age when I would have had to fulfil my military service, and this would have entailed fighting against North Vietnam. Because my village was situated so close to the border I considered this to be a demand that I fight against my own people. So I refused and left for France with a one-way visa that barred my return home.

Eric ensured that I understood the significance of his story. He checked my notes to make certain that I had correctly written his father's name and that of his family's village. He wanted my record to be accurate. He then related to me

My father had owned and managed an automechanic's garage, which was judged to have the requisite facilities to manufacture armaments such as Sten guns. The colonial French authorities in IndoChina would not authorise Vietnamese people to manufacture arms because they reasoned that the arms would then be used against them. One of the many South Vietnamese religious/political sects of local combatants against the French that was in existence at that time demanded that my father manufacture clandestine weapons for them. He refused and was subsequently kidnapped. Although my mother sold our home and all the family's possessions to raise the ransom, and paid the kidnappers, my father was assassinated.

Eric's narrative, as with many others, impelled me to consider how I could negotiate people's sometimes painful responses to my quest to create cross-cultural knowledge. Kunié women, and Vietnamese-Caledonian women and men, taught me about the ways that gender, emotion, and global/local relations of power shaped their lived experiences. They also alerted me to *their* kind of power. Justine told me of her resistance to patriarchal power by building her life in dynamic new ways. Kunié women were proficient in the profound care and pathways of respect that are required to build relationships within their small societies, and showed me how these qualities could not be applied intellectually but must be genuinely felt and practiced. And, participants like Eric taught me that affinities can develop through genuine and mutually rewarding relationships and that research can benefit from interactions between people who have become friends. However, I also learnt that relationships launched from a basis of friendship can create ethical dilemmas.

When I first arrived at Vao, the sole village on the Isle of Pines, to live among a Kunié family I spent time slowly blending into the community. Marie-Jeanne (my elderly Kunié host who died in 1998) and I would take long walks, travel to outlying gardens by outrigger canoe, and attend religious services. She helped me obtain permission to attend community meetings and events, supported me when I asked the

women in the family compound to enquire of their kin members and friends whether they would be interested in talking with me, and understood when I explained that I did not want women to feel pressured through kin obligation. I described my project in clear terms, telling people I met that I wanted to learn about their community, and their beliefs and practices, so that I could teach young people in Australia about how they lived. Most appeared comfortable with my explanation and reaffirmed my project, “if you don’t tell them, how would they know?” I established open-forum talk sessions in the afternoons, leaving word-of-mouth to advise people they were being held. Many curious people came and moved on, others stayed to listen, a few were permanent members of our small group. One afternoon Marie-Jeanne’s cousin Adi arrived at the compound. Prompted by my questions and Marie-Jeanne, Adi recounted aspects of her life story. She told me

I came to live in the village from my lands in the northwest of the island because I wanted my daughter to go to school. I never wanted to be married to a man who drank alcohol like many other men here and I worked hard to avoid that. But my marriage ended in divorce because he began to drink heavily some years after we married. He changed so much. I left him to come here and to build my house at the end of the village, near [a French tourist hotel]. I cared for my daughter alone she has now left home to work in a tourist resort nearby.

After describing the difficulties she had endured in her marriage due to her husband’s alcoholism and infidelities, Adi started to weep. I was troubled. During my doctoral research in southern France a number of elderly women wept in response to my questions but, as I had lived in their village for many months, most were secure with showing emotion when talking with me, and laughed at their tears. Adi was different. I had not met her before, she was a guest of my host and, being relatively new to the community, I was at a loss to know how best to comfort her. After some minutes she stopped and I advised her she did not have to continue talking with me if she did not wish to do so. This was the recommended response according to my university’s ethics committee protocol. Adi nodded, conversed with her cousin in Kunié then left shortly thereafter. But for the rest of my stay she avoided me.

Implications for Ethical Social Research

How can social researchers avoid distressing (if at all) people such as Adi? And what ethical responsibility do we have? Because people’s narratives can generate distress for the narrator and ethical dilemmas for the researcher, the respect and sincerity of purpose that Cole and Knowles (2001) propose is a necessary but not sufficient framework for ethical social research. Although Adi’s physical expression of distress taught me that how my research participants (and I) *felt* could become more important than how I *thought* as a researcher focused on obtaining data, I also learnt that physical expression of distress, particularly women’s tears, can be conceptualised as a potent means of communication.² Dee Graham et al argue that male violence against women drives “the occurrence of women’s seemingly irrational behaviours” (1994:xv). As a solution they propose that we imagine a world of relationships “based on mutuality rather than dominance and subordination” (1994: xvii). Their insights can be linked to those of Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis who contend that violence is the momentary expression of a “long history of complex human relationships imbricated in constantly shifting nexuses of power” (1996:9), and that expressing emotion is *not* pathological.³ They also prompt power in research relations

to be understood as a complex manifestation of cross-cultural social relations not just between ‘researcher/researched’ but also the structures, histories and ongoing struggles that many women endure in order to survive in a difficult world. Furthermore, Adi’s response suggests that, even though most researchers do not enjoy distressing their research participants, emotion cannot and should not be completely avoided. However, the imagination and creation of relational mutuality is not sufficient for the practice of ethical social research for it does not recognise the power that is derived from being a tertiary-educated researcher, nor adequately deal with the issues generated by gender and a lack of understanding of different emotional ways of being across cultures.

Given the complex issues generated by considerations of gender and emotion in cross-cultural social research how can universities problematise biomedical models that presently limit the conceptualisation and practice of ethical social research? Field research has taught me the value of describing in detail and interpreting the diverse and vibrant subjectivities of people in cultures not my own to ensure they can best explain their modes of being and thinking. I continue to work to fashion frames and content that best correspond to and enable participants’ insights to be expressed. Learning how to practise participant observation as a kind of ‘descriptive interpretation’ has been a valuable lesson in research skills, but it was my engagement with Kunié and Vietnamese-Caledonian people that taught me to validate the care, respect, and collaboration required to interpret their stories. They were presenting a gift of themselves to me and to others beyond their island home and teaching me how ‘knowledge’ could be mutually constituted. But, as the above examples suggest, the creation of field relationships also produced ethical dilemmas.

Anthropologists have worked to negotiate some of the dilemmas they encounter. Many cross-cultural studies counter the tendency to disembodiment ‘others’ in theoretical hypostatis by framing their findings within an awareness of participants’ reactions, by providing a description of how the research was undertaken, and by revealing how their methodology has been constituted in relation to disciplinary expectations (Cameron 1998, Sheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998, Watkins 1996, Weiss 1998). Hobart suggests treating knowledge “not as some abstract conceptual system, but as situated [local] practices” (1993:4). Cole and Knowles (2001) write of the ethical principles they devised to guide their life history research. Contesting Seidman’s (1991) view that rapport between researcher and participant should be controlled so that data is not negatively distorted, they argue for authentic emotions of care, sensitivity and respect (2001:44). Meira Weiss (1998) offers a slightly different yet still compelling perspective. When researching parents’ difficulties in adjusting to ‘appearance-impaired’ children in Israel, on many occasions she observed behaviour she considered abusive. But the ethical options anchored in anthropology as a discipline were limited.

Weiss noted that two male researchers chose not to act when encountering behaviours they considered abhorrent. Concurring with Seidman’s view that “the best thing to do is nothing” (1991:82), they counselled noninterference and advised that taking responsibility for research participants’ wellbeing was inappropriate. Weiss protests, “the imperative of ‘field neutrality’ – like a powerful conditioning imprinted in an early and critical period – [it] dictates anthropology’s epistemological and moral stances” (1998:157). She chose instead to document the child abuse she observed as a preventative measure. Her self-reflexive ethnographic representation details how, as a caring woman, she was wounded by the harsh behaviour she observed. Viewing the demeaning effects of social abuse on the children concerned, she was unable to continue research that had become, for her, unethical.

Weiss linked gender and emotion with an examination of power relations to work towards the creation of ethical knowledge. She chose to respond to her *feelings* about the practices she observed, contradicting the established code of neutral field practice. Weiss' rigorous scrutiny of her sense of unease invoked what Megan Boler has termed a "semiotics of empathy" (1999:157). Although Martha Nussbaum has distinguished 'empathy' from 'compassion', arguing that empathy "is simply an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience, whether that experience is happy or sad, pleasant or painful or neutral" (2001:302), Weiss writes that she felt compelled to examine the interrelations of her emotion with social relations of power as part of her empathetic response.

Weiss' response is significant because it suggests there is no single clear pathway to ethically produce knowledge from social research. Nussbaum has argued for empathy as being "highly relevant to compassion" (2001:330,333) and requiring "a notion of responsibility and blame" (2001:314). My research has taught me to take responsibility for the knowledge I produce by situating, as best I can, the narratives of different women in *their* sense of community relations and interpersonal subjectivity, to elucidate how I have interpreted the insights I have gained into their ways of being, to acknowledge the contributions of people with whom I create knowledge, to clarify how my perceptions are refracted through the constantly varying prism of cross-cultural theory, to illuminate how social research relations are shaped within my participants' emotions and their complex nexus of power relations, and how social research relations are "fraught with history, contingency, and struggle" (see Mani in Grewal and Caplan 1994:149, Kaplan 1994; Smith 1988). But is this sufficient?

Researchers can recognise that we have an emotional self, can acknowledge the emotional selfhood of our research participants, and can blend an empathetic response born of field relations with participants to a critical analysis of the historical struggles that have created the rigid dichotomies between 'us' and 'them', to develop, as Celia Rothenberg writes, "a continuum of experience and identification with those with whom we do research" (1999:37). Also, research practices that link gender with emotion and power in order to create ethical knowledge can acknowledge that speaking nearby, or next to, or together with a collaborative participant can open opportunities for different people's voices to be heard in a domain of mutual respect (Alcoff and Potter 1993, Caplan 1993, Cuthbert 2000, Johnson 2000, Rothenberg 1999). And, a reflection upon the dilemmas produced by conceptualising and performing cross-cultural social research in an ethical manner has implications for tertiary teaching practices, particularly in research skills and methods courses where students' awareness of how ethics are socioculturally constructed, and the different ethical issues that can arise within and across cultures, should be stimulated. Finally, the linkage of gender, emotion and power may also enable cross-cultural researchers to use the knowledge that research participants have helped them create to educate university ethics committee members, to broaden their conceptualisation of non-Western peoples, and to question privileging the Western researcher as sole knowledge-maker.

These suggestions have the utopian yet necessary potential to broaden understandings of people's ways of being, thinking, and feeling beyond the comfort zone of a researcher's own community. Nevertheless, they do not resolve all the dilemmas inherent in conceptualising and enacting ethical social research. It may be impossible to conduct 'pure' ethical knowledge, in that academic research relations are inherently loaded in favour of those with exceptional education. Academics do have the power to control a research project and to (re)construct the narratives that appear on the printed page. Linking gender with emotion and power to create ethical social research

may promote empathy and identification with the people who have often given of their time, homes, hospitality and thoughts to collaborate in the creation of knowledge. And conceptualising research collaborators as active cultural agents, albeit often disadvantaged politically and economically, may broadcast to the wider community potential ways to overcome the easy slippage into hatred provoked by fear of difference, and the need to control others caused by the diverse range of vested interests within the global community. But scholars should never acquiesce to the belief that our ethical conceptualisations have resolved the complex dilemmas produced by our power as researchers in the field and writers in the academy, for what happens in practice is far more complex, variable and unpredictable than can be encapsulated by any single ethical research model.

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¹ In Amartya Sen and Susan Okin’s (1995) linkage of gender to justice they analyse how social constructions of gender can reinforce inequality, particularly in relation to women’s perceptions of and justification for their low status.

² I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer who made this point and stimulated my thinking about a number of related issues.

³ I wish to thank again the anonymous reviewer who alerted me to this issue.