INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: HAS IT GONE OVERBOARD?

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ABSTRACT

Canadian University Institutional Review Boards (IRB) assess action research proposals based on the ethical protection of participants, the methodology, and any potential implications for human participants involved in the qualitative study. There are more disadvantages than advantages through this ethical review process. This positional paper analyzes complex issues including: the implications that are intertwined with ethics in qualitative action research with human participants when assessed by IRBs; the challenges associated with autoethnography in terms of whether IRBs can ethically assess research proposals properly; and recommendations for the future review of qualitative action research within Canadian universities.

KEYWORDS: Institutional review boards, Canadian universities, human participants, autoethnography, ethics.
**Introduction**

Qualitative action research (AR) studies have changed since the 1980s in that scholarly associations began to adopt their own codes in their assessment of research (Christians, 2011). Canadian universities adopted ethical procedures to assess submitted research proposals from their faculty members, students, and various associations. This process evolved in the twenty-first century due to reported and documented abuse to human participants, and to researchers’ misrepresentation of the findings that they would report. The end result is strict guidelines, which must be met by the researchers for their studies to be approved by Institutional Review Boards (IRB) so that the treatment of human participants takes precedence over the potential findings from any study. The issue of how much control IRBs are allowed to exercise continues to be assessed and analyzed. This paper assesses Canadian Institutional Review Boards, exploring ethical and ethnographical implications, and suggesting the need for better reviews of research proposals involving human participants by Canadian universities.

**Rationale for Topic**

It is important that we understand the historical origins of qualitative methodology, including diverse forms of ethnography. Qualitative action research should be more accepted as a valid research method because research discoveries can benefit society through their findings. This paper focuses on graduate level qualitative action research proposals involving human participants as undergraduate research proposals at Canadian universities are usually reviewed for course credit at the departmental level (Ells, 2011, p. 883). It is the stance of this article that IRB assessments of autoethnographies through the methodological lens of AR are simply not working. Recommendations with the goal of enhancing the future process of review are provided for enhancing educational policy and practice.

**Methodology and Scholarly Approach in Terms of Justification**

The purpose of this paper is to continue the challenging dialogue surrounding Canadian university IRB assessments of qualitative action research studies involving human participants. As an educator and researcher interested in qualitative studies that enhance practical teaching and learning application, it is apparent that problems exist with the procedure for reviewing qualitative action research proposals in Canadian universities. This paper presents a number of points demonstrating problems in need of attention regarding AR as it impacts education practice and related policies. This is important so that a better assessment of qualitative action research involving human participants can enhance learning dynamics in the classroom of the future. When the IRB assessment method is better prepared to accommodate AR studies, then an essential aspect of qualitative research will be more encouraged in our schools, enhancing both teaching and learning.
BACKGROUND OF QUALITATIVE AR AND THE IRB

Qualitative action research became recognized as a research method in the early twentieth century, eventually leading the World Medical Association in 1975 to revise their Declaration of Helsinki to incorporate a provision that experimental procedures involving human participants must be reviewed by an independent committee (Lemmens & Freedman, 2000). In the 1990s, international ethically approved guidelines for human research constantly changed within the academic fields of medicine and education as regional stakeholders developed their own university policies (Lemmens & Freedman, 2000). Concerns remain amongst academics regarding the ethical approval of qualitative action research as it has undergone transitions as a research method. A history of North American qualitative research is provided by Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 2005) when they state:

Qualitative inquiry in North America has passed through several historical moments or phases: the traditional (1900-1950), the modernist or golden age (1950-1970), blurred genres (1970-1986), the crisis of representation (1986-1990), the postmodern (1990-1995), postexperimental inquiry (1995-2000), the methodologically contested present (2000-2004), and the fractured future (2005-Current). These moments overlap and co-exist in the present. (pp. 2-3)

Qualitative action research has been accepted as a valid methodology through diverse time periods, but society must continue to see value in the findings for it to remain sustainable.

Qualitative action research in Canadian Universities ensures specific conditions are attained before research is conducted with human participants. Research projects in Canadian universities are governed by the Tri-Council Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, which was put forward by the federal funding agencies that support research in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, engineering, and medicine (Connolly & Reid, 2007). All Canadian universities are required to have Institutional Review Boards to review all faculty and student research and to enforce the “Tri-Council agency guidelines” (Connolly & Reid, 2007). All qualitative research proposals involving human participants at the Canadian university level must be approved prior to the implementation of any procedure. IRBs at the university level are:

Charged with ensuring the protection of human subjects in all research conducted under the auspices of that institution. Such boards serve important defining and policing roles in judging what is considered ethical practice with human subjects, frequently requiring researchers to pass the appropriate and informative Collaborative Institutional Review Board Training Initiative modules. (Rossman & Rallis, 2010, p. 380)

IRBs in Canadian universities scrutinize qualitative action research proposals more than quantitative action research studies. There have been extensive studies (e.g. Grayson & Myles, 2005; O’Neil, 2002) that discuss major challenges for qualitative researchers to
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attain IRB approval and proceed with their study (Ells, 2011). Academic institutions employ different assessment methods due to differing degrees of human agency depending on who is actually on the boards, the number of individuals, the review process, not to mention issues such as cultural impact, race, and geo-politics contingent on the diverse regions within Canada where universities are located. Therefore, it is challenging for qualitative action research proposals to conform with IRB guidelines because there is not a set method. According to Ells (2011), there should be more “effective ways to share their knowledge, experience, and views towards promoting and achieving best practices in qualitative research” (p. 888). Ells (2011) suggests the necessity for better communication and a plan to legitimate qualitative action research proposals to university ethical boards.

One of the greatest frustrations with the IRB process continues to be that action research can be disregarded as not part of academia. I have experienced professors who wanted graduate students to only engage in quantitative research studies rather than qualitative action research studies because they felt it was easier to measure. Teachers engaging in daily practice experience hurdles in the field because IRBs see the purpose of the work purely as self-interested for the sake of seeking publication. The reviewers struggle with understanding the value of qualitative action research in its fulfilling its reflective and analytical purpose (Dr. C.D. Stonebanks, personal communication, Jan. 24th, 2019). Qualitative action research conducted by practicing educators is frequently looked upon as being personal and individualistic instead of a shared experience, or one that can benefit others in the scholarly field. Because of the controls of IRBs, AR is not able to fulfill its purpose of contributing to educational advancement.

**Tri-Council Policy**

Canadian university IRBs must abide by the Tri-Council Policy (TCP) when reviewing all research proposals. The TCP was created in 1994 when three major public research funding bodies in Canada developed a common ethics policy statement. The three bodies – the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) – have a consultation process which all Canadian Universities must follow. There have been multiple written editions of this policy since it began in 1998. The National Council on Ethics in Human Research (NCEHR) was established in 1995 in order to provide support through the evaluation process for the three bodies. Numerous review committees existed throughout the process in order to deal with the issues around compliance funding and procedures. *The Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* began as an extensive 216-page document including 13 chapters outlining research involving human subjects. The Tri-Council Policy agencies released an updated version in 2014 that is now 220 pages, and is referred to as TCPS2 (Canadian Institute of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC], 2014). It is constantly evolving, but it still fails to adequately cover ethical procedures.
I think the length is a problem as it is dense and confusing. In order to receive funding, an initial analysis determines whether the researcher can conduct a study. An applicant submitting to one of the three federal government bodies mentioned above may be rejected by one, and thus, “applicants may be required to submit a new application to the appropriate agency” (Canadian Federal Government, 2017). The language used throughout the federal government website is carefully phrased to avoid upsetting individuals or interest groups through a lack of specificity. In allocating funding, the SSHRC determines whether a researcher will use human participants and if the study is appropriate and interesting. If funding is provided, the funds are only released by the university when the IRB also approves of the research (Dr. C.D. Stonebanks, personal communication, July 16th, 2019). It is quite the process!

Also, the TCP guidelines for research involving human participants are severely limiting for action researchers. This is evident in the TCP document when they state, “Respect for persons, participants or authorized third parties, makes the final judgement about the acceptability” of a study (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014, p. 8). Using ambiguous language, the document suggests that human participants can be used to answer the research question, but that IRBs must consider whether participants’ identities will remain protected (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014, p. 14). The research process is taken extremely seriously, and a lot of documentation is available to guide researchers. The Canadian Federal Government provides easily accessible on-line information regarding ethics in research and many Canadian universities have multiple documents outlining ethical policies that encompass a wide range of different departments. It has expanded to separate human, animal, and biological agents or bio-hazardous materials through ethical research practice and policies.

I argue that a dichotomy presents itself through the ethical review process. On one hand, IRBs and their affiliated universities support academic freedom. This occurs through a democratic western liberal education method that governs the culture impacted by geography, academic recruitment of professors and students, and the advancement of research so that scholars and their affiliated university achieve recognition. On the other hand, the IRB, through public institutions such as universities, are challenged with protecting public responsibilities (Lewis, 2008, p. 686), which in turn puts limitations on academic freedom. Lewis (2008) states that they “close down valuable debates and leave a chill on the terrain of academic freedom” (p. 688). The result can be a loss of professionalism, autonomy, and a sense where researchers are hesitant to engage in the challenging discourse or research controversial topics. The Government of Canada in 1998 publicly released a statement that said, “Research should not be blocked through the use of harms/benefits analysis or because of the potentially negative nature of the findings” (Lewis, 2008, p. 692). Qualitative action research is restricted through the IRB prior to the research even beginning. The IRB can substantially hold up the access to funding for researchers until they approve the research, thus hindering the possibility of discovery.
ETHICS CONNECTION
There is a complicated ethical process through Canadian university IRB involving multiple steps, but universities are often under-staffed or under-funded, which delays the process even more. The more interactive and complex the research design, the more ethical decisions that have to be made about the study. The other side of this argument is that if a researcher does not have ethical decisions to make, then their research design may have major limitations. There is a need for more time, money, and resources to be allocated to making ethics procedures better in qualitative research for professors, researchers and participants so that individuals can respect the process more.

Ethics represent a plurality of concepts and norms that are not always clear. The ethical review of research contributes to a consciousness “grounded in ontology and epistemology consistent with anthropogenesis and cultural-historical development. It is a way of grounding consciousness in our bodily-existence and the plural (social, societal) nature of being more generally” (Roth, 2006, p. 1). Humans have a responsibility to protect one another in the search for truth, and there are times when human-associated qualitative research challenges this responsibility. Research is rarely isolated or individualistic because of group dynamics that emerged through the explosion of qualitative research in the 1990s, leading to interest groups with their own journals and paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 2). Human power dynamics can make findings challenging because they are not universal. Coupal (2005) feels that IRBs jeopardize the researcher’s individual rights by acting as organizational gatekeepers and policing the ownership of experiences. This leads to a denying of human dignity and respect through an individual’s right of not being allowed to share experiences. Ethical review is constantly compromised by the individual versus the group in terms of the review of research proposals. The end result is hesitation and delays to approve of the research.

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY AND SOLIDARITY: TOWARD A BODY-CENTERED ETHICS
There are a number of examples in which qualitative action researchers have struggled with the presentation of topics theoretically and practically: a study on African-American girls in an urban school (Scantlebury, 2005); cross-cultural research governed by ethical consideration (Marshall & Batten, 2004); research outlining challenges with a student’s physical disability that limit the assistance to working professionals within Canadian schools (Edgington & Roberts, 2005); the protective presentation of a female teacher while working in an all-boys Canadian independent school (Maxwell, 2015); and a study on the limited permitted dialogue for child-centered participatory research activities across the world (Maguire, 2005). It is difficult to find a qualitative action research topic that has not been impacted by the IRB ethical process.

The ethical guidelines outlined in TCPS2 are unclear. It is stated that for research involving human participants, “one important difference that must be considered for fairness and equity is vulnerability” (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014, p. 8). The document goes on to explain how different groups of people might be implicated as victimized. The notion that decision making leads to victimization is not explained or substantiated and I question the
validity of this statement for an AR context. The criteria for deciding which human individuals or groups are victimized is vague. Furthermore, the definition of a human in Article 2.1 of TCPS2 is based on humans as living or as human biological materials (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014, p. 13).

I firmly believe that IRBs contribute to bias. It is not easy for university ethical boards to assess research studies, but problems remain when committee members become too involved in the design and method aspects of the study and move away from the ethics analysis in the study (Connolly & Reid, 2007). Individual members of IRBs have diverse personalities and research interests. It is disingenuous to believe that personal relationships do not cloud judgement during reviews. The irony is that universities want to promote consistent ethical human protection and practice, yet human related research through both methodology and analysis is not always consistent. This occurs more with AR as it can dictate an outcome that leaves the participant a subject rather than a research colleague when the human participant is told too much as dictated by the IRB to cloud the results. There a risk, through all of the “protection” for human participants in qualitative action research studies that the results are corrupted. A participant can modify their responses in order to skew the results by knowing too much information about the study before it even begins. The movement towards informing human participants has a proclivity to lead to unreliable results, and to mislead the public.

The question about what ethical issues are considered by the IRB suggests that ethical standards are marginal at best in most phases. Peled and Leichtentritt (2002) suggest that four standards are assessed in ethics in research: prevention of harm to others, empowerment-related aspects of the research process, research-related benefits for participants and others, and researchers’ technical competence. These four standards demonstrate the breadth of the ethical review process. Not only do IRBs indicate when a study might not be ethical in nature, but they also police methodology in their criteria.

All qualitative action research must achieve approval from ethical boards for the researchers to discover their findings. Is it right for researchers to “exclude research subjects on the basis of such attributes as culture, religion, race, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, sex or age, unless there is a valid reason for doing so” (Murray, Pushor, & Renihan, 2011, p. 47). Do we take the risk of denying research benefits involving human participants through these rigid ethical standards? Why can’t we raise our hand and yell, “Stop!” when valid participatory research has not been approved by the IRB? We must understand that ethical procedures cannot be applied in the same way for all methodologies because human dynamics and qualitative research is complex.

My position is not to do away with IRBs. IRBs are important because ethics in qualitative research is important due to the social nature of the inquiry. The problem affiliated with ethics in research is that there has been a history of abuse and misrepresentation. One can review examples of research abuse of participants in the United States by Humphreys (1970), Milgram (1974), the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932-1972), and the Willowbrook Hepatitis Experiment (1963-1966) (Christians, 2011). Nazi doctors in death camps
tortured people in the belief that they were advancing scientific knowledge. Ethics in qualitative action research has sought to become better in its protection of human participants; yet areas continually need to be addressed in order to finesse the process for different methodologies with the research process. Vallance (2005) concludes the following about ethics limited to data collection or institutional demands, and ethics not linked to personal accountability: Ethics are limited through data collection in that the researcher must inform all participants of all possible risks and consequences of the research. Ethics are further limited by institutional demands because universities or institutions cannot fully assess the intent of all research studies. Finally, ethics are not linked to personal accountability, meaning that all researchers do not always succeed in representing the viewpoints of their participants when presenting their findings. Vallance mocks the IRB methodology because they cannot adequately or properly deal with the three steps of data collection (process), institutional demands (review), and personal accountability to protect others (release) in an ethically fair way. Therefore, researchers and IRB will continue to struggle with the analysis of this type of qualitative action research.

The format of IRBs are devised separately by each Canadian university, leading to different interpretations. Some IRBs have more time to review research proposals, and because of this there can be differences in the time it takes to review action research. Stricter ethical guidelines encourage tighter reviews and research to be done in new ways. Does this complicate it too much? Does this make it so that the new ethical methods are more beneficial than if we did not have such strict requirements for research involving humans to proceed? The end result is that qualitative action research is deconstructed through the ethical board review process despite its original purpose as a research method (Childers, 2012). It is challenging to establish set standards in our diverse social world that lacks conformity and normalcy.

Ethical challenges ensure that consistency across IRBs cannot possibly be achieved. The larger the number of human participants, the more challenging it is for the researcher to establish a proper relationship based in consent and comfort (McGinn, 2005). Also, whether the researcher is an insider or outsider within the methodology is important (McGinn, 2005). Hwang & Roth (2005) suggest that “ethics develops as researchers concretize ethical aspects of their lived experiences in research activities, which realize ethical possibilities in those experiences and constitutes itself as a new configuration of praxis of ethics” (p. 20). Multiple ethics reviews of a single study delay research and require significant resources in order to fulfill the requests of individual ethics boards (Ferguson & Master, 2016).

We should not get rid of Institutional Review Boards at the Canadian university level. The protection allocated for human participants is crucial. The rise of the “Informed Consent Form (ICF)” is important in qualitative research so that all human participants are informed of their rights and obligations, and understand their involvement in a research study. IRBs want these forms attached to research proposals and they generally spend time reviewing them as vulnerable populations may be involved in the study (Connolly & Reid,
2007). For instance, Canadian university IRBs ensure that when children 15 years of age or below are participants in a study, parents must sign consent forms. There are special considerations for children, youths, individuals with disabilities, and people who cannot read. The ICF is ethically intended to bring to the participant’s attention any deception and limited disclosure; however, the participants may lack the necessary literacy skills, knowledge of patriarchal societies, or cultural understanding to recognize the implications of their involvement. Further, participant’s trust of the researcher is required through member checks (Rossman & Rallis, 2010). The ICFs protect the researchers and research participants, with the goal of establishing trust and avoiding risks. The potential of legal entanglements is realized through potential for psychological harm (imagine a child suffering from a recent parental split and having to do a study on human relationships), and published findings (perhaps the participant has been asked to disclose their name in the disseminated findings).

The other issue is whether IRBs are able to properly assess sensitive topics. Cultural diversity is rarely explored in literature (Trahar, 2009). The tragedy with all of this is as Richard Pring (1999) stated, “intense and sustained critical reflection through narrative inquiry can produce insightful accounts of process which go beyond the particular story itself” (p. 6). Human research participants are provided with choices in research studies in order to accommodate and inform them. By providing them full access to all of the information in the study, they can also select which information should be disclosed (Connolly & Reid, 2007). The IRB consent forms, as completed by human participants, should benefit the qualitative action research methodology to ensure legitimate respect and protection between the researcher and participant.

Action Research is unpredictable, especially given that participants often have the role as co-researchers as well. The fact that there are controversial issues in the news leads to ethical considerations that can change with the times. Ethical issues associated with social sciences “cannot avoid involvement with contemporary, everyday life and dominant societal discourses influencing that life” (Cannella & Lincoln, 2010, p. 83). Two examples include bullying and suicide in schools. Research studies on bullying and suicide are often tragically delayed because of the extensive review of the proposals hindering the possible progress to learn and implement better strategies for prevention.

IRBs can lead researchers to modify their studies, thus impacting their results. For example, a funded study by the Australian Research Council, the Center for Digestive Diseases, and the Children’s Hospital Research Institute in Sydney, Australia, were disturbed by the limitations they had to endure with their findings on anorexic teenage girls from interviews (Hales & Honey, 2007). The researchers felt frustrated that their findings could not be presented in a way that fairly and adequately reflected their analysis of anorexia among teenage girls. This completely hinders the progress towards greater knowledge, awareness, and prevention for anorexia among teenage girls.

In the 1990s, qualitative action research began to be acknowledged as an important research method. However, despite attempts by IRB boards to increase integrity, there
remain many problems associated with ethical issues when trying to separate commercial versus academic research (Lemmens & Freedman, 2000).

**The Ethical Challenge with Action Research Autoethnography**

Ethnography was subject to strong criticism as a writing genre due to an alleged lack of scientific objectivity when it emerged in the mid-1970s. Scholars who assess and debate the validity of autoethnography seek a consensus in terms of cultural alternatives, political correctness, avoiding legal entanglements, the role of the researcher, becoming an original accepted research genre, and engaging in dialogues about the methodology’s purpose (Schröer, 2009). From my view, autoethnography is when an author uses self-reflection and personal stories to write with a purpose to inform others while also aiming to challenge deeper meanings and understandings.

Graduate students are discouraged from partaking in autoethnography because it may not be considered a valid research method. Ellingson (2011) defines autoethnography as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical to the culture or phenomenon of which one is a part, integrated with relational and personal experiences” (p. 599). Autoethnography challenges the formal or standard research method for difficult narrative topics because they may involve “developmental disabilities, sexual abuse, divorce, accidents, and illness” (Murray, Pushor, & Renihan, 2011, p. 43) According to Scott and Sutton (2009), autoethnographical studies are successful in education because they impact teachers’ emotions and practice, and they provide a better understanding of particular sub-cultures, as exemplified in Hecht and Miller-Day’s (2007) autoethnography on youth in which they detail narratives from adolescents about their substance abuse experiences.

Autoethnography is complex as the researcher may be inside or outside the study. This leads to several theories as there is not a uniform theory that applies to all individuals or groups (Sheridan & Storch, 2009). Autoethnography can be used with research associated with topics such as migration as we learn more about the immigrant experience of settling into a new country. Immigrants are in a vulnerable place, and a researcher, either directly or indirectly involved, may wish to study them in order to enhance our knowledge about their experience. To further complicate it in a qualitative action research fashion; issues such as length of study, methodology, release of information, language challenges, cultural differences within the group, and number of participants, among other aspects that should be considered. Given that IRBs cannot consider these complexities in a research proposal; researchers struggle to present many topics in their presentation of their study.

Autoethnography involves a new appreciation for one’s experience to enhance our knowledge, yet IRBs can take that away through an over-protection of human research participants. Autoethnography does inform, educate, and have an audience as the individual stories enhance research associated with various topics. We can learn from stories as they have valid information that increase our knowledge-base. The social dynamic of qualitative action research and autoethnography align with ontological views of
human nature, but is more scrutinized by IRBs. This will result in researchers avoiding creativity or flair in their own stories in order to avoid potential delays or rejections with the IRB (Sheridan & Storch, 2009).

Reviewer’s knowledge and attitudes towards their own practices and beliefs compounds autoethnography because people are bound by their own freedom of situational action associated within their own cultures (Busch, 2009). Koch (2009) calls this the concept of Intercultural Communication Research (ICCR) suggesting that diversity exists within cultural groups is natural and symbolically constructed. These issues make assessing autoethnography difficult because of individual personality (Giddins, 1991), issues of hybridity challenges (Bhabha, 1994), and “super-diversity” (Vertovec, 2007). The different cultural traditions should not matter in the review of research studies if objectivity is sought (Schröer, 2009).

For some IRB individuals, autoethnography research proposals are not academically acceptable due to a perceived lack of research in the process. This concern exists because autoethnography connects the personal to the cultural by exposing the self within a social context (Holt, 2003). This can complicate IRB analysis as autoethnography because action research might be perceived to be limited through the interpretive narrative in that it is too personal, lacks research depth, or is too situational through geography, age, race, class, socio-economic status, or gender. Aneas and Sandin (2009) suggest that qualitative action researchers become the “principal information gathering instrument,’ and thus assess some of the objectives which have been identified for studies of cross-cultural and inter-cultural communication are associated with the reflexivity of the researcher over her or his own cultural biases together with the associated theoretical, and even social and political standpoints” (p. 15).

There is a transitional separation in autoethnography in moving towards research findings through the personal narratives. It is up to us to assess the validity and reliability of the stories, and this is also an exciting possibility. There are individuals who want to share their stories for the sake of educating others. How can an IRB protect this type of individual when they do not want to be protected from their own story? Murray, Pushor and Renihan (2011) question, “How do university ethical boards protect individuals in an auto-ethnography through the methodology, confidentiality, anonymity, or consent?” (p. 44). The challenge is the “storyteller” does not want these to be protected so the results are more significant, or they may know their rights to privacy. The autoethnographer may want protection, or may not mind if their story is in the public domain. How can IRB properly assess or measure this dichotomy?

Autoethnography can enrich academia by building on research in disciplines such as history and anthropology as primary sources (Allen, 2015). Autoethnographers enjoy telling original stories. The methodology fills an important qualitative action research void to assist us with better understanding ourselves (Allen, 2015). When IRBs acknowledge this potential, proper ethical review will follow.
Autoethnography proposals submitted to IRB face challenges with justifying and rationalizing their action research with vulnerable populations. There are no guarantees that the approved original study may be publishable material. It is possible for the review board to grant permission to a study because publication may not necessarily be desired or guaranteed. Many IRB restrictions occur because reviewers misunderstand the purpose of autoethnography (Forber-Pratt, 2015, pp. 2-3). An autoethnographer is vulnerable; however, the researcher may want the story to be told as it is personal.

**Recommendations to IRBs Regarding Qualitative Action Research Proposals and the Reality and Benefits of Unpredictability**

IRBs at Canadian universities deal with complex research studies involving human participants. There may be alternatives to the current ethical review approach. Lewis (2008) suggests, “The academic community needs to establish a widely representative body of researchers and scholars with the responsibility to adjudicate cases where, not compliance with TCPS policy, but the definitions within the policy – and hence jurisdiction – is the issue” (p. 694). The power taken away from the universities proposes a uniform board where research proposals would be submitted for review. An academic board that is established, similar in scope to the Supreme Court of Canada, or a national sporting governance model of sorts, with provincial and territorial representation to assess all research proposals. These could be full-time appointed academic positions that specialize in the qualitative action research methodologies.

Another suggestion involves the federal government of Canada assessing human research projects. A consistent policy could be adopted for all qualitative action researchers. A more transparent separation of different panels within Canadian universities could establish different research methodologies by experts in qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods or other methodological proposals, and for participant separation in research proposals involving animal, human and other participants. IRBs should have universal standards for human participants. Separate boards to review qualitative action research distinguishing the researcher on the “outside” and the researcher as an active “insider” participant. These expert reviewers assess diverse research proposals. Many Canadian university IRBs have experts who assess proposals; however, there are many different types of qualitative action research methodologies. Someone skilled in one qualitative method might not be an expert in all qualitative methodologies.

A central Canadian office (e.g. in Ottawa, the nation’s capital) for research proposals to be electronically submitted and then assessed through an objective process entails better legal protection for the constituents. This office would need to retain lawyers who specialize in the field. This would lead to research proposals that could be assessed more quickly and more fairly because it would reduce bias. Many Canadian universities IRB are backlogged with proposals that can lead to either rushed or delayed reviews. Timing is important in research as delays impact lives and results. Research should be reviewed efficiently because the research studies cannot begin unless they are properly assessed. This leads to
potential ethical problems, legal complications, and the potential for harm to human participants.

In Canadian provinces and territories, graduate level research involving human participants can be inconsistently assessed by universities. The different university bodies and positions of inquiry contribute to oversight. Clarity is needed with the number of representatives from each provincial and territorial board because a different number of post-secondary institutions exist. The same criteria for all assessment of research proposals should be clear, fair, and efficient. Geographical considerations should be made wherein regions with similar demographic trends could use shared ethical procedures (Ferguson & Master, 2016). A provincial and territorial ethical research board would have one full-time administrative office to assist with the efficiency of having research studies processed, and assessed in the fairest way.

A better process of assessing research proposals by Canadian universities is needed for the increase in qualitative action research in education. University professors are stretched with their analysis of research proposals on top of their current workload. A professor might be part of the board to pad their resume, and the reviewer might know the author of the study. This may cause the review process to unfairly impact the researcher and the potential participants. As Cannella & Lincoln (2010) suggest, “this ethics of good intentions has tended to support power for those who construct the research and the furthering of oppressive conditions for the subjects of that research” (p. 88). The participants are exposed to mistreatment, while IRB try to prevent such harm through the abuse of power. Ethical research boards need expert evaluators in ethics, involving human participants, with a clear understanding of how to protect diverse human participants and the researcher.

Plenty of research demonstrates that IRBs are not succeeding. Anthony (2005) refers to the review process of proposals as nightmarish, suggesting that all research board chairs should be held accountable for lack of fairness associated with ethics when two similar proposals treated differently by the same university board. Milne (2005) also expresses frustration with the lack of consistency leading to a double standard in which the medical model of clinical trials is perceived as the gold standard. Since qualitative research in education is often not empirical in nature, it is not assessed the same way, contributing to a double standard. Milne (2005) suggests that IRB committees should allow applicants to dialogue more openly to reduce misinterpretations or miscommunications.

Graduate university programs should ensure that their IRB representative(s) meet with other IRB university representatives to share experiences for positive discourse. University courses could assist graduate level students to specialize in this type of field. If research is important, why not expertly train individuals who will assess research proposals? This will also strengthen research findings. This is valuable in cultural differences between the researcher and human participants. Marshall and Batten (2004) suggest that “a community-based partnership project incorporating an on-going process of communication and consent officers an ethical solution that is mutually beneficial to both
researcher and cultural group members” will eliminate issues of power held by researchers over their human subjects (p. 17). Halse and Honey (2007) seek regulation of research ethics by the IRB so that discourse opens up a greater possibility for counter-discourses to encourage relational ethics to be more heavily weighted in the moral decision making that is associated with research.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Qualitative action research has produced significant findings as an acceptable form of research. However, it is not easy for qualitative action researchers to play an important role in education theories and practice, or to create change in their academic fields. The social nature of qualitative action research is appealing, but a better research proposal review process by IRBs in Canadian universities is needed, especially for research involving human participants. Through their strict ethical requirements, IRBs are problematic to the research process and to the potential findings that could be exposed about a wide range of topics and issues. Autoethnography as a qualitative action research method is difficult for IRB to evaluate based on implications for the researcher(s) or participant(s). Qualitative action research is unpredictable and necessary, and the IRBs need to adapt to the benefits of this methodology and fully comprehend it, as opposed to setting hurdles that dilute its impact.

IRB protection of research participants through the use of an ICF should clearly outline relevant information to the human participant(s) so that researchers do not abuse their control. The role of the IRB at Canadian universities needs to better assess all types of qualitative action research including ethical issues and autoethnography with human participants. The debate about IRBs and their ethical considerations will continue to seek a consensus. Canadian university IRBs should right this ship; thus, saving qualitative researchers and human participants from being thrown overboard.

**REFERENCES**


**Biographical note:**

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