

4 Ethics and activism in environment and health research

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Reflections on praxis

This chapter features fieldwork conducted by Mason and Walker that was ultimately challenged by community activists, so in the interest of brevity, their reflections on praxis are the focus here.

Sarah Mason

My dissertation research¹ examines perceptions of a controversial waste processing facility that was proposed for the rural community in which I grew up. Here I discuss how my role as an insider impacted me emotionally, professionally, and personally.

It was disheartening that in an effort to censor my research, local activists directly contacted our Research Ethics Board (REB) rather than merely asking me what my intentions were with the research. Some of these people knew me as a child and watched me grow up volunteering in our community. It was very stressful and upsetting to feel that they either honestly believed that I was corrupt, working for government and industry, and out to harm the community, or that they knew these allegations were untrue but still drew on these as a means to stop my research. Our REB told me to go home, grieve the loss of my project and move on and pick another one. I was stressed and emotionally impacted by the feeling of both losing a great portion of my dissertation research but also feeling that people from my community, some of which I knew, had made personal attacks and allegations towards me.

Through complaints to our REB, local activists critiqued my dual role as community member and researcher, claiming I had a conflict of interest and motivations to further the facility proponents' agenda in an attempt to halt and presumably censor my research. The REB also initially criticized me for being 'too close' to the research, until one member reminded everyone that this 'closeness' was in fact encouraged in other contexts (e.g., Indigenous research, feminist

studies) and should instead be seen as strength in my design. However, a portion of my research was eventually cancelled due to a procedural error, detailed below, uncovered following activists' complaints.

I was devastated when told I would have to discard my collected data and start over. What amplified the impacts of this event however was that my place of research and turmoil was also my home, normally a place of refuge. Where many students would have travelled home for the weekend to take a break, I returned 'home' immersed in the middle of conflict, accusations, confusion, disbelief, and media attention involving family, neighbors and friends – I could not escape. The situation took an emotional toll on my family while these community discussions continued for two months. The REB handled the issue by prioritizing the few complainants and hastily doing damage control as they rushed to review the file and make a final decision in an attempt to appease the activists' demands for a quick verdict (or they threatened to go to the media and pursue legal action) and mitigate further complaints. What they had not accounted for was that their quick actions with initially vague community messaging might negatively impact my family in the ways it did. This raises questions about the degree to which REBs account for impacts on immersed researchers (insiders or not) as well as the degree to which they consider the political motivations of activists trying to shut down research due to ostensible ethics violations. In the original letter sent to the complainants there was no explicit justification for termination. Instead, the following ambiguous statement was used to notify residents' of the termination of Mason's quantitative work in the original letter disseminated to Southgate activists: "After concerns were brought to the attention of University officials, an investigation was undertaken by the University's Office of Research Ethics, which in turn resulted in a decision to terminate the research study outright." This was left to residents' interpretation and resulted in the belief that it was their complaints (my involvement and supposed funding control by biased parties) that resulted in the cancellation of the research and not a separate procedural issue (described below) that was independently discovered. Further, the quantitative survey was mistakenly described as qualitative, resulting in confusion between the cancellations of the survey or interview portion of the research. The seven individuals who received this letter electronically circulated it throughout the community with their added interpretations. This and the REB's initial vague messaging eventually led to three community letters being disseminated with the last being a two page letter (mailed to all Southgate residents) explicitly clarifying each portion of the research, my involvement, and the procedural issue. Situations involving insiders perhaps deserve particular consideration, because the 'concern for welfare' we take such pains to protect for our research participants (Tri-Council, 2014), may be unintentionally damaging for insider researchers.

The series of events these prioritized complainants initiated with the REB were stressful, disheartening and certainly caught me off guard as a new researcher. Although I was encouraged to walk away from this research and do something 'easier', I still feel this is an important area of research, so the project continues

¹ While this is currently Mason's doctoral dissertation research, she began this project as an MSc Candidate and then was accelerated into her doctoral degree.

while my family, community and I work on healing. There are many advantages to conducting research in your community, and I have had many positive experiences; however, I do caution qualitative researchers to consider the personal impacts this can have, regardless of REB's actions. As Buckle, et al. (2010, p. 119) warn, 'qualitative research is emotionally involving in ways seldom experienced by quantitative researchers', and I argue that this is even more so when conducting research in your own setting. This is not a reason to avoid 'insider' research, however an awareness of the potential impacts and emotional ramifications prior to conducting research should help prepare you for the backlash that can be faced, despite best efforts to the contrary.

Chad Walker

In some research there are more pressures to take sides that are increasingly difficult to negotiate, particularly when savvy activists are motivated to challenge our work. My master's research began as an investigation of daily life changes following wind energy development in southern Ontario. It was partially inspired by media reports of health problems, sleeplessness, and decreasing property values. In conversations with randomly selected residents of Port Burwell (a community with wind turbines) however, I found almost none of these to be occurring 'on the ground' – though several residents noted there were concerned and impacted people in nearby Clear Creek. After several weeks interviewing those supportive of wind energy, it was a shock to hear first-hand the problems some residents in Clear Creek were facing. Some would even break down and cry during our conversations. While I have become less surprised when these types of emotions are shared, I am no less disheartened when people feel an overwhelming anger or sadness regarding their particular living situation.

No matter whether a participant supports or opposes wind development, I feel the motivation for residents' participation in my research was about getting 'the truth' out there. Of course, one true reality does not exist, and this makes it difficult to sort through and represent residents' varied and often conflicting 'truths' or views of the same situation. While this chapter discusses my difficulties with some activists opposing wind turbines in their communities, proponents of wind have labelled me as being 'too sympathetic' to the concerns of those claiming health and other problems. Not fully supporting the convictions of either side of the debate meant I was left in a kind of purgatory – particularly regarding their trust.

The major question of my PhD research is focused on the causes and meaning of support (or opposition) of local wind turbines. It seems the question of causation is a point of contention for both sides. On one hand when I (among others) suggest that fair planning processes and financial arrangements increase support, those against wind turbines reply that realized impacts cannot be reduced so easily. Similarly, when I have reported perceived health problems and social conflict in wind turbine communities, proponents of wind dismissed the findings as insignificant. In a recent example, peer reviewers of a journal article suggested that only 34% of residents reporting property value loss due to turbines was 'not enough'

to lead to a conclusion that turbines might result in financial loss. These examples suggest that the politics of wind turbines is pervasive and that trying to represent differing viewpoints is politically charged and problematic.

Introduction

What will you do when participants in your research make public claims to discredit or terminate your research? While this may not arise in much qualitative health geographic research meant to provide an empathetic perspective, such backlash lurks beneath the surface when studying environment and health controversies. Controversies such as toxic chemical remediation and compensation (Edelstein, 1988; Brown, 1994), facility siting for a proposed hazardous facility (Wakefield and Elliott, 2000) or policy change like a smoking or pesticide by-law (Hirsch, et al., 2010) tend to involve coalitions for and against the proposed action. Researchers often take an openly neutral stance on the subject matter in order to play a role gleaned insights from the situation for wider audiences. The stakeholders we involve in the research (e.g., in interviews or focus groups) may however be unsatisfied when the results are perceived to work against their stance on the issue – despite every effort we make to be just in the situation. Suspicions from stakeholders are likely to manifest when initial contact is made with potential participants, and may intensify as the research unfolds, especially when findings are shared which extend beyond the individual interview or focus group. This may be true when those we are calling activists – people who are heavily invested and publicly vocal about their particular stance on an issue – criticize our research. Increasingly, these activist publics are savvy to the inner workings of university systems and how these may be accessed to thwart the release of findings, particularly through the auspices of REBs. In our two case studies, such activists took direct actions to protect family, home and community against what they viewed to be serious threats in their communities. This chapter examines the increasing engagement of these community activists with REBs, alongside current critiques of REBs to shed light on the impacts activism and REB may be having on environment and health research.

Traditionally, discussions surrounding activism and academia in human geography have focused on enabling critical or radical geographies with the researcher's role as activist taking center stage (e.g., Castree, 2000; Blomey, 1994; Parr, 2004). For example, feminist researchers are concerned with both advocating for their female participants and exploring novel ways to encourage the empowerment of women as a whole (VanderPlaat, 1999). In this discussion of community activism and the changing nature of REBs, we are instead focusing on researchers' interactions *with* activists. Parr's (2010) discussion of research amidst legacies of conflict and handling disagreements over interpretations is one example, but papers like this are either few and far between or difficult to track down. That is, there is no literature that directly addresses issues of activism against academics, but some allied literatures include social movements and emotional aspects of research (Hlec, 1998; Flinn and King, 2007).

Yet, in terms of a major conduit of activism backlash, there is a growing literature that is critical of the role REBs² play as arbiters of social scientific research practice. They have been accused of being both overly restrictive (McCormack, et al., 2012; Dyer and Demeritt, 2008; Haggerty, 2004) and sidestepping some of the equally important issues of professional ethics, like working towards empowerment of marginalized groups (Murray, et al., 2012). Much of the ethics of research falls somewhere between what REBs can conceivably control and what various theories of research praxis suggest we might legitimately do. Further, the documents meant to guide ethical research conduct (e.g., Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2010) are open to interpretive inconsistencies surrounding REB principles such as 'do no harm' and 'informed consent' that are enacted at regulated institutions (McCormack, et al., 2012; Abbott and Grady, 2011; Angell, et al., 2006). REBs and universities fearful of the legal implications of their decisions have also been criticized for extending their mandate beyond the issues originally intended, including bias towards certain methodologies.

We draw on our own experiences to highlight difficulties that arise when the people who are participating in your research decide to rally against you and your study. This chapter will proceed first with a brief introduction of two environment and health case studies: health risk in communities living with (1) a proposed biosolid waste processing facility and (2) wind turbines in rural Ontario, Canada. These cases illuminate when activism against academic studies may become acute by contextualizing interactions between ourselves, the activists, and REBs. This will be followed by a more extended discussion of the role of REBs drawing on the notion of 'ethics creep', censorship and emergent designs in qualitative research. Further, we provide insights into how procedures meant to enhance qualitative rigor may be flashpoints for activist backlash, specifically member checking and autobiographies. We conclude with a discussion of lessons learned to suggest possible ways forward in environment and health and other potentially contentious research.

Urban biosolid processing in rural communities: facility siting, risk perceptions and community conflict

Sarah Mason is conducting her doctoral research within her community, the Township of Southgate in rural Southwestern Ontario, where she is using mixed methodologies to examine risk perceptions and social and emotional impacts of the siting and eventual operation of a regional biosolid (sewage sludge) to agricultural fertilizer processing facility. As the facility imports mostly urban biosolids into the small rural community, environmental justice concerns are among the many that ignited strong opposition within the community. Mason conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 adult Southgate residents in the summer of

2012 in the middle of the contentious facility siting process (the facility became operational in 2013). Conflict within the community heightened as a local activist group opposing the facility carried out a three-month site blockade and took the municipality to court over land zoning issues.

Following initial analysis of the interviews, a survey was disseminated to all Southgate households in September 2012 looking to gain a broader understanding of residents' opinions before a final decision was made by the provincial environmental assessment panel – expected a month later. The survey immediately instigated actions by seven local activists who directly contacted the University REB. The complaints included Sarah's status as a community resident and former member of the facility's Public Advisory Committee and the belief that Mason and Luginaah (Mason's graduate supervisor and principal investigator of this research) were working for government and industry organizations to conceal negative facility impacts. The researchers were absolved of any ethical wrong-doing as far as the activist complaints were concerned, but following persistent complaints by these individuals the survey was cancelled due to a procedural issue uncovered by the REB itself, not the residents. Though the survey covered the exact same topics as the interviews, the specific survey questions were not added officially as an addendum to the original approval. It was maintained that the survey topic was no more harmful than the interviews, in the sense that no invasive questions were asked; however, REB representatives worried that the procedural issue (survey addendum) could arise if the activists had sued as they threatened to, and therefore the survey portion of research was halted.

In the short week that the REB deliberated upon the activists' complaints, 445 residents consented to, completed, and returned questionnaires prior to the first official announcement issued by REB, which stated the study was being terminated, but no explicit explanation was provided to the community.

The REB deemed the entire situation an 'adverse event' and further instructed Mason and Luginaah to cease research contact with the community and not publish results from the interviews. After persistent discussions with REB and faculty representatives, along with requests for clarification with general community members, it was decided that materials from the interview transcripts could be published.

Worth noting is that the municipal government voted in favor of the facility itself, which became a strong rallying point as activists claimed these municipal officials failed to represent their broader constituents. Our survey research would have identified whether or not council had widespread support in the community (not the primary objective of our research but nonetheless a potential outcome). The irony here, given this is a book about qualitative methods, is that it was the survey that instigated the activist backlash, not the interviews. This was arguably because of timing – given the activists' final court appeal against the municipality, which challenged the zoning of the land the facility was proposed to be on (for a full description see Mason, et al., 2015), was denied coincidentally the week of survey distribution. This led some residents to believe the REB protest

² Ethics boards are referred to as REBs in Canada, Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the United States and Research Ethics Committees (RECs) in the United Kingdom.

was the activists' 'last straw'. Had the interviews been conducted at this time, it is plausible they may have protested these as well. However, this duality may shed light on a broader belief that interviews can be seen as less threatening. While Mason's interviews captured the viewpoints of a handful of residents in depth, in the context of decision-making at the precise moment in the community, those interviews were less threatening than a method that could ostensibly measure public opinion community-wide.

Mason will soon be conducting follow up interviews with community members as the REB agrees enough time has passed (28 months) since the turmoil. Qualitative methodologies were selected not merely to avoid the upheaval previously experienced with the survey, but to gain a comparatively nuanced understanding of experiences and impacts following the onset of facility operations. Our return to the community is based on the notion of comparing pre- and post-facility siting views within the community.

Though we do accept our part in not submitting the proper addendum within the REB's procedures, we discuss the implications the REB's decision had on the ongoing research, the community, and Mason in her dual role as resident and insider researcher. The goal is to explore how research involving contentious issues and activism relate to a broad array of research issues including ethics, rigor, and the evolving nature and critiques of REBs.

Activist(s) against local wind turbines in Ontario

During his master's degree, Walker investigated community-level impacts and determinants of support for wind energy development in two southern Ontario communities. Wind turbines in rural Ontario have recently become politically divisive, particularly since enactment of the 2009 Green Energy Act, which was successful in streamlining renewable energy approval processes (Ministry of Energy, 2015) despite community objections (Songsore and Buzzelli, 2014).

In 2011 Walker conducted 26 in-depth interviews with local residents (24), and policy experts (2). This research uncovered majority support for wind turbines alongside significant changes to 'daily life' for some people (Walker, et al., 2014b), such as increased community conflict, perceived health effects (Walker, et al., 2015) and property value loss (Walker, et al., 2014a).

Interviews aimed to understand the in-depth 'daily life' experiences of living close to wind turbines in Ontario since no such case studies had yet been published. While Port Burwell was chosen as the original study site for being one of the earliest and largest implementer of wind turbines in the province, nearby Clear Creek was also chosen because Walker was hearing stories of their discontent from the Burwell residents. Clear Creek is also the community from which most of the criticism against our research originated. Harsh denunciations and subsequent threats by one individual to 'shut down' the study began shortly after the dissemination of our preliminary findings through member checking (discussed further below). Though Walker and Baxter received mostly positive replies from this process, two people known to oppose wind turbines had serious

complaints with the data interpretations. Those complaints stated we did not go far enough to denounce the turbines that resulted in extended discussion with Walker and Baxter.

In terms of impact on our interpretation, we decided to focus the attention of our quotations in three papers on how the concerned citizens were impacted (Walker, et al., 2015; 2014a; 2014b) with far less coverage of the majority in support of turbines. This was meant to balance the academic coverage of turbine communities, which Aitken (2010) characterized as biased against concerned local residents. After member checking, there was a relative calm until the online publication of Walker's (2012) thesis. In the days that followed, we received emails from three individuals complaining about the thesis. Their biggest problem seemed to originate from the content of Walker's autobiography, which openly stated his biases going into and coming out of fieldwork (more detail below). Criticism spread from one participant across the province through wind turbine opposition websites with comments meant to discredit the research. The proclamations against our work were reignited each time a new academic publication emerged from our study. The claims against our study even included invocation of the Nuremberg Code concerning the unethical conduct of medical research on humans. That is, since we were reporting that the well-being of residents near turbines was negatively impacted (e.g., community conflict), we were tacitly supporting the ongoing and unethical exposure of those same people by doing the research.

The study was never shut down despite letters from the one participant to everyone from the departmental chair right up to the university's president. It is important to note these events occurred shortly after the REB's experience with activist engagement in Mason's research. Perhaps there were lessons learned by the University that led to caution and more thorough and participatory processes between the REB and Baxter and Walker than Mason and Luginaah had previously experienced in conceptually similar circumstances.

The role of the REB and reflections on the role of the activist

It was not that long ago that research ethics was simply a matter of professional integrity, but it has evolved into formalized procedures to protect potential research subjects and increase public trust and the accountability of experts. Basic principles of ethical research conduct have been articulated and reinforced including doing no harm, respect for persons, voluntary and informed consent, beneficence, and justice through a fair balance of risks and benefits (Brown, et al., 2010). Harmonized national principles for ethical research involving humans has only been in place in Canada since the 1998 publication of the first policy statement on ethics published by the three federal funding agencies (Tri-Council). Similarly formalized procedures have only been implemented more recently in much of the UK and EU. Despite, or perhaps because of, this relatively short history, there is already backlash against such formalized systems in Canada, in what we have already referred to as ethics creep (Haggerty, 2004; see also Dingwall, 2008). This creep refers to REBs being overly restrictive, delving into areas ostensibly beyond

its mandate, and escalating both requirements and restrictions to the point where qualitative social scientists are focused too much on 'jumping through hoops' to achieve ethics approval that may ultimately do little to protect communities or researchers themselves (McCormack, et al., 2012). As different jurisdictions implement formalized procedures, reactions against ethics creep have emerged outside of Canada in such places as the United States (Becker, 2004) and the United Kingdom (Dyer and Demeritt, 2008), suggesting a systemic problem for social scientists.

In discussing 'ethics creep', Haggerty (2004, p. 392) describes how 'REBs have unintentionally expanded their mandate to include a host of groups and practices that were undoubtedly not anticipated in the original research ethics formulations'. This, he argues, suggests issues of 'institutional distrust' whereby it is presumed that researchers now require additional oversight through REB monitoring to ensure ethical decisions and actions are made. Further discussions regarding REBs overstepping their bounds have been identified as they move to assess the value, validity, rigor or practicality of social science research (Murray, et al., 2012; Dyer and Demeritt, 2008). For example, issues typically dealt with by thesis supervisory committees (e.g., methodology or sampling) have come under increasing scrutiny by REBs. Though friendly suggestions may always be welcomed in a system of checks and balances, Murray, et al. (2012) argues that REBs are in danger of absconding roles and in the process taking on responsibilities beyond their purview. Similarly, Dyer and Demeritt (2008, p. 3) suggest that REBs' 'wholesale and indiscriminate application will create more problems than it solves', whereby they take on the role of judge and jury on legitimate methods and methodologies.

As environment and health geography research often investigates communities in conflict and with publics increasingly skeptical of science, it is understandable that this skepticism also gets directed towards the ethical conduct of social science. Drawing upon Beck's (1992) risk society framework Haggerty (2004, p. 392) comments: 'Concerns about the ethical quality of research are characteristic of a society where anxieties . . . are increasingly common.' However, there may be a thin line between skepticism on the one hand, and censorship on the other hand when ethics are invoked ad hominem. While the awareness of rights and empowerment of activist participants with regards to institutional ethics boards should be applauded, REBs' fear of litigation should be weighed against intentional efforts to silence the voices of those with opposing views. In both case studies, activists attempted to stifle research they felt was not aligned with their viewpoints. In regards to Mason and Luginaah's survey research, residents spoke out through letters to the editor complaining against the cancellation of the research and the belief that activists were trying to censor the results – seen in the quote below from a resident who was neither a family member nor a close friend of Mason's:

I, along with many others, am disgusted with the actions of a small group of residents who claim to know what is best for this municipality. . . . They hit a new

low when they interrupted the education of a local Western University student claiming she had a 'conflict of interest'. Were they afraid the results of this survey would not support their propaganda? (*Dundalk Herald*, October 24, 2012).

In the case of the resident exposed to turbines, the REB decided there was no specific ethics violation. Though the board acknowledged that health and well-being were at least perceived as being impacted, the REB determined we as researchers were not the cause of the exposure. That said, we were mindful of how those individuals turning their sights on us, in some sense, meant we had become part of the 'exposure' – engaging in a conversation about turbines may have been bringing forward negative emotions. Subsequently we repeatedly suggested the one particularly determined participant consider withdrawing from the study. In the end, without confirmation that the person wanted to remain in the study, we withdrew them. It is somewhat ironic that we (including the REB) felt that withdrawal would remove this person's access to the very structures in the University he seemed to want to hear his case (i.e., the REB, deans and the president). In such situations it is important for REBs to consider the merits of the ethical claims of concerned citizens and determine whether the claims are tools that can be used by activist publics to forward their interests.

Murray, et al. (2012, p. 46) suggest a more balanced motivation for REBs whereby they ask, 'How can we facilitate this research and not just block it?' As researchers, we agree that research can be increasingly controversial when conducted in contentious communities; however, as Canada's Tri-Council (2014, p. 20) policy states, REBs 'should not reject proposals because they are controversial, challenge mainstream thought, or offend powerful or vocal interest groups'. With the necessity to obtain REB approval to conduct social science research, REBs also have the power to determine how human geography research is conducted and subsequently what environment and health problems are investigated. From these experiences, we have learned that by prioritizing an individual participant without substantive claims, the ethics review processes fail to support critical scholarship seeking to expose injustices, academic freedom to inquiry, and the public right to know (Dyer and Demeritt, 2008).

Anticipation of harm in inductive research and procedural ethics

The notion of emergent designs in qualitative research is particularly relevant to health research where changes may happen rapidly on the ground. As we enter communities seeking to examine an environment and health phenomena, often-foreseen themes emerge giving way to additional questions or conceptually important participant categories. This 'messy' approach is how nuanced findings and deeper understandings of contextual experiences are theorized (Denzin, 1997). Yet, it is these investigative uncertainties that create the greatest 'ethical quandaries' for researchers (McCormack, et al., 2012, p. 33). It is impractical for REBs to demand anticipatory prescriptive project plans for exploratory qualitative research and subsequently penalize researchers when the plan shifts

(e.g., new participant groups, larger sample sizes). Pollock (2012) distinguishes between institutional procedures as rules within REBs versus in the field processes as defined by professional ethical conduct (see also Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) and argues that at many levels ethical decisions would be best monitored through 'micro' or process ethics based on judgements rather than a priori application of rules. We do however recognize that a 'judgement' based process would only introduce more subjectivity and interpretive power to members of REBs, which depending on methodological biases among committee members may or may not be helpful to decisions regarding nuanced qualitative research. Though 'deviations' can be brought to a REB's attention (i.e., amendments forms) such a process can work against happenings 'in the field'. As REBs collect particular details such as sample size, there is concern that the information collected on the application represents a contract of sorts. An increasing awareness of the willingness of REBs to view their work in legalistic, contractual terms opens up research further to stoppage by shrewd activists. In our view, REBs should consider the merits of emergent qualitative methodologies on a case-by-case basis, thereby considering issues of broader moral ethics. Haggerty (2004) argues the pendulum has swung too far – towards a rule-based system rather than one based on core ethical principles:

[With] the fetishization of rules . . . researchers risk being seen as acting unethically when they fail to submit an application to the REB or to obtain a signed consent form, whether or not there was ever the slightest prospect of anyone being harmed by virtue of such research (Haggerty, 2004, p. 410)

New ethical tensions created by the constantly evolving nature of qualitative health research 'in the field' and the propensity for REBs to become enforcers of 'rules', has shifted the original intent of the REB to ensure principles of 'do no harm' and informed consent. Further, Haggerty (2004) reinforces the injustice of such procedural decisions, saying it is 'divorced from common sense' (p. 411). This fracture bore out in Mason's research when such a procedural issue resulted in cancellation and silenced 445 consenting individuals.

Qualitative rigor

REBs are only one aspect where community activists are involved in research. In fact, hostile responses to our work may be due more so to our own well-intentioned research decisions, such as engaging participant feedback on the data interpretations. In the case of wind turbine work, Walker engaged two procedures intended to strengthen the qualitative rigor (credibility) of the study: member checking and autobiography (Baxter and Eyles, 1997; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). While these procedures were used to increase the transparency of the research, in combination these strategies fuelled the flames of discontent, particularly with two primary objectors.

Member checking

Member checking is used to grant research participants access to (initial) data interpretations while establishing the relationship between the researcher's and participants' perspectives of those interpretations (Sandelowski, 1993). This approach aids the iterative process of interpretation, helping to situate the data within the context of the actor's 'true' point of view (Bloor, 1983; Hoffart, 1991). Indeed it may be informally done during each interview when an investigator asks for clarifications (Sandelowski, 1993), but our focus here is on a more formalized process later in the interpretive phase of fieldwork.

There is some debate about the value of member checking since it can make fairly opaque interpretive processes more frustrating, while others worry about loss of interpretive sovereignty. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314) suggest that member checking is 'the most crucial technique for establishing [research] credibility'. Yet, Sandelowski (1993) warns that member checking may present more problems than it solves and may actually undermine the trustworthiness of a study if it fails to recognize the diverse interpretative goals of the researcher(s) and participants (see also Turner and Coen, 2008; and Hammersley, 1992). In this context, Walker's primary analytic goal was to increase 'richness' of the data through further interpretative input and reflection and not achieve participant consensus. To achieve this goal, participants were mailed a document that briefly outlined preliminary results along with an explanation of the member checking process. This document highlighted the nuances of support and opposition to wind turbines in Port Burwell, among other things. Participants were asked if they agreed with the document and requested to comment extensively. Of the 12 who responded, most (8) agreed with the findings, and two participants strongly disagreed. The two participants with opposing views also vehemently opposed the turbines, and in addition one of these two participants provided an extensively written (i.e., 4,100 word) email (followed with many others) in response. It is this particular response that Walker found difficult to reconcile against the other findings, which pointed to high levels of support.

A common theme throughout this email response was the accusation that our findings were 'missing the mark' and the claim of misrepresenting the actual situation in Clear Creek. Perhaps because an inherent value of qualitative work is the ability to represent marginal, disadvantaged populations rendered 'inconsequential' by other (quantitative) methodologies (Watters, 1989), this person felt we did not present their views and their situation (e.g., health impacted) on the same level as those supportive or accepting of wind turbines. The opponents' quotes made up only about 27% of the document while a follow-up survey later revealed only 23% of people in both communities opposed their respective community wind projects. That said, the objections gave us pause to consider focusing more attention on the concerned citizens to support a greater voice for their issues in the academic literature and ultimately the local media.

An additional objector accused us of biasing our participant selection – that Port Burwell residents were selected because they were all lease holders and were

financially benefitting from turbine development. Though this was not the case – only two residents (of 26) with a turbine lease were interviewed – this situation did remind us of the high stakes: that our overall design was under scrutiny. This member checking response letter, from another participant than discussed previously, also highlights the issues that member checking may open up the research up to more personal attacks. This resident wrote that the work was too full of ‘flotsam and jetsam’ with ‘no valid conclusion’, further suggesting it was comparable to ‘that of a high school student’.

While Mason had not yet conducted member checking within her research community, following the turmoil that arose from the contested survey, she was advised to avoid returning to the community to conduct member checking and examine interview interpretations. It was the REBs concern that this process would ignite further opposition by the activist community – understandable given Walker’s experience. However, we do note that REBs’ aversion to community conflict does have implications for qualitative rigor within research.

Autobiography and revealing yourself

Autobiographies are recommended to augment the process of reflexivity or self-awareness of bias during the research process, thus Walker included one in his MA thesis. This was subsequently scrutinized by one concerned citizen research participant and, based on his reference to the autobiography in further communications, seemed to help precipitate this person’s claims that we were not conducting ethical research. This autobiography required Walker to not only disclose biases going into the field, but also reveal how the process of qualitative research changed those biases and ultimately Walker’s identity. Autobiographies are intended as a corrective to positivistic research, which assumes researchers can enter and exit the field as objective automatons; its intent is in the spirit of openness to enable the reader to better understand the context and motivations for the research.

Determining what exactly to include in the autobiography was a difficult decision, partly because it is rarely done. It is frequently used as an independent research method in itself – widely encouraged in the social sciences disciplines such as anthropology (Okely and Callaway, 1992), education (Mitchell, et al., 2013), sociology (Harrison and Lyon, 1993) and any discipline that incorporates a self-reflecting approach to ethnography (Hannabuss, 2000). Walker’s autobiography included general comments about his education and research interests:

My interest in the current research on wind energy and more generally renewable energies has developed from a love of good environmental stewardship. . . . [During my undergraduate years] I found there were apparent disconnects between climate change science and policy and enjoyed studying the many proposed solutions designed to marry the two (Walker, 2012)

However, in the spirit of the theoretical use of autobiography, Walker also revealed initial feelings on core research issues he later learned he would be forced to

reflect upon throughout the thesis work and beyond, particularly the issue of wind turbine-induced health effects:

I became much more sympathetic to the problems facing the people I spoke with who are facing difficulties. . . . [However] I feel that any type of problem created with the introduction of wind turbines into a particular area appear to be smaller in comparison with the ecological, human health, and social impacts associated with a continued reliance on GHG-rich sources of electricity. (Walker, 2012)

In the days after Walker’s thesis was published, the autobiography prompted response from one particular participant who argued that Walker’s bias disclosure meant the entire work should be dismissed. In terms of the ethics process, it was the autobiography combined with member checking that prompted what this person felt were legitimate claims against the entire study.

Activism in the media and online

Both projects were scrutinized online, similar to other studies and papers in such controversial fields of study. For months after Walker’s thesis publication, there was a relative absence of activism against the research until early 2014 when journal articles started to be published. These articles received significant media attention. Though we maintain that the papers are actually far more sympathetic to concerned citizens than the majority of academic writing on turbine communities to date, we were obligated to point out that the majority of people we interviewed and surveyed in all cases were supportive of turbines. However, it is most telling that Walker and Baxter have published papers highlighting the health impacts of turbines from the point of view of conflict, community ostracization, and well-being. The majority of online comments were associated with the first paper we published (Walker, et al., 2014b) and are linked to an article in a local paper stemming from our own press release. A total of 138 mostly negative comments have since accumulated (Miner, 2014). These comments vary, but the main theme is that the research was biased and speculated to be funded by industry or the Liberal government. Similar assumptions and accusations were made towards Mason’s research through social, online and print media. Yet, in both cases, we clearly acknowledged the university as the sole source of funding.

The efforts to discredit the research highlight that wind turbine and waste processing research is clearly politically divisive in Ontario, but more insidiously it spotlights the pressure on researchers to yield to one point of view or another. This is likely not the context that ethnographers had in mind when warning each other of the lure of ‘going native’ by losing touch with academic principles and audiences in the service of the people we study, but the same basic principle applies.

Developing a ‘thick skin’ is an understatement in this type of work when your research goes on trial publicly to be characterized dubiously as an ‘absolute disgrace. . . . My 12 year old son could do a better, more accurate job. My mark for

this work is F.' There were also other mentions of Walker's potential bias found through other online forums such as the accusation that his positive comments about wind energy as an undergraduate student in the BG News (Ohio, USA) in 2009 created an implied bias three years later. Mason and Luginaah experienced similar backlash where activists 'dug deep' using social media, news sources, and career associations to suggest similar historical bias.

Implications and lessons learned

Our experiences with activists and REBs have sensitized us to what may be a new era of research for social scientists interested in controversial topics. Not only are activists generally knowledgeable, savvy and increasingly engaged, they are resourceful and willing to go to great lengths to use institutionalized and rule-oriented REBs. We should be heartened somewhat, and ironically, that our desire for empowered publics is being realized. There is a not-so-fine line though between accusations of unethical research practice and outright efforts on the part of groups within communities at censorship. This should serve as a reminder to researchers to be well prepared up front and that satisfying REB requirements is a necessary but not sufficient preparation for handling activists concerns.

Further, REB approval is insufficient for wrestling with deeper ethical issues such as finding ways to represent those same activists, who are often marginalized in their local and wider communities. We still feel it is our role to help make their voices heard in empathetic ways despite what they may say against us as researchers. It is indeed challenging to juxtapose hegemonic viewpoints (e.g., biosolids and turbines are minimal health risk) against these marginalized voices, since research generally tends to favor majorities. Fortunately, with qualitative research we have the opportunity to more fully represent the marginalized views that strictly quantitative designs typically understate. The delicacy lies in the fact that representing alternative opinions can instigate criticism from both academia and majority publics who, for example, prioritize rural sustainability, action on climate change, or pollution reduction.

Given the inherent challenges, a reasonable alternative to tacitly claiming objective impartiality is to focus efforts on transparency, but this comes at a cost. Regardless, it is essential to monitor and reflect on our own positionalities, either openly in our publications or behind the scenes. It is a tough position to take the risk of exposing yourself to criticisms and possibly censorship while simply being honest about bias in an effort to contain it. This will make the task of multidisciplinary REBs more challenging. When research becomes politicized by community activists claiming ethics violations, REB members with little experience of qualitative methods may find it difficult separating ontological and epistemological differences within their own biases with matters of ethical principal. For example, efforts towards improving rigor through transparency are a legitimate component of much qualitative and critical inquiry and not (necessarily) a signal that ethics have been breached by incompetence to conduct sound (read: 'unbiased') research.

Further, it is a difficult decision to resist 'setting the record straight' as your personal and professional reputations are attacked. Our experience is that outside the context of an interview the exchange is largely one-way and political – though perhaps, understandable given these voices have been ignored in many other contexts. When considering this we have had two thoughts: (1) silence makes a tacit statement that we stand by our work, and (2) fighting back takes effort that could otherwise be put into thoughtful research and may merely act to instigate further assault. Yet, in line with Haggerty's (2004) notion of ethics creep and increasingly legalistic nature of REBs (Pollock, 2012), important research may be at risk of being shut down or never seeing the light of day for fear of political repercussions.

We are not suggesting to eliminate REB review, however as this is an increasingly contested institution that likely disproportionately impacts qualitative researchers (Pollock 2012; Dyer and Demeritt, 2008), we feel it useful to weigh in concerning what may be a new era of activist backlash. We simply ask that REBs consider the theories behind the methodologies and act in proportion to the associated risks. Further, while we do not feel that qualitative research is directly under attack by REBs, we remind that such attacks tend to be incremental and perhaps even unconscious, yet the end result is that dismantling qualitative research of any sort is another form of censorship. We urge REBs to take a step back and focus on core principles such as balancing benefit against harm, respect for persons, beneficence and justice. Ultimately the rule-based procedural ethics of REBs must give way to professional ethics in the field where researchers are tasked with making ethical decisions on a regular basis. Even when we do act ethically according to professional and disciplinary standards, that will do little to prevent community activists – marginalized or not – from taking our research to task.

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Part II

Representation, self and community