# Introduction

In this article we set out to critically review our shared experiences of the Ethical Review process within a social science department of an English university. In order to do this we have deliberately created a framework that will enable us to interrogate the apparent binary of ‘ethics’ and ‘Ethics’ explored by Blackburn (2001) as it applies to our own research/researcher contexts. Blackburn calls ethics as an institution ‘Ethics’. He poses the rhetorical question of whether Ethics is a ‘system whose real function is other than it seems’ (2001, p. 45). Halse and Honey (2007) are categorical on this point: Ethics becomes the ‘institutional discourse of ethical research’ whilst ethics exists as ‘the relational ethics of actual research practice’ (2007, p. 345). This means that, for them, Ethics and ethics are in danger of becoming ‘positioned in opposing moral universes that construe ethical research in very different ways’ (2007, p. 345). Others, too, have queried the ways in which the ‘Ethical’ review process informs and improves the quality of social science research practice (Jacobson et al. 2007; Hedgecoe 2008; Hammersley & Traianou 2010). Guillemin and Gillam suggest that the bureaucratic context of ‘Ethics’ can be a distraction. They claim that it is ‘the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research’ that form the ‘researcher’s ethical competence’ (Guillemin & Gillam 2004, p. 262). Hammersley employs the terms ‘principalism’ and ‘particularism’ to distinguish between ‘Ethical’ Review and situated ‘ethics’ practice. He goes as far as to suggest that Ethical Review does not raise the ‘ethical standard’ of social science and ‘probably worsens the quality of what it produces’ (Hammersley 2010, p. 211). Similarly, Stanley and Wise allude to what they have termed ‘ethics creep’ within institutional review processes which may have detrimental long-term effects on the research (Stanley & Wise 2010).

We explore this ethics/Ethics paradigm through the consideration of three themes that have become pertinent for us both. The first of these concerns the representation of vulnerability. The second, aspects of power\*especially\*that which is ‘undisclosed’; that which is deemed ‘definitive’; and that which is ‘assumed’. And the third, relates to issues of relationship formation and identity as part of Ethical Review.

Finally, we offer some thoughts as to how the apparent tensions and contradictions of the ethics/Ethics binary may be engaged with to improve the effectiveness of Ethical Review. We believe that this is necessary if an Ethics Review process is to move beyond an ‘illusion of manageability’ (Anderson 1992) to one that respects, supports and advises all those involved in research practice. This has important implications, too, for those involved in ‘everyday’ work contexts of policy and practice where Ethics is in danger of silencing the voices of people who need to be heard if policy and practice are to address their needs. If this were possible, the various instruments of accountability would no longer be ‘superordinate to the moral principles and codes for ethical research’ (Halse & Honey 2007, p. 343) and the ethics/Ethics binary would become redundant.

# Context

We are both qualitative social science researchers working within UK contexts. Our research is post-positivist which means that it questions notions of ‘scientific objectivity and value neutrality’ as well as recognizing the ‘socio-political context’ of all research (Simons & Usher 2000, p. 2). We are both using methodological frameworks that critique dominant moral traditions and which consider how particular subjectivities are constructed within discursive practices at particular times and in particular sets of circumstances. Central to both our areas of research is a concern with applied ethics in the contexts in which we are working. For this reason we have both found that we have puzzled over some of the general principles and practices, as we have experienced them, as part of the institutional discourse of Ethical Review. These principles and practices can appear as privileging a Cartesian subject who is ‘rational; autonomous; and exercising moral judgements against abstract and universal rules, substantively concerned with an Enlightenment agenda of justice and ‘‘rights’’’ (Simons & Usher 2000, p. 30). Such a framework appears, at times, to compromise an approach to ethics which champions a perspectival approach: one that recognizes that all claims to knowledge are self-interested, partial and specific. Therefore, it may be perceived as denying the situated experience of research as messy, contradictory, and physically and emotionally charged in which there are no moments of ‘security and cognitive certainty’ (Keenan 1997, p. 1).

# Our Backgrounds

Denise (henceforth D) has a social work background and Rebecca (henceforth R) an educational one. D is a part-time student, in the fourth year of her DPhil, and having completed her fieldwork is now moving on to data analysis and interpretation. R is a full-time student and will be commencing fieldwork in the autumn term, at the start of her second year. Despite being at different stages, we have found that discussing our research in our respective fields has provided a strong motivation for working together. We have many shared values and perspectives, yet we are also able to challenge one another through bringing different knowledge bases and experiences from our particular subject areas. We have developed our own ‘community of practice’ which has been supportive, enabling and affirming.

D’s research explores parents’ experience of the professional response following the sudden, unexpected death of a child. In the United Kingdom all such deaths are followed by a professional ‘rapid response’ involving police and other professionals, to ensure no crime has been committed. D experienced this ‘rapid response’ following the sudden, unexpected death of her own son and later found that the effects of this on parents and siblings are largely undocumented. D’s professional experience and personal experience both contribute to her research which seeks to help fill this knowledge gap. It is a narrative study, based on eight in-depth interviews with parents who have experienced the sudden, unexpected death of their child.

R’s research is based within a 311 school in England. It is an ethnographic case study which will take place over the course of the next academic year. Primarily it will involve participant-observer research within one classroom with both teachers and pupils. The research itself seeks to explore the discourses around the issue of politics within the school curriculum and how this is played out in pedagogical practices in the school context.

# Three Emerging Themes

As a result of discussing our respective experiences of engaging with the writing of research proposals, encountering the process of Ethical Review, and in D’s case conducting field research as part of her DPhil, we wished to consider aspects of the vast and bumpy terrain of ‘ethics/‘Ethics’\*what Halse and Honey (2007) describe as the ‘cartography of ethics’ (2007, p. 336). We did this by interrogating the three themes of vulnerability, power and relationships that had emerged for us. We felt that all three had been insufficiently problematized within the existing institutional Ethical Review framework. We wished to rock the ‘hegemonic epistemological anchors’ (Halse & Honey 2007, p. 337), suggesting that ‘things [may] be done differently’ (Lather 1991, p. 21).

# Vulnerability

The discourse of ‘vulnerability’ relates especially to the way in which both the researched and the researcher may become constructed within the institution of Ethical Review. The default setting for the researched, if they happen to be children (or the bereaved, the infirm, the disabled, etc.), is that they are deemed ‘vulnerable’. Indeed, the word ‘vulnerable’ (from the Latin vulnus\*wound) is clearly linked to the idea of being hurt, physically or emotionally or attacked in some way (Carter 2009, p. 859).

By implication, those researchers working with them may become constructed as a ‘threat’ from whom the researched must be protected. This can have the effect of setting up a seemingly unhelpful and unproblematized binary of potential researched as ‘victim’ and researcher as ‘perpetrator’. Moreover, this can, unwittingly, lead on to a position in which the nuanced and subtle dynamics of situated ethical encounters of the researched and researcher become unrepresented as part of the initial proposal presented to the Ethical Review body.

This was certainly R’s experience of Ethical Review as she engaged with setting out the way in which she wished to conduct research with a class of eight and nine year olds working with their class teacher. Initially, she applied for ethical clearance through the ‘low-risk’ route. She worked on the assumption that all her research with young people would be conducted within public spaces in the company of other professionals. She would at no time be working with a child on her/his own. Her application was rejected on the basis that conducting ethnographic research with children that may generate discussions that may involve their talking about their own lives would render this a ‘high-risk’ research project. In making her second, ‘high-risk’ application, she struggled to find the language that would not, on the one hand, prefigure encounters and outcomes that were as yet unknown and unknowable, and, on the other, that would satisfy the demands of the Ethical Review template. She also found an ironic and unhelpful dissonance in the conceptualization of the ‘vulnerability’ of all eight and nine year olds, as running alongside the construction of Children’s Rights, championing participation, ‘Pupil Voice’ and involvement. She found herself drawn to the observations of both Carter (2009)\*that discourse that automatically ‘constructs children as defenceless research subjects can easily result in limited access to children and limited knowledge of children’s own perspectives’ (2009, p. 860), and Cree et al. (2002)\*who suggest that this can lead to the ethically and morally dubious position of rendering children as silent.

D’s experience of the Ethical Review process echoes many of the same issues. Her research is concerned partly with how parents can be constructed socially following the sudden, unexpected death of a child. Dyregrov (2004a, p. 182) found that professionals frequently disempower bereaved people, telling them ‘how they should understand, regulate and experience their bodies’. There are common assumptions that parents bereaved in this manner are helpless, that they are vulnerable, often irrational and in need of counselling and professional support. Cottle (2002, p. 536) dubs such assumptions ‘the myth of vulnerability’, whereby people who have had certain experiences are considered so ‘damaged’ they are denied the right to speak for themselves. This ‘myth of vulnerability’ is reinforced by a lack of published material looking at how professional intervention may actually affect parents, causing Davies (2010, p. 8) to question whether professionals ‘have the courage to act non-defensively’ in investigating such cases. D found that the process of Ethical Review, prior to starting fieldwork, unquestioningly echoed the ‘myth of vulnerability’ with regard to parents bereaved in this manner. Indeed, the assumptions of the Ethical Review panel concerning D’s research participants appeared to mirror the positioning by some professionals of certain service users. They seemed to be more concerned with codifying them according to a particular status, rather than by viewing them as holistic individuals.

D’s first application for ethical clearance was rejected on the grounds that it was insufficiently clear for ‘ethically sensitive research of this sort’. There was no explanation given as to why the research was deemed by the committee to be particularly ‘ethically sensitive’. As someone who had experienced the death of her own child and was familiar with others in the same circumstances D would have welcomed a dialogue which used the process of Ethical Review to further professional understanding and knowledge. The immediate assumption by the Ethics Committee that all parents in these circumstances were vulnerable and in need of special protection led D to speculate whether those categories of people labelled as ‘vulnerable’ may often in practice be those categories who make others feel vulnerable. Dent and Stewart (2004, p. ix) support this notion, suggesting that ‘other people, including many professionals, are simply scared of bereaved parents’.

In order to gain ethical approval and the required permission to begin fieldwork, D was required to re-submit her application within the conditions laid down by the Ethics Committee. These consistently defined her research as ‘sensitive’ and required clarity in terms of informed consent, the use of consent forms and a promise of confidentiality to participants. Whilst such conditions rightly aimed at protecting participants from harm, the advance nature of the process rendered it almost impossible for the committee to predict how research participants would feel, how they would construct themselves and what they would want in terms of confidentiality. Many of these decisions, therefore, were necessarily based on the committee’s preconceived notions of parents who had experienced the sudden, unexpected death of a child. In fact, the actual research participants came forward in response to advertisements and were therefore self-selecting. They were all naturally very familiar with their own stories which represented lived experience[[1]](#footnote-1) for them and they were happy to have an opportunity to share these stories. Additionally, many of the participants held hopes that participation would add an extra level of purpose to their children’s brief lives. No interview participants were particularly distressed by the experience, which most evaluated as positive\*a response reported by other researchers in this area (Dyregrov 2004b; Riches & Dawson 1996). Several interview participants said that they did not wish to be sent transcripts, nor did they want their names kept confidential. In many cases they specifically did not want to be rendered anonymous, as they wanted an audience for their story.

The process of Ethical Review is necessarily carried out before fieldwork commences, with a remit of preventing unnecessary distress and harm. However, the difficulty of this lies in allowing the committee to decide beforehand what is ‘ethical’ on behalf of the research participants. As D discovered, this can tie the hands of the researcher who has agreed a set of conditions in advance, which do not reflect the actual needs and wishes of research participants. The construction of this particular Ethical Review body seems to have fallen back upon the generation of preconceived assumptions about these participants as ‘vulnerable’ in a way that tends to mirror the way in which professionals may codify participants through their client status, experience, demography, etc., rather than as holistic individuals. Certainly, in a research context, van den Hoonaard suggests that Ethics Committees should ‘consider looking at research proposals from the perspectives of the populations being studied’ (van den Hoonaard 2002, p. 183). For this to work in practice, Ethics Committees would need to learn about different populations and their related perspectives and (thus) the ethical process would need to become more iterative. However, in D’s experience the ‘absolute’ nature of the review process meant that there was no route back to the committee for her to discuss the actual, as opposed to the preconceived, needs of participants.

Another way in which the conclusive nature of Ethical Review led to difficulties came at the interpretation stage. D’s chosen research method requires asking people from a variety of backgrounds to form ‘interpretive panels’. The aim of these ‘panels’ is to look at sections of the transcript in order to assist the researcher with different ways of viewing the material. Guidance on panels, within the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) Guide, states simply that people should be recruited as widely as possible and that the process is often ‘fun’ (Wengraf 2011). Although none of the interviews, for which D had required ethical clearance, caused distress or were unduly ‘ethically sensitive’, the panels, for which she did not require clearance, resulted in several panel members becoming distressed, angry and exhausted. D explains this in terms of the way in which panel members and bereaved parents are constructed culturally and by the Ethics Committee specifically. Whilst the parents, had lived through the death of their child and were strong enough to tell this story to a researcher, the panel members had not previously heard the material. For the parents, the material was part of the fabric of their lives; for many of the panel members it was deeply shocking and it was therefore the panel members, not the parents, for whom it may have been ‘ethically sensitive’. The timing and nature of the ethics process placed the parents at the forefront, constituted as the only ones in need of protection via the ethical process. The realities, which unfolded during the research process itself, showed quite a different picture, echoing van den Hoonaard’s assertion that there is much that a ‘qualitative researcher does not know in advance’ (van den Hoonaard 2002, p. 177).

# Power

We were troubled, to some degree or other, by the experience of the engagement with Ethical Review as definitive. Although we were both required to reconsider, redefine, alter and amend aspects of our methodological submissions for Ethical Review, this did not feel like a two-way conversation from which both parties might learn. Indeed, an e-mail sent to R at one point from the Review Committee stated definitively: ‘Do not reply to this email.’ Following her first submission for ethical approval, D received a three-page letter which laid out the procedures necessary for the ‘ethically sensitive nature of this sort’, explaining these had not been met. There was no opportunity for mutual discussion or any explanation as to what terms of reference the committee had used in coming to their own decisions about the research. As both a social worker and a parent who had experienced the death of a child, D especially wondered what knowledge base the committee had drawn on in defining this group of people as they had. The power to decree certainly seemed to be in the hands of one party and not the other. This imbalance of power has led Halse and Honey (2007, p. 348) to note that this state of affairs constructs reviewers as ‘somehow immune from, or less capable of, moral transgressions than other species of human beings, such as researchers’. D and R both likened this definitive sense of powerlessness to that of awaiting the outcome of a judgement from a patriarchal ‘Meeting of the

Elders’.

We also experienced the power dynamic as one in which much remained ‘undisclosed’: we found ourselves asking: ‘who were the committee?’ and ‘how representative of all those with an interest in our ethical research was it?’ Carter 2009, p. 858 poses the question of how we might instigate child-led and -oriented Ethics Review to accommodate the strengths, expertise and capacities of children when it is they who lie as the focus of research, for example. We felt that we would have found it helpful to have had the terms of reference of the Ethics Review Committee straightforwardly set out in order that we might more clearly understand the constraints of such a committee within a broader governance structure. We asked ourselves questions such as: ‘to whom are the committee accountable and on what terms?’; ‘how is this framed by law?’; ‘how does this relate to the governance of risk management?’; and ‘how informed are they in my particular subject area?’ Many of these questions have arisen for us in response to a sense of the Ethical Review as forming part of the ‘comfortable’ and somewhat ‘inevitable’ dynamic of the neoliberal managerial ‘audit culture’ (Strathern 2000). Separately, we also questioned the way in which the undisclosed power dynamic acted to challenge the relationship of the researcher with her supervisor. The parameters of responsibility with regard to redrafting, amending and reformulating remained ill-defined. Any communication between the researcher and the committee is also sent to the supervisor. The supervisor is required to sign the submission for Ethical Review in just the same way as the researcher. This presents the potential for a range of intellectual and emotional reactions and ‘tugs’ between both parties: feelings of embarrassment, guilt, frustration and of ‘letting the other down’.

We also felt that the nature of the power dynamic meant that much was ‘assumed’. The default position behind the construction of many questions on the form assumes the role of the researcher as all powerful such that this power must be mediated and controlled (for example, in Section C.1 which presents the ‘Risk Checklist\*Participants’, C.3 about ‘Data Collection’, ‘Recruitment and Method’, and C.4 about ‘Ethical Considerations Containing Choice of Consent’). Such assumed power requires us to construe our research (and ourselves, for that matter) as an ‘unchanging, sequential process that can be set in stone in advance of the research’ (Halse & Honey 2007, p. 342) in which we must be held in check for the damage that we might do and devastation that we might cause. The reality of ‘power’ for R to date in negotiating access to her site of fieldwork has been that she has felt almost entirely powerless. Certainly, it has left her with a sense of fearfulness concerning the relationships that have yet to form between her and her research participants in the field. This heightened sense of anxiety at this stage in the research process does not feel encouraging.

D’s experience in the field differed vastly from the rigid design predetermined and fixed by Ethical Review. The original letter from the Ethical Review Committee described the research as ‘potentially powerful and distressing’, thus setting D up as the potential agent of this distress. In practice, it was the requirements of the Ethics Committee which caused uncomfortable power and authority issues within the interviews and thereafter. Many of the participants, as discussed, did not wish to be made anonymous or sent transcripts. They were happy to give the interview, but experienced the transcripts as something ‘other’ and did not wish to be presented with their words, set in stone, in a way that was uncomfortable for them. Similarly, the consent forms were ‘obtrusive and established an atmosphere of formality and mistrust’ (van den Hoonaard 2002, p. 10). Snyder (2002, p. 78) suggests that, rather than pre-determining such things, ‘we should seek to understand the degree of anonymity, confidentiality, and/or identification desired by each participant... we should individualize consent forms to reflect the wishes of specific participants’.

D also found that the ‘Information for Participants’ required by the Ethical Review process and written according to their view of the research as both ‘ethically sensitive’ and ‘potentially powerful and distressing’ was hence rather over dramatic and risked altering parents’ own perception of the research. The required, often rather aggressive terminology such as ‘destroying’ audio tapes may ‘instil fear in research participants about projects that actually carry minimal risk’ (van den Hoonaard 2002, p. 185). This experience echoes van den Hoonaard’s assertion that Ethical Review ‘can overstate risks... social researchers delving into emotive topics have not found interviews cascading into the sort of troubled waters that require work by therapists... professional interviews are usually quite trouble-free’ (van den Hoonaard 2002, p. 12).

All these experiences within the field reinforced D’s view that issues of ‘informed consent’, also fixed rigidly in absolute terms by Ethical Review, are part of

a process rather than a time-limited event. Informing for consent is a responsibility that a researcher must take seriously at every stage of the endeavour, not just at the beginning. What we as researchers understand to be informed consent can change radically as our research moves forward. (Thompson 2002, p. 95)

# Relationships and Identity

The institutional discourse of the Ethics Committees has effects that shape the relationships and identities of us as researchers and our research participants. This was recognized by the social theorist Goffman (1956, 1959) exploring the construction of ‘identity’ for particular organizational ends, stressing the need for the flexibility of identity in the field. Somers (1994) suggests avoiding ‘essentialist... singular categories’ of identity creation that can create ‘false certainties’ (1994, p. 605) and which do not adequately recognize ‘overlapping networks of relations that shift over time and space’ (1994, p. 607). D and R have felt challenged by much of the language of Ethical Review which has configured and standardized relationships and identities that they may or may not form to be set in tablets of stone as part of their research, almost even before they have had a chance to make sense of them themselves. So, for example, the relationships and identities as set out on the form construct the research participant ‘subject/ s’ as ‘object/s’, which imputes that the research starts with a concrete act of recruiting ‘subjects’. For R, conducting ethnographic research, this has proved problematic in that she anticipates that the ‘boundaries between the observer and the observed [will be] per‘meable’ (Barbour 2008, p. 98) within the everyday experience of fieldwork. Not only is the demarcation for her between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ necessarily rather blurred, but so too is the idea of a ‘subject’ rather than a ‘participant’. She is all too conscious that much of her ethnographic experience in a classroom with children will be participatory (meaning that she will be interacting with them whilst they do things) in an environment where a concern for ‘fixed categories’ (Simons & Usher 2000, p. 33) could become unhelpful.

Another problem with the language of relationships and identities is that it has the effect of concealing from view all those ‘Others’ who could be implicated within (and possibly affected by) the research if we do not ‘name’ them. D’s experience of working with panels is a powerful example of this. In R’s case, within a primary school context, this required her to second guess a range of relationships that she might make or be required to make within a dynamic and public space as part of her ongoing ethnographic research over a sustained period. At this stage, she is required to ‘lay bare’ all those who might potentially become woven into the warp and weft of research subject as object. At the moment she finds this, frankly, bemusing and terrifying. How does she ‘capture’ a range of ‘Others’ who may influence or be influenced by the research who are, as yet, unknown to her? Of course, she has attempted to do so, but she agonizes and worries about ‘being caught out’ for having wrongly represented the dynamic of the researcher/researched dynamic. In this, D and R are very much in accord with Kellner (2002, p. 31) who states that ‘codes of ethics, or any codes, do little to inform us about taking these very human aspects into account.’

As a result of conducting action research as part of her master’s degree, R knows that there is a dissonance with the situatedness of the practice of qualitative research where relationships and identities of the researcher and researched are constantly ‘reconfigured and reformed in ways that repeatedly realign and renew the ethical terrain’ (Halse & Honey 2007, p. 345) in the field. Indeed, she found that ethical issues were such an integral dynamic of what constituted ethnography that they were not to be resolved but mapped in order to chart the ‘ambiguities and uncertainties which characterize the production of knowledge about people’s lives’ (Simons & Usher 2000, p. 34). However, she feels that the ‘Ethics-speak’ of the form has not enabled her to capture this in a way that allows her to feel as though she has acted with complete integrity at this juncture of form filling.

Bauman (1993 quoted in Kellner 2002, p. 27) attempted to draw a distinction between ‘ethics and morality’, which D has found valuable in questioning the process of Ethical Review. For Bauman (1993 quoted in Kellner 2002, p. 30), ‘ethics is an attempt to codify morality or to set forth norms. By necessity and by definition, codification is situation-and-culture bound and therefore relative and limited.’ According to Bauman, morality is orientation to the ‘Other’ that is infinite. Consequently, therefore, an attempt to ‘codify morality... falls far short of invoking caring about the people being studied. One cannot codify caring and the sense of the infinite obligation required by morality.’ For D, Bauman’s distinctions have been illustrated within the field with research participants and also within the process of Ethical Review itself. Weinberg (2002, p. 79) describes a research project as ‘a lived dilemma rather than simply the neat achievement presented in a published report’. As PhD researchers we are encouraged to keep personal journals that will chart the changes that occur as we navigate the PhD journey. The process is conceptualized from the beginning as one of acquiring knowledge, questioning assumptions and thus of personal and intellectual growth and change. However, when encountering the process of Ethical Review, we find ourselves required to know everything in advance, risking chastisement (in the way that D felt herself to be) for ‘vagueness’ in our applications for Ethical Review. For Ethical Review to be truly ethical (van den Hoonaard 2002, p. 185), committees should have a responsibility for educating the researcher and, where practicable, consulting the people being studied.

Similarly, relationships in the field are conceptualized within Ethical Review as finite, when in practice this may be a much more difficult area to navigate. This is recognized by Glesne, who candidly admits that ‘no matter how qualitative researchers view their role, they develop relationships with research participants’ (1998, p. 122). She cites Hansen (1976 quoted in Glesne 1998) who, in her anthropological research in Denmark, found that much of her data was gleaned through her role as researcher and friend where the two identities became indistinguishable. In the field, clearly, researchers and participants take on a multiplicity of roles and adopt a variety of identities which overlap one with the other. The Ethical Review process does not recognize the intricateness of such relationships and requires that such identities and roles (along with their assumed power relationships) be placed within neat boxes. D’s research posed particular ethical difficulties in this respect as she opted to disclose her own personal experience when recruiting prospective participants. Whilst the process of Ethical Review did not address the implications of this but rather constructed D as ‘researcher’ with the attendant power of this role, participants often viewed her as ‘one of us’ and were clear that their decision to collaborate with the study had been largely influenced by this. Although the work of Hansen (1976) is so helpful in mapping the terrain between different identities, D as a relatively inexperienced researcher had the often uncomfortable feeling that she was ‘getting it wrong’ within the field and rather than having a multiplicity of roles she actually felt that none were ‘safe’ and ethically correct. Her methodology contributed to this, for, as Thompson (2002, p. 99) describes it, narrative interview methods ‘tend to have a friendly fac¸ade’ and interviews may occur in a participants home or over coffee. Following the interview process, D continued to encounter ethical dilemmas for which she felt unprepared, for after listening to such deeply personal life events it was sometimes difficult to simply end the relationship at the door of the participant’s home. Whilst some people have been happy to terminate any ongoing contact with the end of the interview, others have wanted to maintain relationships via e-mail and telephone. D has maintained these relationships with the uneasy sense that this may not be ‘ethical’, within the research context definitively agreed in the process of Ethical Review. Bauman’s guidance on ethics and morality, although potentially controversial, is helpful here, and D has been guided by this in continuing relationships with research participants where they have wanted this:

It is our morality, our diffuse, unlimited obligation to the ‘Other’, that must inform the more important aspects of our conduct in the field. And where ethical requirements and moral requirements conflict, the latter must take priority.

(Bauman 1993 qtd in Kellner 2002, p. 33)

Another aspect to relationships within the field which D encountered concerned the sharing of her research ideas and processes with research participants. Fine (1994, quoted in Ungar & Nichol 2002) explores the relationship between ‘Self and Other’ in research contexts, describing this as one which mostly privileges the researcher. However, DPhil researchers who have invested both time and money in their research are also inherently vulnerable when sharing ideas within the field and may benefit from awareness of this vulnerability and of how best to safeguard their ideas. Whilst qualitative researchers often wish to improve practice or ‘make a difference’, it is also important to maintain ownership of their original research contribution and not allow this to become unwittingly appropriated by interview participants, without due reference and credit.

# Conclusion

This article has explored the contradictions inherent in the experience of institutional Ethical Review for the social science researcher, and by implication, the ‘Others’ involved in the research process, in particular, ‘the researched’. It has focused especially on the frustrations of marrying the experience of Ethical Review with the situatedness of ethics as the lived experience of research practice. Based on this, the authors would like to make some recommendations that may help to offset the tensions arising from the ethics/Ethics binary. The first of these would be to make every effort for Research Ethics Committees to gain as much knowledge as possible of the research populations being studied. In the case of ‘vulnerable groups’ (for example, children) this should include finding ways to involve them in the advice and decision making of Ethics Review panels. The second recommendation would be to establish mechanisms for members of the Ethics Review panels to enter mutually beneficial dialogue with the researcher concerning ethical dilemmas that arise at different points in the course of research. There should be an expectation of mutual learning between both parties as the research unfolds and develops. The third recommendation is concerned with transparency: information about the remit and scope of the Ethics Review Committee should be clear and easily accessible at the outset of the process, so that any researcher approaching the committee knows what to expect. This leads to a fourth recommendation which is predicated on the previous recommendations as it requires the generation of mutual knowledge, interest and trust: there should be scope for agreement between an Ethics Review panel and a researcher with regard to the adaptation of the language of standard forms to allow for the particularities of a range of research methodologies and/or research contexts. Finally, the establishment of relationships of this nature between panels and researchers should enable further advice to be given concerning such matters as ‘exiting the field’, as well as coping with expectations of research participants concerning ongoing contact once the research is complete. This advice could also include such issues as the protection of the intellectual property rights of the researcher. By taking into account the needs of the researcher as well as the researched and ‘Others’ in the research process Ethics Review Committees can ensure that procedures remain human centred. And most importantly, as van den Hoonaard suggests, ‘ethics review can also become ethical’ (van den Hoonaard 2002, p. 185).

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1. . We use ‘lived experience’ throughout this article to describe the vitality and spontaneity of what Guillemin and Gillam have called ‘ethically important moments’ (2004, p. 262) where difficulty, subtlety and unpredictability arise in practice in the doing of research. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)