Ethics-in-Practice in Collaborative Management Research

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Reflections on ethics-in-practice and the informal, implicit, situational and political nature of ethical action as a social process stand in marked contrast to the restrictive focus of ethical formalism in the process of applying explicit and formal rules to adjudicate on matters of moral concern (Bauman 2003). Such reflections incorporate and address the inevitable 'practice gap' between what rules prescribe and situations demand (Taylor 1993). The call for greater transparency and reflexivity on this social process advocates cultivating increased sensitivity towards and honesty about such ethical activities (Bell & Bryman; Bell & Wray-Bliss 2009). One way of enhancing such an awareness is through the documentation of and reflection on case studies that capture the frequently suppressed and often 'not talked about' moral dimensions of academic research (Macdonald & Hellgren 1999; Macdonald & Hellgren 2004).

By the late 20th century, scholarly, professional and academic associations of various kinds had established codes of ethics for governing their research. Christians (2003) outlined this as commonly involving principles of providing 'informed consent', opposing 'deception', safeguarding 'privacy and confidentiality', and ensuring 'accuracy'. Government agencies and universities have also legislated that ethics review bodies need to be established to monitor research involving human subjects as a condition of being able to carry out that research. Known in the US as Institutional Review Boards, an influential statement of principles (the 'Belmont Report') was provided by the US National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research (Christians 2005, p. 147). This report elaborated three key ethical principles: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for persons, drawing on Kantian ethics, proclaims that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents. Beneficence, rooted in Utilitarianism, dictates that researchers should ensure the well-being of their subjects. Justice, as a distributive ideal derived from Aristotle, insists on fair distribution of both the benefits and burdens of research.

Critics of such moral codes point to both the conflict between these ethical prescriptions and the inherently controversial, often narrow operationalisation of what they mean (Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Bell & Bryman 2006). Respect, it is argued, involves more than 'informed consent' by subjects who agree to a study. It involves caring, honouring, treating with dignity, etc. Beneficence, based on identifying risks and benefits, is not only unquantifiable, but inherently contentious. Ideas of non-deception, safeguarding privacy and confidentiality, etc., do not begin to cover the range of issues involved in the conduct of empowering and participatory research, addressing the ethical dilemmas of covert research on controversial issues of the day, or even the generally relevant issue of determining what appears to be a justifiable 'minor' risk to subjects in the face of 'major' potential benefits from the outcomes of research. Finally, justice extends far beyond ensuring fair selection or preventing unfair distribution of the results of research. It also involves commitments to responsibility, honesty, fairness and so on, that extend beyond such issues.

We hold that not only does seriously addressing such principles involve opening up a wider range of ethical and political debate than is currently addressed in Institutional Review Boards or Ethical Committees, but it also involves seriously addressing the overall course of a research project. This means not merely 'doing ethics' and getting the 'boxes ticked' when entering the research field, but addressing the complex ethical and political issues involved in all the stages of creating, conducting and completing that characterise a research project in practice.

In our case study we attempt to illustrate such issues, and contribute to an opening up of debate, through the documentation of how such ethical/political issues arose and were resolved at these different stages of a collaborative industry-academic research project. In the first year of the collaboration, a joint research project between an Australian university and Steelmaking Oz (the industry partner) was awarded a three-year competitive research grant by the Australian Research Council (funding body). The academic researchers on the project were part of the university's Steel Research Institute established three years earlier. The project was a collaborative analysis of the nature and outcomes of an extensive, emotive and controversial leadership program undertaken by over 1000 Steelmaking Oz managers. The project was jointly funded by the Australian Research Council and Steelmaking Oz.

As part of this project, a Human Research Ethics Application was submitted to the university Ethics Committee and received approval a year after the start of the project. On completion of the project three years later, a final progress report was submitted by the university and Steelmaking Oz to the Australian Research Council. In formal ethical terms, the ethics process occurred in three months between the submission and approval of the Ethics Application in the second year of the project. This formal ethical process was, however, embedded in a four year complex and contested social process involving the crafting out, negotiating, adapting, and concluding of a morally and politically contentious research 'evaluation'. The paper draws on the symbolic interactionist framework of Anselm Strauss in analysing the *trajectory* of the project as an overlapping, iterative and multi-level three stage social process of 'getting in', 'getting on' and 'getting out' (Buchanan, Boddy & McCalman 1988), influenced by the *technology projections*, *technology schemas* and *arc of action* of the different actors involved (Strauss 1993). In particular, the case study focuses on the nature and activities surrounding what Strauss describes as secondary *boundary objects* that act to define and 'carry' a project forward as focal points for the negotiations that occur between the different participating *social worlds* (Strauss 1978; Garrety & Badham 2000). These objects are: the Australian Research Council application and Industry Letter of Support; the University Ethics Application and Industry Letter of Permission; and, the Australian Research Final Progress Report and Report on Collaboration by the Industry Partner.

We outline and examine the differing ways in which each of the three 'ethical principles' (respect, beneficence and justice) were raised at each stage of this project. In conclusion, our argument is that this case reveals: the political and social shaping of project 'contracts' prior to the formal ethics process; the changing influence of academic and industry partners over the three stages of such collaborative research projects, the conditions affecting their power; and, the moral and political issues surrounding collaboration and ethical reflexivity in such conditions.

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