Questioning Professional Autonomy in Qualitative Inquiry

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An Institutional Review Board (IRB) is an independent committee in the United States that protects the rights and welfare of human subjects recruited to participate in research. The federal government requires that government-funded research of all types involving human subjects, or their records, must have approval from an IRB. Institutions that receive government funds have, therefore, established IRBs to comply with federal requirements. IRBs review research proposals prior to the commencement of research to ensure that the possible risks to human subjects participating in a study are minimized and justified by the anticipated benefits. IRB-type committees that are in place or are being established in other countries are identified under different names, such as Human Subjects Committee or Human Research Ethics Board.

Initially, some scholars argued that IRBs were designed to address ethical challenges involving the inherent risks, hazards, and dangers to human subjects in biomedical research, rather than in social science research [1], [2]. Since the year 2000, scholars, reporters, and professional organizations have argued that IRBs have become rigid in their interpretations of federal regulations, and the enforcement of such regulations on social-science research has reached new and unprecedented levels [3]-[12]. According

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to the *Wall Street Journal*, IRBs are "cracking down on social sciences" [13]. Shea has declared that researchers are virtually being told, "Don't talk to the humans" [14]. Church, Shopes, and Blanchard have observed that IRBs have a "chilling effect" on social-science research [15]. Schrag has equated the relationship between IRBs and social sciences to "ethical imperialism" [16].

This article will review the rules, processes, and behaviors of IRBs for qualitative inquiry in the social sciences within the framework of professional autonomy. The research will demonstrate how IRBs draw procedural criteria from the biomedical sciences and favor criteria applicable to quantitative social-science research when reviewing qualitative social-science research applications. Typically, quantitative research assumes that social facts have an objective reality and that they reduce data to numerical indices. There is also the assumption that social facts are deductive, begin with hypotheses and theories, identify variables, and measure relationships among variables. In contrast, qualitative research assumes that reality is socially constructed and makes minor use of numerical indices. This type of research is inductive, ends with hypotheses and grounded theories, restricts identification of variables, and faces difficulty in measuring relationships among variables. Since an important factor in qualitative social-science research is that researchers enjoy discretion in deciding what they would like to research and the means with which they want to carry it out, and ultimately IRBs control this, IRB review often generates frustration among qualitative social-science researchers.

Most scholarly studies on IRBs have either grouped social sciences with behavioral sciences, or have focused on the discipline of social sciences rather than on the method by which the research was conducted. For instance, a recent large-scale national survey on 45 IRB functions was conducted with 886 biomedical and social-behavioral researchers as subjects [17]. More importantly, IRB review tends to be more challenging for qualitative research rather than quantitative social-science research. This can be attributed to the notion that traditionally, quantitative inquiry has been portrayed as superior to qualitative inquiry. For instance, Fred Kerlinger once proclaimed, "There's no such thing as qualitative data. Everything is either 1 or 0" (cited in [18]). Consequently, IRB's demand modifications better suited for quantitative rather than qualitative social-science research. Previously, when scholars have focused specifically on IRBs and qualitative inquiry [5], [6], [9]-[12], the topic was not examined explicitly within the framework of professional autonomy.

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Professional Autonomy

The professional autonomy of scientists to determine research problems, and to determine the methods with which to respond to research problems, has been regarded as one of the fundamental norms of science. Friedson has argued that legitimate organized autonomy is the basic pillar of professionalism [19]. Professional autonomy is defined as the ability to initiate and conclude action, and to control the content, manner, and speed with which a task is done [20]. Bailyn has identified two types of professional autonomy: 1) "strategic autonomy" which is the freedom to set one's own work agenda, and 2) "operational autonomy" which is the freedom, once the work agenda has been set, to attack it by means determined by oneself [21].

As professionals, scientists exercise both facets of autonomy in the performance of research, with the theoretical expectation that research will be conducted in accordance with the ethical norms of the profession and without interference from those who are not qualified [22]. Scientists are viewed as experts in their fields who have gone through an extensive period of formal education and training [23]. Thus, autonomy is not a reward that has been granted, but rather it is a right earned by the efforts displayed in becoming an expert.

The academic setting is known to facilitate the highest form of professionalism. Professionals sustain jurisdiction with the power and prestige of their academic knowledge [24]. Academic scientists are viewed as enjoying strategic autonomy [25]. Theoretically, they are not required to focus on any given research topic; they conduct research in their areas of interest and expertise. They have ownership of data generated from their research and decide how to interpret results. They tend to enjoy the academic freedom to speak freely on subjects within their expertise. Similarly, they pursue their own agenda in teaching and even shape the department curriculum. They are free to design courses they like to teach, and to determine how to present material to students.

In practice, however, academic scientists do not enjoy absolute autonomy. Since 1950, the financial support given to universities by the government, as well as the partnership between universities and industry since 1970, has placed organizational constraints on the autonomy of academic scientists

[26]. Research selection at the university level is influenced by many factors, including professional priorities and availability of external funding. These factors tend to compromise the ideal conception of academic scientists' autonomy [25]. Academic scientists are directing research toward subjects they feel are favored by funding agencies [27]. The concept of professional autonomy is thereby rendered capricious.

Within many fields of social science and humanities, such as history, literature, and philosophy, research is conducted with little external funding. Fields such as economics, education, political science, and sociology have more external funding sources available to them. However, external funding cannot support all the subject matter within these fields. It can be argued that social science and humanities researchers tend to enjoy more autonomy than those operating within the constraints of external funding. Yet, social scientists meet their own threats to autonomy through restrictions imposed by IRBs.

Evolution: IRB and Social Sciences

The establishment of IRBs is rooted in national and international historical efforts designed to improve the ethical conduct of biomedical and behavioral research. In addition to the research conducted in the U.S., German physicians have conducted medical experiments from 1939 to 1944, in which prisoner's experienced extreme pain, permanent injury, mutilation, and death [28]. Within the U.S., the national Public Health Service carried out the Tuskegee Syphilis study from 1932 to 1972 on almost 400 low-income black males by withholding information about their disease and preventing them from being administered penicillin [29]. Between 1956 and 1972, New York University researchers injected hepatitis serum into children diagnosed with mental retardation in the Willowbrook State School [30]. Researchers at the M.I.T. exposed 57 human subjects to radioactive calcium between 1950 and 1953; earlier in 1946, they had exposed 19 students to radioactive iron [31]. In the New York's Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital study of 1963, elderly patients were injected with foreign, live cancer cells [32]. In Milgram's 1961 obedience study, human subjects were asked to give what appeared to be real electric shocks to another person [33].

Such cases confirm that the protection of human subjects by federal regulations was often overlooked. This is partly due to links between the power of medical schools and the pharmacology industry [34]. At the time of the creation of IRBs, there was no mention of human subjects in social science research, but only in biomedical and behavioral research in which there was direct intervention in the human body and mind [35]. However, some restrictions were placed on social-science research partially due to Laud Humphrey's study, which involved observing men having sex in public restrooms from 1966 to 1968 [36]. Yet, IRBs were somewhat liberal in their interpretation and implementation of federal regulations on social science research.

For social sciences, two special review categories were established: exempt and expedited. The exempt category implies that IRB review and approval of research is not required by federal regulations. It includes research on educational instructional strategies and tests for internal educational purposes; research involving elected or appointed officials, and collection or analysis of publically available data. Expedited review is used for research that poses no more than a minimal risk to human subjects. Generally, research on individual or group behavior and characteristics that employ ethnography, focus group, interview, observation, survey, and other such social science methods go through expedited review. It is important to note that whether or not research is exempt or expedited is determined by the IRB; the researcher can only apply for exempt or expedited status from the IRB.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, IRBs started enforcing regulations on social-science research at higher levels [37]. Government-funded social-science research that was previously exempt now falls under IRB review. IRB control has been extended to non-funded social-science research, as well as to graduate students' dissertations [38]. Some universities have extended IRB requirements to undergraduate students who are writing honors theses. In addition to getting an IRB approval from the employing institution, researchers may now have to get additional IRB approvals from those institutions where the study will be conducted [39]. Increasingly, online research sources (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, chat rooms, discussion forums) about people, which do not require login with password, are being considered as publicly available data by IRB, thus subject to its approval.

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This shift in regulation enforcement is mostly because, between the years 1999 and 2001, major ethical misconduct occurred in biomedical research at prominent institutions (see, www.niehs.nih.gov/research/resources/bioethics/

Fig. 1. The Nit-Picking IRB.

timeline/). For example, a human subject died in 1999 after participating in a gene therapy study at the University of Pennsylvania. In 2001, a healthy volunteer in a project at the Johns Hopkins University died in an asthma study, which led to temporary closure of all research activities at the medical school. In 1999, federally funded research at the Duke University Medical Center was suspended for four days, mostly due to several deficiencies in its IRB. A lawsuit was filed against the IRB at the University of Oklahoma when it was discovered that the approved informed consent for a study involving subjects with melanoma contained false information. It should be noted that the recent research misconduct that has made IRBs more rigid has occurred in biomedical and clinical research rather than in social sciences.

Making One-Size-Fits-All Research

Federal regulations require IRBs to have the professional competence necessary to review specific research activities. However, studies show that IRBs tend to be overshadowed by biomedical researchers and bioethicists, followed by psychologists who do not have expertise in social science research [40], [16]. If there are some social scientists on local IRBs, they tend to be trained in quantitative methodology. Although they may be open to a variety of research methods, they still view qualitative research as "soft science" [9], [12]. Many scholars believe that qualitative methodology does not fit well with formal procedures familiar to biomedical, behavioral, and quantitative social science reviewers.

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According to federal regulations, IRBs must determine that the risks of participation in research are reasonable in relation to the potential benefits that may be expected as a result of the research. Scholars have argued that IRBs ought to distinguish between physical and non-physical harms in biomedical, behavioral, and social-science research. This is due to social-science research more often involving paper-pencil tests (i.e., rather than drug trials), and to social-science research being dialogue-oriented rather than clinically oriented [9], [10]. Oakes has plotted a chart of possible harms to human subjects, which range from physical harms, such as death, in medical research, to non-physical harms, such as annoyance, in journalism research [41].

Scholars have further argued that it is easy to evaluate physical harms in the context of potential direct benefits to the human subject [42], [43]. For example, the risk of cancer research is death, and the benefit is protection or cure from cancer, which the human subject may receive. Similarly, the risk in an anorexia study is depression and the benefit is the psychotherapy, which the human subject is likely to receive. Additionally, it is suggested that the bulk of social-science research offers little individual benefit to the human subjects who participate in the research. For instance, a study of how people use technology will generate knowledge about new ideas for products and services, which is a long-term benefit and may or may not be directly beneficial to human subjects who are participating in the research.

Federal regulations require IRBs to approve the informed consent form, which is the voluntary consent of human subjects to participate in a study. Each human subject must sign this form before research is conducted. Scholars have argued that the nature of informed consent causes some challenges in social-science research compared to biomedical and behavioral research. For instance,

explaining the purposes or the benefits of the research in detail to subjects may skew the research results in the social sciences [4]. It is proposed that IRBs do not take specific context of social-science research into consideration [43]. The American Association of University Professors has cited numerous examples [44], such as when a linguist seeking to study language development in a preliterate tribe was instructed by an IRB to have the subjects read and sign a consent form before the study could proceed. Similarly, a political scientist who had bought a list of appropriate names for a survey of voting behavior was required by an IRB to get written informed consent from the subjects before mailing them the survey.

Informed consent is seen as creating additional challenges in international settings [39]. Seligson has proposed that IRBs may be engaging in a sort of cultural imperialism when they impose American criteria on human subjects in social settings elsewhere [34]. Further, it is not customary in the culture of many developing nations to sign documents [10]. Generally, the details written on the informed consent tend to be detached from the cultural norms of the countries where the study is conducted.

Informed consent is also required to protect the privacy of human subjects. IRBs consider anonymity one of the best assurances for protecting confidentiality of human subjects. Scholars have claimed that in some social-science methods, the issue of anonymity is problematic [42], [43]. For example, it is difficult to protect the identity of human subjects in a focus group study or in an interactive group setting in which a researcher asks questions. Human subjects give answers openly, and they are free to talk with other participants. In ethnographic studies, cultural anthropologists cannot ensure anonymity in practice since some societies, individuals, or organizations are sufficiently distinctive and thus identifiable [6], [11]. For oral historians, anonymous sources lack credibility [45]. They conduct interviews for the record, preserve interviews as an archival document, and provide open access so that others can evaluate them.

Studies on sensitive topics such as sexual assault, repressed memory, genetic markers, teen pregnancy, or criminal conviction face additional challenges. For instance, doctoral student Tara Star Johnson who wanted to do a qualitative study to investigate the phenomenon of sexual dynamics in the classroom discovered that the IRB was a tool used to discipline her department by allowing its students to do research outside accepted norms [46]. Jonathan Church, a senior student, wanted to conduct an ethnographic study of a gentleman's club in Philadelphia, which raised red flags to the IRB. He abandoned the project for something less controversial in an effort to graduate on time [15]. David Wright was accused by the IRB of unethical behavior, among other things, for not reporting a student's involvement in a crime about which he wrote a creative nonfiction story [47]. Typically, IRBs views sensitive topics as having the potential to bring lawsuits and bad publicity to universities.

If social scientists conduct their research without IRB approval, employing universities may call it scientific misconduct and suspend the research, thereby making the data inadmissible for publication [48]. Brown University prohibited Professor Li from publishing research from her three-year study of the education and socialization of Chinese immigrant children because she modified the IRB-approved budget during the fieldwork stage [49].

> If there are social scientists on local IRBs, they tend to be trained in quantitative methodology.

Empirical Cases

This section presents examples narrated by social-science researchers on their interactions with IRBs following three conferences in 2005, 2006, and 2011. Each session had over 20 participants in the room and the participants were in agreement about the role of IRBs in social-science research. A large majority of these social-science researchers belonged to public research universities; IRBs in private research universities, as well as in master's, baccalaureate, and other educational institutions, may differ in rules regarding human subject research. In most of these public research universities, IRBs were centralized, dealing with biomedical, behavioral, and social science research; universities, which have a separate IRB for social-science research, are likely to differ in the review process. Only examples pertaining to qualitative research are presented here.

Example 1- According to a researcher, the IRB did not understand why his research questions were not converted into a hypothesis to be easily tested. Additionally, the IRB was not in agreement with his need to conduct face-to-face interviews with human subjects. Alternatively, the IRB expressed that administering an anonymous survey could collect the same information.

Example 2- The IRB told a researcher that the snowball sampling that he had proposed was similar to collecting data from friends. In his experience, purposive sampling, interviews, and small sample size do not generally fall in line with IRB approval standards. They tend to favor surveys with a large sample that is selected randomly.

Example 3- The IRB took over eight months to approve an

application to study the selection of majors in institutions of higher education. The IRB requested a copy of the data-collection instrument that, in the application, the researcher described as being designed to include questions in several areas and specified the types of questions to be asked. Additionally, the IRB requested the names and resumes of the transcribers the researcher wanted to employ. Furthermore, it asked that they be listed as investigators on the project proposal.

> IRBs tend to follow a fixed checklist, misread the qualitative research design, seek meaningless clarifications, and delay the start of research.

Example 4- To study the teaching of mathematics in schools in a developing country, a researcher secured verbal permissions from the Director of Education for public schools and principals of private schools during a trip. She submitted the application to the IRB for expedited approval. The IRB took over five months to request the modification, which centered on getting written documentation from the Director and principals; the IRB did not accept verbal permission secured by the researcher.

Example 5- A researcher, who expressed interest in the study of how female faculty members balance academic careers with family commitments, recounted that the IRB believed the study would be risky for the faculty members later seeking tenure and promotion. She had planned to acquire data by asking open-ended questions and additional questions based on the responses from the human subjects. Instead, she was asked to submit the exact instrument so the IRB could evaluate the possible risks to the subjects. The IRB felt that a survey with a set of possible answers from which to choose would be a less risky data-collection strategy. It further objected to the recording of interviews. Also, the IRB did not like obtaining the list of female faculty from department chairs.

Example 6- In the study on teaching mathematics in a developing country, the researcher told the IRB that there is no risk to human subjects. However, the IRB contested that subjects may feel bored or tired during interviews, which means some potential discomfort involved in the study.

Example 7- A researcher revealed that he typically derives risks based on speculation or guesswork. According to him, possible risks in his studies are similar to a normal interaction between people (human subjects) and a stranger (the researcher) who will leave after the data is collected. Further, he finds it extremely difficult to summarize the benefits that the subjects will receive from participating in his research, other than the gain of general knowledge.

Example 8- According to a researcher, earlier informed consents were brief, approximately 100 to 200 words. Now they consist of the multiple headings such as: 1) Introduction, 2) What will happen if I decide to participate? 3) How long will I be in this study? 4) What are the risks of being in this study? 5) What are the benefits to being in this study? 6) What other choices do I have if I do not want to be in this study? 7) How will my information be kept confidential? 8) What are the costs of taking part in this study? 9) Will I be paid for taking part in this study? 10) How will I know if you learn something new that may change my mind about participating? 11) Can I stop being in the study once I begin? 12) Whom can I call with questions of complaints about this study? 13) Whom can I call with questions about my rights as a research subject? 14) Consent. 15) Investigator's signature. Every heading had a brief write up.

Example 9- In the field, a researcher had instructed human subjects to read and sign the informed-consent form as required by the IRB. Several non-Caucasian subjects were hesitant to sign and they had to be persuaded to comply with the IRB requirements. She observed similar hesitation with immigrant subjects. For them, the main issue was who would have access to the signed informed-consent form and when it would be destroyed. They did not want to have any written record related to their participation in the study.

Example 10- In a developing country, a researcher found that most human subjects became rather nervous in seeing the formality associated with their participation in the study. Many felt threatened by the clause allowing for participation withdrawal from the study at any time. They interpreted this as an indication that they would be asked inappropriate or threatening questions. Further, they became apprehensive in reading the statement about possible concerns about interview, and the idea that they could call/contact the person listed on the consent form, who was located in the United States. They considered this a physical burden on them due to about a 10-hour time difference between their country and the United States. Furthermore, this meant they were being asked to use their personal funds to make long-distance phone calls.

Limitations of Autonomy and Denigration of Qualitative Inquiry

The presentation of empirical cases, as well as scholarly literature

reviews, has demonstrated that, through the micro-management of IRBs, many of them control the operational autonomy of qualitative social-science researchers. Additionally, it can be concluded that they are not aware of qualitative techniques, and evaluate qualitative social-science research within the framework of quantitative techniques. For instance, in example 1, the researcher was told by the IRB to convert his research questions into a hypothesis, to conduct an anonymous survey, and also to conduct face-to-face interviews. Similarly, in examples 3 and 5, the IRB asked for the exact instrument, which shows a fundamental misunderstanding of qualitative social-science research. Also in example 3, the IRB requested the amendment to the researcher selection of study sites. The researcher studying tenure (example 5) was instructed by IRB to change her recruitment strategy of female subjects. Example 2 shows that the IRB was not aware that snowball sampling is an accepted qualitative technique.

When IRBs are slow in approving applications, the qualitative social-science researchers' operational autonomy to carry out the research as they see fit is adversely affected and research suffers. As example 4 shows, the IRB took five months to request the modification. In example 3, the IRB took eight months to approve the application.

The examples also show that informed consent, risks, and confidentiality assurances create apprehension among human subjects. Further, it places qualitative social-science researchers in an extremely uncomfortable and defensive position (examples 9 and 10). Moreover, by requiring calculations of risk and benefit, which are not appropriate or feasible, IRBs impose limits to the operational autonomy of the researchers. When this is coupled with complex legal informed consents, which do not take the human subjects' actual context into consideration (example 8), it has the potential to skew qualitative social-science research findings.

Often, IRBs have interfered with qualitative social-science researchers' strategic autonomy. To receive approval, the researcher in example 5 assured the IRB that she would transcribe interviews personally, rather than have them transcribed by others. In example 3, the IRB required that the transcribers were listed as investigators on the project proposal, which is the prerogative of the researchers on the basis of the intellectual contributions to the project.

Academic institutions have been characterized as autonomous organizations in which faculty members enjoy a high degree of autonomy from a centralized administrative control. Professional autonomy theory states that social-science faculty members engaged in qualitative research have a systematic body of relevant knowledge without which they cannot perform research. The studies that they are engaged in cannot be performed by researchers who lack similar knowledge and training in qualitative research. Faculty members have competence in carrying out qualitative research with proper notions of success and failure. Their knowledge of qualitative research is not static; instead, the knowledge base continues to grow as new conclusions from the same information immerge and errors are removed. These faculty members understand how to perform qualitative research and why, under some circumstances, they should follow one technique rather than another. Therefore, it is no surprise that faculty expect to initiate and conclude qualitative research by controlling the substance, method, and pace of their work. They seek to make their own decisions without pressure from those who are not members of that profession.

Within academic institutions, however, IRBs control research involving human subjects, ensuring compliance with federal regulations for government-funded as well as non-funded or privately-funded research. Scholarly literature reviews and empirical examples have both indicated that IRBs tend to follow a fixed checklist, and therefore, misread the qualitative research design, seek meaningless clarifications, and ultimately delay the start of research. IRBs consist of reviewers who may be of any rank in any field and thus may know little about qualitative social science research. In terms of successfully carrying out qualitative research, the aspects of research that IRBs view as problematic may not coincide with what a faculty member views as problematic. IRBs tend to assume that they are better trained to evaluate qualitative research and manage qualitative data than faculty themselves. Faculty members are accountable for their academic fields, the standards of qualitative inquiry, colleagues, and the public. As professionals, they must base their research on the best practices of qualitative inquiry, which are subject to scrutiny by their peers in order to maintain research quality. Generally, faculty do not intentionally cut corners in qualitative research and make errors that can be fixed only by IRBs.

The main mechanism used to minimize risk to human subjects is the use of informed consent. However, the basis of informed consent is rooted in the philosophy of rights to information. Essentially, through subjects' informed consent, IRBs are assigning full liability to participants for damages suffered by them during the research process. Realistically, this does not protect human subjects. However it does protect the institutions from possible litigation. In qualitative research, human subjects are protected when the faculty treats them ethically. Such ethical notions are a part of professional discretion and represent a key part of what it means to be a professional.

IRBs are not Functioning Constructively

It can be concluded that IRBs play a significant role in biomedical and

behavioral research. However, in terms of the social sciences employing qualitative inquiry, this research has shown that IRBs are not functioning constructively. IRBs have the authority to approve research proposals without which social science faculty cannot engage in qualitative fieldwork. However, faculty members continue to enjoy professional autonomy in their research. This leads to interpersonal issues. Faculty perceptions of the fairness of IRBs are not only driven by outcomes, but also by the procedures used in allocation of outcomes. Faculty eventually receive approval by IRBs on various proposals, but only after a lengthy, unreasonable, and frustrating process. The end result indicates that qualitative social-science research is complicated by the IRB's conflicting modes of operation. This impacts the faculty engaged in the research as well.

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