Risk-Aversion or Ethical Responsibility? Towards a New Research Ethics Paradigm

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Abstract

Ethics seems to be of increasing concern for researchers in Higher Education Institutes and funding bodies demand ever more transparent and robust ethics procedures. While we agree that an ethical approach to fieldwork in religion is critical, we take issue with the approach that ethics committees and reviews adopt in assessing the ethicality of proposed research projects. We identify that the approach to research ethics is informed by consequentialism – the consequences of actions, and Kantianism – the idea of duty. These two ethical paradigms are amenable to the prevailing audit culture of HE. We argue that these ethical paradigms, while might be apposite for bio-medical research, are not appropriate for fieldwork in religion. However, because ethics should be a crucial consideration for all research, it is necessary to identify a different approach to ethical issues arising in ethnographic research. We suggest that a virtue ethics approach – concerned with character – is much more consistent with the situated, relational and ongoing nature of ethnographic research.

Introduction.

Ethics is taken increasingly seriously in the Higher Education (HE) sector. All universities now require researchers to acquire ethical approval before undertaking any primary research that involves human participation. Both Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and funding bodies such as the Research Council UK (RSUK) have ethical guidelines and/or codes of conduct. All research that involves any form of human (or animal) participation now must gain ethical approval before any research can begin. We address two issues in this paper: first, we consider the main drivers for the increasing concern with research ethics; and second the philosophical underpinnings for research ethics. We identify two philosophical underpinnings to the current approach to ethics. The first, consequentialism, focuses on the consequences of actions. The second, derived from the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), emphasises the idea of duty and usually involves a claim that there are absolute ethical injunctions that are not determined by either intent or consequences. We conclude by suggesting that these ethical paradigms are problematic for fieldwork in religion. We advocate adopting a virtue ethics approach when considering the ethical issues of ethnographic research in religion. Rather than focusing on either duty to abstract moral

laws or the consequences of action, virtue ethics focuses instead on the character of the moral agent, and on those virtues deemed appropriate to moral agency.

Before addressing these issues, it is important to state – it might even be considered an ethical imperative to do so – that one of the co-authors has been Chair of the Faculty of Arts Ethics Committee and a member of the University Ethics Committee at the University of Wolverhampton since 2012. This paper is based on the experiences of being both an active ethnographic researcher as well as chairing the Faculty Ethics Committee. In addition, we interviewed three active post-doctoral researchers who are located in humanities and social sciences, and one researcher in health studies at the University of Wolverhampton.

In recent years there has been a move towards creating a consistent ethics policy across our University and increasing level of detail is required for ethical reviews of proposed research. For example, there are heightened concerns about data security and more specific instructions on the protocols for recruiting research participants. All of these details now demanded for ethical approval are determined at the University level. However, the University's ethical ethos and procedures are themselves embedded in the ethical context of the HE sector and wider cultural understandings of ethics.

Heidi Armbruster and Anna Lærke (2008: 2) observe that 'concerns with research ethics have clearly intensified over recent years, in large part as a symptom of audit cultures'. We argue that the imperative of the audit culture entails that consequentialist and Kantian perspectives are the prevailing paradigms in assessing the ethical aspects of research in the UK HE sector. Consequentialism assumes that weighing the consequences of our actions ought to be of prior ethical concern, whereas Kantianism assumes a duty to the 'Moral Law' incumbent upon any rational creature, be they human or alien. Part of the attraction of these two dominant theories of ethics has been the idea that they could be 'codified', thereby holding out the possibility of both practical applicability and auditability. Practical applicability, because codification involves the derivation of universal rules, or 'codes of conduct' which adherents of either theory could follow. The classic consequentialist version of such a rule is, of course, the utilitarian 'Greatest Happiness Principle' [GHP] which exhorts us to 'act so as to maximize the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. The Kantian

version, on the other hand, entails identifying the rules (codes, laws) adherence to which constitutes moral behaviour. (These rules traditionally take the form of categorical imperatives – 'Always tell the truth – rather than hypothetical imperatives – 'Only tell the truth when it is expedient to do so'). The possibility of auditing these theories follows from the codification process itself. This is very clear in the case of utilitarianism's GHP which invites moral agents to compare the amount of happiness (or pleasure, or 'good' etc.) which may result from alternative courses of action (leaving aside the complex practicalities – amply illustrated by Jeremy Bentham's 'felicific calculus' – of actually carrying out such calculations).

The hegemony of consequentialism and Kantianism is reinforced by a reliance on the bio-medical model of ethics. The bio-medical ethical model is, rightly, concerned with risk-aversion and attempting to mitigate harm and maximise benefits. We consider whether this approach is suitable for ethnographic fieldwork generally, and for fieldwork in religion in particular. Both the demand for more details in ethics reviews in HE institutions and a consequentialist/ Kantian approach to ethics is commensurate with the risk-averse audit culture of universities in the UK. However, neither the consequentialist approach nor a Kantian perspective, determined by the ethical concerns of medical research, are apposite paradigms for considering the ethics of ethnographic fieldwork in religion. As the human geographers Sarah Dyer and David Demeritt observe (2008: 54), 'we stand in a different relationship to our research participants than doctors do'. Dyer and Demeritt have identified the salient point that ethics is primarily a relational concept, and we suggest that a virtue ethics approach is a more useful way of thinking about relationships between the ethnographer and research participants who are members of faith communities. The objectivist, impersonal nature of consequentialism and Kantianism is challenged by virtue ethics. This is not to say that virtue ethics is, by contrast, subjectivist; it is to say that it takes the situated nature of human existence seriously in a way that neither consequentialism nor Kantianism can do, and this situated and contextual nature of human relationships must be taken into account when undertaking ethnographic research into religion.

What drives the ethics agenda?

HE in both its main activities – teaching and research – is increasingly shaped, as with aspects of the wider society, by an audit culture. This audit culture is derived from a neoliberal agenda which has informed 'an imperative felt by higher education institutions and governments to find ways of measuring and benchmarking research quality' (Besley 2006: 815). This audit culture has a number of aspects. Firstly, it is underpinned by a positivist approach to research, and this is therefore not appropriate for ethnographic research on religious communities which, in the vast majority of cases, is shaped by an interpretivist approach. Most researchers who undertake fieldwork in religion are informed by what Max Weber termed *verstehen,* which is often translated as understanding. Weber (1978: 9–10) argued that 'understanding involves the interpretive grasp of the meaning' of the context, and that 'the processes of action which seem to an observer to be the same or similar may fit into exceedingly various complexes of motive in the case of the actual actor'. In other words, understanding entails a grasp of the subjective meaning of actions, and this cannot easily be audited.

The audit culture, informed by a positivist outlook, assumes a uniform ethical culture practice and process, which it then seeks to promote a 'one-size-fits-all' strategy. However, at the University of Wolverhampton we have four Faculties - Arts; Social Sciences; Science and Engineering; Education, Health and Wellbeing. Are the ethical issues of someone researching in health and education the same as a researcher in humanities or the social sciences? It is of note that all three interviewees in the humanities and social sciences tended to be sceptical about the 'one-size-fits-all' policy. So for example several of our interviewees indicated that 'there are clear differences between the science disciplines and the social science disciplines' (personal interview 01/06/17).

We suggest that the ethical issues and dilemmas for fieldwork, and particularly ethnographical research of religious communities, are not necessarily the same as those researching in engineering, health or education. Not only is there no uniform approach across academic disciplines, but also there is no consistent ethical approach within the academic study of religion. This is not to say that religious studies researchers should abandon ethical considerations, but we argue that a different way of thinking about research needs to be considered for fieldwork in religion. We specifically argue for a virtue

ethics approach to researching religious communities. However, before detailing the virtue ethics approach, we will identify the philosophical paradigms that we perceive as underpinning the 'one-size- fits-all' agenda and informs most, if not all, ethical guidelines in Higher Education Institutes.

As we have observed, consequentialist and Kantian approaches to ethics underpin and drive the ethical agenda in research in the UK. For example, the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) ethical guidelines suggest that: 'Research should aim to maximize benefit for individuals and society and minimize risk and harm' – clearly a consequentialist idea, whilst later on there is the Kantian exhortation to respect 'rights and dignity of individuals and groups'. This consequentialist approach is indicated by our interviewee in health studies who suggests:

> If you are coming with a proposal, trying to think of all the things that could possibly go wrong. The question is – 'is it quite likely to go wrong, is it almost never going to go wrong?' Then you sort of measure what the consequences of going wrong will be. (personal interview 05/06/17)

While, this is a perfectly laudable aspiration for research that involves physical interventions, we question if 'measuring consequences' is the right philosophical approach to ethnographic fieldwork in religion. While, of course things can go wrong in all research, the ethical challenges in ethnographic research are different to those encountered in bio-medical research. For example, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2000) records how when she returned after 20 years to the village in Ireland where she did her fieldwork for her prize winning book *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics,* she was forced to leave by the irate villagers. Scheper-Hughes (2000: 119) reports one of the villagers accusing her: 'Admit it. You wrote a book to please yourself at our expense. *You ran us down girl, you ran us down.*' The ire of the villagers was caused by what they perceived as being an unfair representation of their lives in the published monograph.

Ethical guidelines

All Higher Education Institutes now have ethics policies, guidelines and processes to review the ethical aspects of proposed research. Funding bodies, such as the UK Research Council, are increasingly demanding a transparent ethical review process as well as having their own ethical guidelines. For the purposes of this paper we will look briefly at the Ethical Guidelines at the University of Wolverhampton and the primary source for these guidelines – the United Kingdom Research Integrity Office (UKRIO). It would be wrong to assume that the Ethics Guidelines are exclusively informed by a consequentialist approach. For example, The University's web pages on ethics suggest that ethics is concerned with 'amongst other aspects: what kinds of lives we should lead' and 'what qualities of character we should develop'. These concerns suggest a virtue ethics approach. However, as it is almost impossible to audit 'kinds of life' and 'character', consequentialist and Kantian approaches, which are more amenable to calculation, dominate the ethical ethos and ethical guidelines in HE. A Kantian approach to ethics is apparent in the University of Wolverhampton guidelines with statements like 'what actions are right and wrong'. A consequentialist paradigm is apparent in phrases in the ethical guidelines such as: 'Ethics as a subject area traditionally covers topics such as the overall harms and benefits of research' (University of Wolverhampton 2017). This agenda of ensuring potential benefits of research raises a number of problematic issues. Even when undertaking physical intervention in health research, harms and benefits are not straight forward to calculate. When considering harm, the researcher in health studies indicated that it is problematic to assess the value of extending life in relationship to the quality of life. In some instances, the participant's evaluation – say a faint chance of extending their life – will be different to that of the researcher who is aware of the low possibility of extending life and the possible harmful effects of the experimental treatment (personal interview 05/06/17).

Furthermore, researchers are obliged to complete ethics forms and obtain ethical approval prior to entering the field. Consequently, we have to try and calculate this benefit/harm ratio before carrying out any research. Joan Cassell (1982, cited in Israel and Hay 2006: 106) observes:

>   Cataloguing potential harms and weighing them against benefits before research

is carried out becomes primarily an exercise in creativity, with little applicability to the real ethical difficulties that may emerge in research.

This imperative to anticipate consequences tends to encourage a perception that ethics is a one-off procedure, rather than an ongoing aspect of research.

When considering benefits, the question arises for whose benefits is research? Leaving aside the obvious benefits to the researchers themselves – for example that good research will benefit the researcher's career and academic reputation – benefits can broadly be classified in terms of either societal beneficence or specific beneficence.

Societal beneficence manifests in the imperative to demonstrate impact in research. Mark Israel (2015:2) indicates that ethical research 'offers the potential to increase the sum of good in the world'. This suggests that societal beneficence implies a utilitarian approach to research ethics. Benefits to society as a whole are often very difficult to establish, even within medical and scientific research. What benefits the wider society could be detrimental to particular individuals and/or groups. One of the main criticisms of a simplistic form of consequentialism is that the benefits for the many may well harm the few. This has sometimes been referred to as the tyranny of the majority and it became a serious consideration when some of the medical experiments performed by the Nazi regime came to light. However, we have come a long way from condoning torture in the name of scientific knowledge. Consequently, ethical guidelines always refer to individuals. For example, the University of Wolverhampton's ethics guidelines indicate that 'researchers should ensure the dignity, rights, safety and wellbeing of all involved in research and avoid unreasonable risk or harm to research subjects'. It is of note that the guidelines refer to research subjects, suggesting a lack of agency to the individuals and a relationship of power between researcher and researched. The current preferred signifier is research participant, suggesting a more equal relationship between researcher and researched, and that individuals are actively involved in the research process, and are not merely passive objects of intellectual scrutiny.

As well as considering societal beneficence research ethics considers specific beneficence –

or the benefits that one's research brings to specific individuals or groups. There are a range of specific groups and individuals that might be considered as potential beneficiaries of research, these include: the particular higher education institute of the researcher, the academic discipline(s) and of course research participants themselves. However, when one looks at ethical guidelines there is little to suggest that research should benefit participants. Although there are some types of research, such as action research, that aspire to bring positive change to the specific constituency being studied, most research aims to add to the extant body of knowledge and understanding of a particular topic, so that the benefits are rather more diffuse.

Researchers can bring unintended consequences for the group or individual being researched. These consequences might be beneficial. For example, academic publications about a specific group may legitimize that group, and give that group a greater public profile. This might possibly bring benefits to certain groups, for example extreme right wing groups that hold an Islamaphobic ideology, that the researcher might not wish to advantage in any way. However, in the context of auditing consequences, researchers are more impelled to consider potential harms, hence the imperatives for informed consent and data security, which are considered to be crucial to protecting research participants. In the information about informed consent the University of Wolverhampton's ethics web pages suggest that researchers must 'consider if there is any possibility of either physical or psychological distress', when planning their research.

The University of Wolverhampton's policy on research ethics, suggests a list of seven principles that should guide research: excellence; honest; integrity; cooperation; accountability; training and skills; and care, safety and respect. These principles are primarily derived from UKRIO an independent charity established in 2006 to 'Promote the good governance, management and conduct of academic, scientific and medical research' (UKRIO 2017). While this is not the place to unpack these principles in any great detail, there are two important points to consider. Firstly – the introduction states that 'these Principles aim to encourage all involved in research to consider the wider consequences of their work' (UKRIO 2017). Again, this emphasizes a consequentialist approach to research. Secondly, the focus is more on the nature of the academic endeavour, rather than on moral concern for

others. For example, the principle of excellence indicates that 'researchers should strive for excellence when conducting research and aim to produce and disseminate work of the highest quality'. Under the heading 'honesty' researchers are advised to 'do their utmost to ensure the accuracy of data and results, acknowledge the contributions of others, and neither engage in misconduct nor conceal it' (UKRIO 2017).

Here we can distinguish between what might be identified as research conduct – which although it has an ethical dimension, is not the same as research ethics. The term integrity is key here. While the UKRIO does not ignore moral concern for others, the focus is on the conduct of the research process – for example not fabricating data. The reference to excellence in the UKRIO's and the University of Wolverhampton's list of principles alludes to another issue, namely what is the relationship between ethics and methodology. Ethics is of course primarily, although not exclusively about methodology. However, methodology – the how of research – is not co-extensive with ethics. This raises a dilemma for ethics committees – namely at what point should we comment on researcher's methodology that is not say directly dishonest etc. The principles of excellence, integrity and accountability suggest that ethics is as much concerned with the reputation of the University as it is with the moral welfare of research participants. Incompetently designed research, for example a poorly composed questionnaire, which is not designed in a way that achieves research objectives, could be considered an ethical issue, as it reflects badly on the University, and could be construed as wasting the time of research participants.

It is no coincidence that out of the 13 members of the advisory panel of the UKRIO five have a background in medicine and health studies. Unsurprisingly, the bio-medical model is dominant in the UKRIO's principles. The bio-ethical model of research ethics, the focus on consequences and the imperative of the audit culture gives rise to two major issues when considering the nature of ethnographic fieldwork. First, it suggests that ethics is a sort of one-off event. Once the researcher has had their ethical application audited by the committee this encourages the idea that there is no further requirement to consider ethical issues. It is apparent that many researchers at all levels – from undergraduate to post-doctoral – consider the demand for ethical approval as an obstacle to negotiate at the beginning of research rather than something that should be reflected upon throughout the

research process. Second, despite the change of terminology from research subjects to research participants, it tends to encourage a perception of individuals as objects of research.

While we have some issues with the ways in which the bio-ethics drives the ethical agenda, we do agree with the importance of a process of ethical scrutiny. We suggest this more from the perspective of having applied for ethics approval, than from the point of view of being the Chair of the Ethics Committee. Certainly our experiences of requesting ethics approval for our own research has made us reflect on what we hoped to achieve in our fieldwork and how we went about that fieldwork. In other words, consideration of ethical issues should not be simply seen as a one-off obstacle to research, but an ongoing aspect of research that contributes, not only to the usual ethics issues – lack of harm, confidentiality, informed consent and so on, but is integral to the development of becoming reflexive researchers. We agree with Marlene De-Laine (2000: 17) that the bio-ethic model underpinned by a consequentialist approach to ethics tend to focus on 'what we do to others, and tends to neglect the wider moral and social responsibility of *simply being a researcher*'.

A new paradigm – becoming a virtuous researcher

Considering being a researcher suggests that one enters into a particular style of moral relationships with others, and this is particularly significant for ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnographic relationships should, as De Laine (2000: 17) suggests, be characterized by the researcher 'who wants to be *with* rather than *look at* the other'. This imperative 'to be with' rather than simply 'look at' research participants requires researchers to be 'morally involved, self-aware, self-reflexive' (De Laine 2000: 28). What De Laine fails to draw out in her otherwise excellent book, is the philosophical approach that should underpin the call for the morally involved, self-aware and reflexive researcher. It is here that we believe a consideration of virtue ethics can come into play.

Rather than seeking to root ethics in abstract, unhistorical rationality, virtue ethics begins with situated human beings and asks what virtues are required for human flourishing in the circumstances in which they find themselves. The idea of 'virtue', of course, is not a simple

one. There are, for example, many potential virtues we might admire – honesty, integrity, bravery, fairness, to name but a few. What is more, time and place may impact upon which virtues we think admirable. As MacIntyre points out, Homeric Greece admired the martial virtues, whilst for Aristotle the Athenian gentleman is the epitome of the virtuous man. For Aquinas, the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity are paramount, whilst for Benjamin Franklin the salient virtues included cleanliness, frugality, and industry (MacIntyre, 2007: 182-183).

What all these different accounts of virtue have in common, however, is that they represent traits of character formed in a complex relationship with one's society, community, family, religion, and so on. Thus, for virtue ethicists, morality is always grounded in a particular time and place, and character is formed, not in the abstract, but in the interaction between what MacIntyre (2007:187) calls the 'narrative order of a single life' and the wider 'moral traditions' in which the self is located. Character is therefore at one and the same time a project of self-understanding, and of seeking to understand one's place in the world. It is, MacIntyre (2007: 219) says, 'a quest' rather than a given. As Charles Taylor, (1989: 47) echoing MacIntyre, puts it: human existence 'can never be exhausted for us by what we *are*, because we are always also changing and *becoming*'. This, of course, is no less the case in our role as researchers.

The attentiveness to one's self and its environment, and openness to change and development this entails, can also be seen in terms of a key Aristotelian virtue: *phronesis*, which has been translated variously as 'practical wisdom', 'practical rationality' or 'practical judgement'. Before we turn to an account of phronesis as a way of approaching research, we should say a little more about the idea of virtue itself.

We can, of course, simply list virtues – honesty, integrity and so on – though which, if any, are to be considered morally salient requires more than this. After all, virtues may conflict – if frugality is a virtue (as it is for Franklin) then it might conflict with liberality (one of Aristotle's key virtues). We could, of course, ask more generally 'what is virtue?' to which the response is often along the lines that virtues 'are not only character traits but excellences of character' (Hursthouse, 2002: 12). The presence of the idea of 'excellence' here is intended to convey a striving, not for perfection (would we even know what that is?)

but for the 'right action', which is to say, the ethically appropriate action. The Dickens character Mrs Jellyby from *Bleak House* is a philanthropist who busies herself setting up a mission to help the poor children of Africa. Yet so busy is she in pursuing this goal that she neglects her own children. She is generous, we might say, but generous *to a fault* (Hursthouse, 2002: 13). In other words, the mechanical implementation of the virtues is not the mark of a truly virtuous person. The truly virtuous person is one who displays phronesis.

Hursthouse (2016, online) describes phronesis as a form of 'situational appreciation' defined as 'the capacity to recognize, in any particular situation, those features of it that are morally salient'. But this capacity does not spring fully-formed from the rational centres of the brain: it is rather a capacity that must be learned, developed and honed in actual contexts facing real issues (which, of course, is one of the reasons we do not generally treat young children as fully competent moral agents since they have yet to develop the capacity). This capacity for judgement, as Ess acknowledges, 'is one that is capable of learning from its mistakes' (Ess 2009: 208). Phronesis is therefore consistent with an interpretivist approach to research, as both acknowledge the contingent, contextual and situated nature of meaning.

It would also be a mistake to think that, once one has learned how to exercise the capacity, then one has achieved virtue. This is because the sheer complexity of the actual situations in which we find ourselves called upon to make ethical decisions precludes the simple invocation of a previously learned mode of action. Thus, virtue ethics acknowledges the requirement for a 'mindset' rather than a codified set of principles. A mindset, moreover, that requires 'the wholehearted acceptance of a distinctive range of considerations as reasons for action' (Hursthouse: 2016) rather than simply the maximization of happiness, or duty to an abstract moral law. The ability to learn from one's mistakes means that the cultivation of the capacity for ethical judgement 'is an on-going task' (Ess 2009: 209).

It should be obvious by now that virtue ethics is not auditable in the sense which current ethical thinking around research demands. As the knowledge and experience of the researcher – and of the research community – grows, so the possible range of responses

to the subject of research develops, too. The current research ethics culture assumes a determinate set of identifiable risks, in advance of the research itself. But immersion in any religious community one is researching may throw up unanticipated issues and problems, which must be faced no matter how much one may have pondered these possibilities in advance. Consequently, the assumptions which virtue ethicists make concerning the nature of moral thinking accord much better with the actual practices of social science research in general, and religious studies ethnography in particular, than do those of either consequentialism, or Kantianism.

Reflections on fieldwork.

Ethnographic research of religious communities is about establishing and maintaining relationships, and consequently ethics must be integrated throughout the research process. Ethics must therefore be construed as an ongoing process and not a one-off procedure, and this is not readily recognized by the positivist bio-medical model with its emphasis on consequences, duty and risk-aversity, and which can have no real understanding of the nature and ethical challenges of ethnographic fieldwork. However, a virtue ethics approach that fosters phronesis, is more compatible with Max Weber's concept of *verstehen* and is much more likely to inculcate an understanding of the ongoing and contextual nature of ethics. It is apparent from our interviewees that the current research ethics procedures and principles miss two significant aspects of the actual experience of conducting ethnographic research: the impact on the researchers themselves, and the complexities of the communities, practices or ways of life which are the object of research. As we shall see, it is in navigating these complexities that the limitations of the risk-averse model of research ethics, favoured by the audit culture, become most apparent. It is also, as we shall argue, where the idea of phronesis is potentially of greatest value.

As one of our interviewees succinctly put it when discussing the dominant framework for auditing ethics in research: "there is the kind of underlying assumption that research ethics consists only of people we research" (personal interview 05/06/17). This is not to deny that conducting research may bring harm to those who comprise the focus of the research, whether individuals, groups or communities. Nor is it to deny the importance of seeking to

minimize such harms, insofar as they can be anticipated. But to exclude the researcher from the scope of harm is to fail to see research holistically. One of our interviewees, for example, described the experience of interviewing a group of emotionally traumatised young men. An experienced researcher, with many previous interviews under his belt, he nevertheless found himself deeply affected by the revelations of his interviewees. As he reported: "when I actually started this research I was just so completely unprepared for this that it affected me quite significantly" (personal interview 05/06/17).

That he did not anticipate that he too would experience emotional trauma as a result of their harrowing revelations is not a failure on his part to correctly anticipate the risks, as the audit model might imply. Even if, in broad terms, the nature of those revelations could have been anticipated in advance of the interviews, one might still not be in a position to anticipate one's own reaction to that content. This, of course, is to recognize that researchers who find themselves in situations for which there is no obvious precedent, and for which they must think on their feet, exemplify the process of phronesis. Rather than see it as a failure on the part of this researcher to anticipate the consequences of conducting these interviews, it is rather an example in which the researcher, encountering a unique set of circumstances, both learns something about his own reactions, and strives to develop strategies for coping with the unexpected. Phronesis is therefore as much about self-knowledge as it is about acquiring knowledge of others.

Any researcher attempting to cross boundaries between one religion and another, or between specific religions and the wider communities in which they exist, or even within religious communities where gender or caste barriers might exist, may find it difficult to anticipate the nature of the risks – to the religion as a whole, or to groups, castes or individual members within that religion – of that research. This is especially difficult if one is also an insider, a member of the religion one is seeking to research. One of our interviewees described these difficulties thus:

> The first time I went to do research I was accused of being a spy. It took me, I'd probably say it took me a good few years actually to get to the level where I am now, where I can walk into a Gurdwara, a *mandir*, a Ravidas place of worship, and they actually respect me because they know the level of research I'm doing. But that didn't happen overnight. It's a very, very long process. [personal interview 1/06/2017]

The fact that this is a 'very, very long process' indicates why the risk-averse, audit-driven approach, with its assumption that risks can be clearly identified in advance, is so problematic for ethnographic research. Much is at stake in such research – not only for those specific individuals who are the object of such research, but also for the communities of which they are members and for the researcher herself – and it is not by any means always clear where the risks may lie. Navigating this terrain is actually to exercise phronesis.

Conclusion

While virtues cannot be audited in the same way as consequences and duties. It is clear that there is no likelihood that the hegemony of consequentialism and Kantian ethics will disappear soon – and it likely that in this risk averse context ethics panels will continue to audit applications for ethical approval based on perceived balance between risks and benefits. Nonetheless, we conclude that a virtue ethics approach to research is more consistent with the relational, situated, complex and changing nature of fieldwork in religion. We do not envisage this paper as offering any definite answers – as that in many ways in antithetical to the concept of phronesis and the approach that we are advocating. However, we do hope that this paper will begin an ongoing conversation about the nature of ethics, which will foster not only better relationships in the field, but also better research.

We end with positing three broad interrelated questions to act as catalysts for this conversation. First, what are the virtues that are needed to develop ethical research? This must come with the proviso that virtues are not like a qualification, but must be understood as a set of complex interactions between the virtue *per se,* the character of the researcher and the context of the research. Second, how can ethics committees ensure ethical research, if virtue ethics is more concerned with character and dispositions than principles that can be audited? Third, how do we develop phronesis as researchers? One of the ways in which we might think about this depends on different perceptions of the scope of ethics. It often seems, all too frequently from the perspective of the audit culture, that ethical considerations are 'bolt-on' elements of the research process. This attitude is, we believe, encouraged by the bio-medical research committee model which takes the auditability of risk as its primary concern. But as one of our respondees noted, in what might be described as classic Aristotelian terms, ethics is not solely about how one plans and executes a piece of

research, but is instead concerned with 'how you live your life' (personal interview 01/06/17). To recognize this is also to recognize that, far from being a superficial, 'bolt-on' aspect of designing a research project, ethics 'goes all the way down' (Hursthouse, 2016: online). That is to say, a disposition towards the virtues – whatever these virtues may be – is something that pervades one's character from top to bottom.

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