Social Movements and Resistance Studies in Neoliberal Times

Massimiliana Urbano

Te Whare Wānanga Otāgo University of Otago

Abstract

This article looks at the issues that the study of resistance and social movements raises to applied normative ethics in the context of neoliberal academia. In particular, by focusing on the function of ethics review committees, the article discusses how current ethics guidelines can constitute possible methodological impediments for the practice of participatory action research. Furthermore, the article reflects on the current institutional principlist approach to ethics and how this has a potential to silence socially engaged research. The article goes further to argue that, with the shift of tertiary education from public good to a corporate service, ethics committees function as bodies that contribute to implement neoliberal governmentalising and individualising techniques among academics. Neoliberal discourses have, indeed, permeated academic institutions with potentially serious consequences for the study of resistance and social movements.

Introduction

On February 3, 2016, the body of Giulio Regeni was found in a ditch alongside the highway between Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt. His body showed signs of extreme torture: numerous fractured bones, stab wounds, burns and a broken neck that ultimately caused his death. Giulio was an Italian PhD student at the University of Cambridge researching independent trade unionism in Egypt, where he was conducting his fieldwork when he was allegedly kidnapped and killed. This tragic event has sparked numerous discussions in the academic circles around issues of safety and risks for researchers in the field, and around neoliberal discourses of risk assessment, responsibility and protection.

In this piece, I will address the critical aspect of research ethics for

the study of resistance and social movements in the context of neoliberal academia. In particular, I argue that while good research practice is an important aspect of our work and every researcher has a duty to ensure participants' safety, there is a risk that the ethics guidelines and procedures implemented by universities to approve or reject ethnographic research projects have the potential to act as a subtle tool for censoring critical thinking and socially engaged research. In particular, I argue that this risk is aggravated by the conditions of labour and of knowledge production of the neoliberal academy. In this article, I will highlight the function and role ethics committees play within such context.

In the following pages, I will first briefly outline how ethics review boards have been established and the challenges that they pose to social science research. Then, I will draw on the existing literature that problematises the role of ethics guidelines and ethics committees in relation to ethnographic research and, specifically, participatory action research. To conclude, I will comment on the possible implications of research ethics institutional procedures for the study of resistance and social movements practices in the context of neoliberal academia.

Background: research ethics and social sciences

The situational context in which contemporary understanding of ethics has developed is to be traced back to the establishment of the Nuremberg Code (1947) developed after the Nuremberg trials after the Second World War, followed by the World Health Organisation's *Declaration of Helsinki* (1964), the *Belmont Report* (1979) and the most recent *International Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research* Involving Human Subject (1982; 1993; 2002) (Israel & Hay, 2006). These four major ethical statements emerged from the need to regulate specific disciplinary areas, that is, biomedical and behavioural research involving human subjects. The fundamental principles elaborated in these reports – respect for persons, beneficence, justice – have been incorporated by most countries' institutions and universities in the elaboration of ethical frameworks for the regulation of scientific and biomedical research as well as the evaluation of social sciences research practice. However, social scientists have often taken issue with the approach that ethics committees employ for the assessment of their research projects, arguing that these

regulations can constrain their work and limit the possibility to acquire valuable information for our research (Dingwall, 2008; Hammersley, 2009).

There is wide consensus within the social sciences research community that the ethical frameworks adopted by universities are ill-equipped to evaluate projects that employ research methods that differ from traditional ones (Wiles, 2013). This problem often leaves social researchers frustrated in their dealing with ethics committees while we still strive to adopt ethical behaviours for conducting our researches. In fact, most research ethics committees adopt a principlist approach to ethics, that is, they draw on specific principles in evaluating applications for ethical approval such as people's autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice (Wiles, 2013, p. 15). While such principles are undoubtedly noble and indeed constitute an example of good research practice they may, as Rose Wiles points out, "conflict with each other, in which case it is necessary to make a case for which one is chosen" (2013, p. 15). Furthermore, they may constitute a methodological impediment as, for instance, can be the case with the issuance of informed consent. In my fieldwork, I have found that the moment of asking the participants to sign the informed consent form has, in many cases, made participants uncomfortable and suspicious. Many social scientists researching resistance and activism have faced this problem, and this is an issue to seriously address as it can compromise the possibility to establish relations of collaboration with participants.

The problem seems to lie in the tension emerging from applying a principlist model of ethics based on universal ethical principles – principles which, most importantly, have been elaborated to regulate disciplines other than social sciences – to the particularity of situational research.[1] While institutional ethical guidelines need necessarily be very general as they provide a model for assessing research projects, I argue that these should not be regarded as sufficient to ultimately evaluate the feasibility of a study. Indeed, like every other model, the particular ethical framework adopted by university ethics committees can be regarded

[1] For a comprehensive account of other approaches to ethics see Israel, M. & Hay, I. (2006). Research Ethics for Social Scientists. London, UK: Sage Publications.

as having limitations, too. In striving to be as comprehensive and communicable as possible, models usually fall short of including details of specific cases; they approximate and may even lose accuracy. I argue that because research ethics committees have the power to determine which research projects can be carried out and which cannot, with considerable impact on the type of knowledge that is eventually divulged, the particularity of each case requires significant attention. General ethical guidelines may be considered as basic starting points for the evaluation of research projects, but a detailed inquiry into the nature of the specific research under assessment may contribute to better-informed decisions by ethics committees. In this regard, I am not arguing for more specific and detailed rules, which could pose a even greater risk for the study of resistance; rather, a better understanding of the research project under consideration could allow for a more flexible application of the general guidelines. In closing, I argue that research ethics committees may need to rethink their approach toward ethical guidelines and consider them not just as boxes to tick off when assessing research projects, but as flexible principles that can adapt to the specific conditions of situational research. I will further explain this aspect in the next section in relation to the ethical issues raised by the use of participatory action research methods and approaches.

Research Ethics, Participatory Action Research and Resistance Studies

As mentioned above, this section will address the issue of seeking ethical approval for research projects investigating the phenomena of resistance through participatory action research methods within the current institutional ethical framework outlined above. In particular, it will discuss the problematics that often emerge when social researchers using this type of alternative research methods submit their application to the scrutiny of research ethics committees.

The origins of Participatory Action Research (PAR) can be traced back to the 1940s, when Kurt Lewin (1946) coined the term "action research" to describe a research approach that emphasises the importance of practical intervention and action in the host community, which also establishes the guidelines for conducting the research itself. Since then,

there has been a proliferation in the use of participatory action research methods (see e.g. Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007,). PAR approaches and methods can be defined as tentative and have, throughout time, raised numerous challenges to the traditional research establishment and traditional research methods, as well as to the normative understanding of research ethics. In fact, the core principles of PAR approaches challenge mainstream epistemological accounts in research tradition that assume that an objective reality exists 'out there' and needs be discovered, analysed and measured by qualified researchers. PAR further attempts to contribute to the broader challenge of "liberal social and political theories and theories of scientific knowledge [assumptions] that the world is composed of individuals… awaiting or inviting representation" (Barad, 2007, p. 46). PAR approaches, instead, seek to understand the complexity of relations that constitute the field under investigation and, particularly, they advocate for the need to acknowledge the relational nature of knowledge production. Participatory action researchers have a commitment to collaborative research practice and knowledge production, which means that we problematise the relationship between researcher and participants as interpreted in traditional research. The research effort becomes a collaborative enterprise at all stages, which acknowledges and emphasises that multiple interpretations of a single phenomenon are possible by both researchers and participants (Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007, p. 13). To do so, participatory action researchers often utilise qualitative methods that are interested in conveying the *messiness* of the experiential and in problematising positivist ideas of *objective methods* (see Law, 2004).

These methods can be conceived as resistant. In advocating for a relational approach to knowledge production that challenges the idea of expertise, these resistant methods contribute to the critical task of resisting and challenging positivist normative accounts of social phenomena. "Stripping the experts" of the academic establishment, in Brian Martin's words, is part of the broader commitment to critical and socially engaged research that hopes to progressively shift policies and social practices (1991, p. 6).

In problematising the very epistemological underpinning of current research practice, PAR necessarily questions the principles that regulate

its ethical understanding, too. In fact, PAR ethics is at odds with current applied normative ethics. At the core of this clash there is a different interpretation of the main principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice that are currently interpreted in a limited way (Manzo & Brightbill, 2007, p. 35). In fact, traditional models of ethics tend to assume that the research process is static and that the relation between researcher and participants is hierarchical. These ignore that participants, in fact, play an active role in the co-production of knowledge, and that, as a result of this collaboration, power relations between the researcher and the participants are continuously re-designed throughout the research process (see Gergen & Gergen, 2000). In this way, ethics committees focus mostly on protecting participants from potentially harmful research by anticipating possible risks that may arise in the research process. In doing so, this approach may deny participants agency, and requires that the design and the conduction of the research be outlined in advance by the "experts". This is difficult to achieve for participatory action researchers who, as explained above, are committed to a relational approach to research and to knowledge production that involves research participants as active agents in the design and conduction of the research itself. It can be argued, then, that PAR demands a broader interpretation of current normative ethical principles. As Manzo and Brightbill have suggested, this alternative view of ethics is based on respecting people by acknowledging them as competent actors who actively and voluntarily contribute to the research process, and autonomously express their worldview that is as well considered of great value for the project (2007, p. 36-39). At the same time, what is formulated as principles of beneficence and simplistically interpreted as "doing no harm" is also considered insufficient for a participatory approach. The principle of beneficence is to be understood in the broader framework of PAR approaches that imply a commitment to take action on the social issues that are investigated. Only in this way can participatory action researchers hope to ensure justice for their participants, that is, by facilitating their self-representations and by sharing with them a commitment to social justice and resistance.

To conclude, I return to the central argument of this article that currently applied normative ethics can be regarded as a regulatory

framework that critically limits the possibility to conduct socially engaged research. In this section, I have outlined how an ethical approach that fails to incorporate a broader understanding of research practice, as elaborated by PAR approaches, is problematic for the study of resistance and social movements that is conducted with these methods. However, this is not the only way that ethics committees can potentially silence socially engaged research, as I will explain in the next section.

Neoliberalism, resistance studies and the changing role of tertiary education

As argued previously in this paper, good research practice is an important aspect of our work and every researcher has a duty to ensure participants' safety. However, I have also explained how the current definition of ethics is disputable, and how social scientists have questioned the utility of ethics boards for decades and challenged them on several grounds. In this article, I have specifically looked at the critique that participatory action researchers have elaborated consisting of challenges to the current model of ethics, claiming it applies inappropriate principles. However other critiques claim that ethics committees can impose unnecessary restrictions, lack expertise or even cause harm to innocent subjects (Schrag, 2011). The aim of this article is not to discuss whether ethics review boards should be abolished or not, or what specific changes they should undertake to better suit the needs of socially engaged research. However, this piece seeks to contribute to the discussion by highlighting how the shift toward a neoliberal model of education and research exacerbates an already difficult relationship between ethics review boards and socially engaged researchers.

In fact, in this last section of the article, I contribute to these critiques by arguing that, in the current neoliberal context in which they function, ethics review boards have the power to censor socially engaged research. I argue further that this subtle censorship occurs at different levels. As explained earlier, the guidelines offered by ethics review boards overlook issues specific to the case of social science and, especially, to socially engaged research. Their reasoning entails not only the possibility for ethics review boards to directly exercise their power by deciding whether or not to stop a research project but also, at a more subtle level

and especially in the case of socially engaged research, it transfers the burden of responsibility of the research from the university as a public institution to the individual researcher. In particular, I argue that within the framework of the neoliberal university, the rationale of current ethics review boards contributes to the implementation of the neoliberal imperative to individualise risk and responsibility within the academy. Here, I address the instances of risk and safety of social researchers on the field by drawing a link between neoliberalism and the current model of university-corporation.

Neoliberalism has primarily been defined as a theory of political-economic practices revolving around principles such as deregulation, privatisation and the withdrawal of social provisions of the state. Neoliberalism can be interpreted as a particular organisation of capitalism which, through changes in policies, practices and institutions, has evolved to protect capital and reduce labour power (Campbell, 2008, p. 187). It tends to present itself as a scientific discipline based on economic facts. In particular, its plausibility rests on the idea that unrestricted trade improves the wellbeing of individuals and offers them the opportunity to improve their situation. However, these anomalies have come to influence many aspects of contemporary social life. As David Harvey points out (2005, p. 11), neoliberalism can be interpreted as a very specific social framework that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (2005, p. 11). Neoliberalism is, indeed, more than an economic doctrine and it can also be interpreted, as Dardot and Laval (2013) argue, as a system that aims to produce neoliberal subjects. Considering the impact of neoliberal policies on the academic institution can contribute to a better understanding of how the bureaucracy at work in the modern university-corporation can hinder the study of resistance practices.

In fact, while ethics review boards have been instituted to formally manage the possible risks that could emerge from the conduction of research – primarily scientific and medical– it can be argued that they have increasingly adopted the features of most bureaucracy. Ethics review boards have expanded and formalised the process of gaining ethics approval

to the extent that they can hinder – if not censor – nontraditional forms of research. I argue that the threats to socially engaged research represented by this process of *ethics creep* (Haggerty, 2004, p. 394) are aggravated by the neoliberal transformation of higher education over the last decades. In fact, the labour processes and the conditions of production of academic knowledge need to be considered in this regard, as precariousness is one of the defining experiences of contemporary academic life (Gill, 2009, p.). While it is not the immediate task of ethical review boards to consider issues of labour conditions' of researchers within the academy, it is important to highlight how the neoliberalisation of academia, coupled with traditional approaches to research ethics, hinders the study of resistance practices. Ethics review boards facilitate this process by imposing limiting requirements to socially engaged research, as I have previously explained.

Moreover, I content that socially engaged research is at risk within the academy also because of the nature of their fieldwork. Social researchers, in fact, may face safety issues on the field; these issues can range in nature and gravity, from physical and emotional safety to ethical and professional safety (Lee, 1995; Allan, 2017). While they are not always predictable, strategies and trainings can be put in place to minimise the likelihood that they may appear, and their impact on researchers wellbeing. However, in the context of the neoliberal logic creeping into the university that looks at expanding those research areas that are considered profitable, these issues are often overlooked. As Haggerty claims (2004, p. 412):

> An unfortunate consequence of these developments will likely be that researchers will choose to employ certain types of unproblematic and often dictable research methodologies rather than deal with the uncertainty and delays associated with qualitative, ethnographic, or critical scholarship which do not fit easily into the existing research ethics template.

I argue further that another consequence of these developments can be, instead, that socially engaged researchers might fulfill the requirements of the ethics review boards in order to obtain approval by silently taking personal responsibility for the possible risks that could emerge on the field. In fact, the encroachment of corporate culture into academia has

introduced several neoliberal mechanisms of governance that shape the way in which employees of the university work. Under the pressure of individualising and governmentalising techniques that are implemented by the introduction of the so-called "audit culture" in universities (and other public sectors), academics often go above and beyond to complete their work and perform to the required standards (Cupples & Pawson, 2012). This is a major issue for the study of resistance and social movements, and for the researchers who study them and are not always sufficiently equipped for the journey. The university has, indeed, a duty of care towards its employees and, regardless of the area that they are researching, it has a duty to guarantee health and safety trainings to its employees and to provide sufficient information to enable them to conduct their own risk assessments. With regard to social research, there is a particular need to formalise and regularise risk-aware trainings as a standard practice (Bloor *et al,* 2007, p. 42).

Certain qualitative research can involve issues of safety and risk, and qualitative researchers that conduct this type of research have a right and an expectation to receive formal trainings. In this respect, aid agencies and media organisations' security procedures might constitute a useful example for universities to follow to ensure the health and safety of social researchers on the field (Bloor et al, 2007, p. 55). Risk assessment and management is not to be regarded as the exclusive responsibility of individual researchers or, in the case of PhD students, of individual supervisors. These are issues that necessarily go beyond the relationship between individual workers in the university. Maintaining safety at work is the responsibility of both employers and employees and, while it is impossible to anticipate every danger that may occur on the field, it could certainly be helpful to learn in advance about possible precautions or actions to take in case these emerge.

Sadly, modern universities are instead becoming increasingly like corporations, administered and run as a business. Like all other corporations they are risk averse, that is, if risks exist it is expected that individuals – who have made their choice – should bear the burden of any resulting misfortune (Rogermacginty, 2014). By absorbing neoliberal discourses and practices, the modern university tends to decide what kind of research is worth doing based on standards of profitability (see

Giroux, 2002). Furthermore, like any other corporation they tend to maximise their profits while reducing risk or outsourcing it. This rationale can constitute a serious obstacle for the study of resistance in the academy, as explained earlier. In particular, this can be especially difficult for doctoral students who often have limited funding available to conduct fieldwork – and might even self-fund their projects – and time constraints to complete their research projects. There is a specific neoliberal logic behind this reasoning: the market logic by which risks shape a new, self-reliant enterpreneurial academic worker. The process of increasing bureaucratisation and corporatisation of the modern university poses several questions regarding the possibilities to undertake socially engaged research, which do not necessarily fit into the category of "profitable research". The social and public role of the university, where research should be undertaken to contribute, sustain and develop democratic public spheres, is undermined by the logic of neoliberalism that, instead, values knowledge exclusively as a form of financial capital.

To conclude, the stringent framework of neoliberal education is making the study of resistance and of its practice increasingly difficult within the walls of academic institutions. For instance, it is possible to track how the humanities and the social sciences have come heavily under attack of neoliberal governments and universities' managerial departments, seeing their funding frozen if not progressively curtailed (see e.g. Sawa, 2015 and Taylor, 2016). This is a reality which is sadly happening at the university where I am currently based (see Taylor, 2016). Within this picture, ethics committees have the power to make decisions about the type of research that will be conducted and, considering the regulatory framework that they apply, the future appears particularly worrying for socially engaged research.

The hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism in the university needs be questioned if we want to remain committed to social justice and political change in our research practice. In these times, when the University's critical and conscious role is seriously at risk, there is a need to challenge every aspect within these institutions that can further threaten the credibility of socially engaged research and its usefulness for society. However, while acknowledging the need to critically analyse and counter the neoliberal hegemony of safety and risk discourses, as researchers we

cannot and should not pretend that these issues are not real. Hence, while continuing to demand that the institutions where we work account seriously for the possibility of a change of policy, we also need to self-organise, provide support and share recommendations for safe research practice.

Conclusion

While it can be said that the various types of harm must be considered as a serious issue when participating in social science research, there is a compelling need to also consider the role of ethics review boards in the current neoliberal model of the university-corporation. This model, in fact, can have an impact at various levels on researchers studying resistance and their well-being. In this article, I have argued that while institutional ethics guidelines follow principles that seek to protect research participants from potentially harmful research, these are often inadequate when it comes to evaluating the practice of participatory action research, and fail to consider numerous issues that are specific to the conduction of socially engaged research. At present, the conservative approach of ethics review boards takes a "just in case" approach to managing the dangers posed by research projects, which generates a process that has the potential to introduce ever more regulations to manage potentially undesirable evenutalities (Haggerty, 2004, p. 412). This article sought to elaborate on the dangers of such conservative approaches to research review in an academic context that continues to be permeated by neoliberal discourses of profit, risk and responsibility. Hence, I have argued that, in the current circumstances, ethics review boards contribute to the implementation of neoliberal individualising techniques within the academy that tend to responsibilise individual academic workers for their choices of how to conduct research. This is a major issue for the study of resistance, considering that often researchers have little choice over the way they can conduct their projects, given the exacerbation of labour conditions within the academy.

Certainly, the solution can hardly be the bureaucratic proliferation of rules and requirements which would make social research that uses nontraditional methods even more unlikely to happen in the academy. What, then, is left for us to do?

Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed to the development of this piece. I would like to thank particularly: Monica Carrer, Yehya Mamdouh, Holly Randell-Moon, Marcelle Dawson and Alex Thong for the fascinating and stimulating discussions. I would also like to thank Rosemary Overell, Brett Nicholls and the Department of Media Film and Communication at the University of Otago for their support.

References

Allan, J. (2017). Activist Ethics: the Need for a Nuanced Approach to Resistance Studies Field Research, *Journal of Resistance Studies* 3 (2), 89-121

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham & London, UK: Duke University Press.

Bloor, M., Fincham, B., Sampson, H. (2007). *Qualiti (NCRM) Commission Inquiry into the Risk to Well-being of Researchers in Qualitative Research*. Retrieved from: http://www.marinerssystem.net/L4SS/images/2014/june/Bloor%20et%20al%202007%20%20Risks%20Qualitative%20Researchers%20CIReport.pdf

Campbell, A. (2008). The Birth of Neoliberalism in the United States: A Reorganisation of Capitalism. In A. Saad-Filho & D. Johnston (Eds.), *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader* (pp. 187-198). London, UK: Pluto Press.

Cupples, J. Pawson, E. (2012). *Giving an account of oneself: The PBRF and the neoliberal university*, New Zealand Geographer, 68, 14-23.

Dingwall, R. (2008). The ethical case against ethical regulation in humanities and social science research, 21st Century Society: *Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*, 3(1), 1-12.

Gergen, M. M. & Gergen, K. J. (2000). Qualitative Inquiry: Tensions and Transformations. In N.K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 1025-1046). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gill, R. (2009). Breaking the Silence: The hidden injuries of the neoliberal university. In R. Flood & R. Gill (Eds.) *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections.* London: Routledge.

Giroux, H. A. (2002). Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education: The University as a Democratic Public Sphere, *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(4), 425-463.

Haggerty, K.D. (2004). Ethics Creep: Governing Social Science Research in the Name of Ethics, *Qualitative Sociology*, 27(4), 391-414.

Hammersley, M. (2010). Creeping ethical regulation and the strangling of research, *Sociological Research Online*, 15(4), 16-20.

Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Israel, M., Hay, I. (2006). *Research Ethics for Social Scientists*. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Israel, M. (2015). *Research Ethics and Integrity for Social Scientists*. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Kindon, S., Pain, R., Kesby, M. (2007). Participatory Action Research: origins, approaches and methods. In S. Kindon, R. Pain, M. Kesby, M. (eds.) *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting people, participation and place* (pp.). London, UK: Routledge.

Law, J. (2004). *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. London, UK: Routledge.

Lee, R. (1995). *Dangerous Fieldwork*. London, UK: Sage Publication.

Manzo, L.C., Brightbill, N. (2007). Toward a participatory ethics. In S. Kindon, R. Pain, M. Kesby (eds.) *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting people, participation and place*, (pp.). London, UK: Routledge.

Martin, B. (1991). *Strip the Expert*! London, UK: Freedom Press.

Preston, A. (2015, March 29). The war against humanities at Britain's universities, *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/29/war-against-humanities-at-britains-universities

Rogermacginty (2014, Sept. 26). *Are we entering a post-fieldwork era? The challenges of the neoliberal university and the digital revolution to fieldwork research.* Retrieved from: https://rogermacginty.com/2014/09/26/are-we-entering-a-post-fieldwork-era-the-challenges-of-the-neoliberal-university-and-the-digital-revolution-to-fieldwork-research/

Schrag, M. Z. (2011) The case against ethics review in the social sciences. *Research Ethics*, 7(4), 120-131.

Taylor, M. (2016, June 27) Humanities Jobs Threat. *Otago Daily Times*. Retrieved from: https://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/humanities-jobs-threat

Wiles, R. (2013). *What are Qualitative Research Ethics*? London, UK & New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.