



**Inciting Dialogue at the Edges**  
*of human science research*

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**An exploration of possibilities in qualitative research**

# Provocative Dialogues on Review of Ethical Issues and Practices

Arne Collen

Professor of Psychology, Human Science and Organizational Systems  
Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, USA  
acollen@saybrook.edu

Wherever humans are the objects and subjects of research, the projects that use them require prior scrutiny by a committee known in the United States as the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The board examines proposed research projects for their potential aversive impact of the research procedures on human participants. The IRB represents one kind of social system, and the process of review may be construed as a process of human science inquiry.

IRBs exist in the United States by mandate of the federal government. For the past 3 years, the author has served as the principal architect, designer, developer, and chair of the IRB at his institution. This paper rests upon the author's perspectives as both a leader of his IRB and a human science researcher.

The chief aim of the paper is to relate several ethical issues and research practices, familiar to this IRB, that incite dialogue to the edges of human science research. Although many cases progress through routine review for the potential impact of their research procedures on human participants, occasionally a case appears that provokes more and unexpected dialogue than expected. It is a sample of these more illustrative case studies of IRB review that are to illuminate the major points of this paper.

The initial part of the paper is brief. It describes this IRB for a graduate level distance education institution in the United States, to which students and faculty propose research projects involving human participants. This part covers the design, development, and current status of activity of this IRB that exists to serve primarily to protect, and secondarily to raise to conscious awareness, educate, and foster humane practices in doing human science research.

The second part briefly presents the range, variety, and frequency of ethical issues and practices that this IRB has encountered over the past three years in its evaluation of graduate student projects. These projects almost always involve student research required to fulfill research requirements of the masters and doctoral programs. They provide the context to define and contrast the provocative case that incites more IRB discussion and usually raises many questions and issues far beyond the jurisdiction, policy and procedures of the IRB.

The third and major body of the paper discusses several issues raised by the provocative case. The dialogue that ensues tends to come in two forms. The first and more evident form involves ethical issues directly pertinent to the research procedures. In such cases, dialogue presses what the researcher wants to do against concerns expressed by the IRB for the welfare of the participants. This form of dialogue more often than not leads to compromises by the researcher, but sometimes, it is mutual by both parties. The second and less common form of dialogue involves a more complex conversation. It happens when the ethical issues surfacing in IRB review, regarding the practices intended by the researcher, tests and even conflicts with institutional policy and procedures. In these cases, the dialogue may require negotiation by vested parties, where the IRB finds itself in the center of controversy.

The concluding part briefly discusses the implications of the two forms of dialogue, specifically, IRB influence on the kinds of research practices chosen by faculty and students, the manner in which IRB review transpires, attitudes of faculty and students toward IRB review as an aspect of graduate education, the ethics of IRB review, and the passage of research ethics as a critical ethos in the treatment of human participants to the next generation of human science researchers.