

On ethical determinism – five uneasy pieces¹.

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The term *technological determinism* is a construct which refers to ways in which technologies shape, or determine, human behaviour. A ringing telephone, for instance, almost always spurs humans to respond. People forego and cut short current face-to-face engagements and will even interrupt intimate encounters with loved ones in order to attend to the shrill trill of the phone. And telephones, along with lifts, have been the technologies which have most enabled high-rises buildings to proliferate. These are examples of technological determinism.

In a similar vein, ethical determinism occurs when, rightly or wrongly, ethicists and not researchers, decide what, how and when research procedures should or should not be undertaken. Hence, they shape ways in which contemplated or planned research exercises unfold and thus they mould the behaviours of researchers. Put another way, ethical determinism happens when ethical decrees (or even the mere prospect of ethical decisions), shape research design either at the point of origin or at points of revision.

I'd like to propose that ironically, ethics committees might inadvertently fan rather than prevent unethical behaviour and this can happen in at least five ways:

First, there is a form of ethical determinism which can be described as *ethical determinism by avoidance*. Here the spectre of having to gain approval almost certainly encourages some researchers to submit designs which totally avoid the need for ethical scrutiny. They expediently choose a topic which does not require ethical approval and whilst in some cases it is entirely possible that their topic choice resonates with their research interests, I'd suggest that in many instances, topics are selected mainly because investigators just don't want to be bothered with ethical minefields. Moreover, I'd also suggest that there are more than a few examples of research supervisors conveniently steering time-strapped students away from labyrinth-like ethics forms.

Second, I argue that, sometimes, when researchers know there is no way of avoiding ethics committee scrutiny, they provide answers of convenience in order to skirt around, or minimise possible ethical glitches or delays. This form of ethical determinism can be labelled as *ethical determinism by sanitisation*. By framing their initial research design in 'safe' ways, they avoid a possible ethical challenge (or three) which means they are more likely to

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gain ethics approval relatively quickly. This is expedient to the applicant primarily because it allows potentially thorny issues to be presented and addressed in a sanitised and politically correct manner. And expediency also means that time-strapped researchers can get on with their work sooner rather than later.

Third, I think there are instances where researchers who have been rebuffed by ethics committees simply succumb to ethical determinism by either altering, or in some instances attenuating, their original epistemological drivers and/or research questions. This version of ethical determinism can be thought of as *ethical determinism by dilution*. It is akin to integrity subversion where the researcher has shifted ground principally to satisfy ethical requirements despite their original intentions becoming sabotaged because of their shifted stance. Such shifts, I would argue are incongruent with truthful research and truthful dialectics which are a core hallmark of scholarship.

Fourth, there can be, although this does not occur nearly often enough in my view, instances of ethics committees triggering intentional research postponement. By this I mean that if a sticking point arises between a researcher and an ethics committee, the researcher should initiate a period of postponement. They should invoke project deferment, without penalty and without further costs, in order to be able to complete a dialogue which enables them to remain truthful to their research. Moreover, they ought to be willing and able to argue, face-to-face and for as long as it takes, their case for their proposed research proceeding, eventually, in an unexpurgated fashion, or if that is not possible, in a manner that preserves integrity for all parties concerned. They must, therefore, defend their research position, e.g. as a practitioner scholar or a teacher researcher, not from a platform of traditional folklore and professional dogmatism, but rather from a stance of being at once a rational teacher and a willing learner. They must seek to transform the thinking of those ethics committee members who have turned them down whilst also being willing to have their own thinking enlightened and converted to a greater or lesser extent by those same people. But let's be clear that this has to be a two-way passage which means that ethicists and researchers must each be open to perspective transformation. I would like to describe this kind of ethical determinism as *ethical determinism by transformation* but I currently have serious reservations about the willingness of many research committees to enter into such a learning convention.

Fifth and finally, there is the possibility of quitting a project which quite simply can be called *ethical determinism by abandonment*. Jettisoning a project is most often a regrettable matter but it becomes a final solution when either or both parties involved in determining ethics approvals refuse to budge from their entrenched position. It can be likened to the irreconcilable differences which are cited in divorce cases and I suspect that while there may have been some instances of this happening, a more probable solution has been that of desertion with the candidate ruefully leaving scholastic and research aspirations behind.

As an addendum, I'm bound to say that combinations of the above five are possible. Personally, I know of no systematic research within Aotearoa New Zealand into the ways in which research ethics committees have impacted upon researchers and that means that my five typologies of ethical determinism are not founded upon empiricism. They have been constructed after reflecting on performances I have witnessed. Nevertheless, I suggest that there is a need for such a study. (Isn't there always?) There have been some medical based discussion papers from the U.K. and a Spanish study of how one hundred ethics applications were treated administratively but I've been unable to find any evidence of systematic scrutiny of ethics committees within Aotearoa New Zealand.

Overall, it seems to me that researchers are frequently forced into a conflict role so that there is a 'them and us' situation. To surmount the perceived adversity of ethics committees, researchers resort to strategies which sidestep the strictures of ethics committees. They do this by espousing insincere solutions rather than following inconvenient strategies for compliance. Their rhetoric, therefore, extols tactics which create illusions of conformity. And if they are working under the aegis of a tertiary institution or an established research agency, they are compelled to be seen to conform in order to be given approval to proceed. Such compliance, I would argue is likely to be more phantom than real because it is, at best, tokenistic and at worst, unethical. It certainly hinders rather than grows research.

Hence, irrespective of whether or not researchers are avoiding ethical challenges, or sidestepping issues in anticipation of pursuing altogether different research procedures, chicanery is at play. Truth in research, therefore, becomes muzzled when investigators eventually get around to undertaking the work associated with their *real* proposals.