Editorial: "The Ethics and Politics of Knowledge Production," Critical Reflections on Social Work and Social Sciences Research

Teresa Macías
York University

The contributors to this special issue of *Intersectionalities* answered a call for multidisciplinary contributions on the general topic of the ethics and politics of knowledge production in social work and social science research. The objective of the call for papers was to attract contributions on topics such as research practices, methodologies, and ethics and to promote reflections on the actual work of research and its role in the socially and politically situated production of knowledge. Of particular interest were manuscripts that critically reflect on research work with: communities and people who experience social marginalization, victims and survivors of historical injustice and violence, and populations who are often the object of research but excluded from processes of knowledge production. The manuscripts could explore the power relations at work in the identification and/or production of certain populations, communities, and peoples as objects or targets of research. By focusing on questions of ethics in research practices, the call for papers aimed to centralize the ethical challenges experienced by social science and social work researchers in the ordinary, minute, and detailed work associated with research. It also aimed to centralize decision-making processes about such issues as methodologies, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, practices of data collection, data analysis, research writing, etc.

The idea for this special issue emerged as a result of my ongoing preoccupation with questions of ethics for which institutional ethical procedures offer few answers. For example, I am interested in questions such as how we, as researchers, speak and write about certain human experiences and social phenomena while honouring the dignity and subjectivity of those involved? What are the socio-political contexts within which we conduct research and within which we are differently positioned? And what are (or how do we deal with) the politics of reception that determine how research will be read and taken up? I experience my research work as a constant, ambiguous, and precarious process of negotiation taking place at the intersection of all these questions. I also frame this negotiation as a matter of ethics, and as an ongoing process through which I negotiate my own belonging within certain communities and disciplinary fields.

In my conversations with colleagues, I came to realize that this negotiation was not unique to my work. Many of them also grapple with similar issues—issues that needed to be framed as problems of ethics even if they could not be contained within restricted, rigid, corporate, and individualistic conceptions of consent, confidentiality, and risk. Furthermore, in these conversations, it became evident to me that questions of ethics could not be disentangled from the productive and socio-

political character of research as a situated form of work that actively implicates researchers in the production of knowledge and in social power relations. As a socio-politically situated activity, social science research can be understood as what Foucault (1990) would call a biopolitical device, the objective of which is to capture and render specific forms of life, life experiences, and social phenomena explicit and knowable. This biopolitical condition of research cannot be avoided simply by identifying "better" or "more ethical" research approaches. Rather, it requires critical reflection that renders problematic the role and location of researchers in the contextual and politically relevant work of research.

All the papers included in this special issue complicate conventional ways of doing and thinking about research ethics by situating ethics in the multiple entanglements of work, subjectivity, thought, reflection, politics, etc. that make up the work of research and determine its receptions and constitution as knowledge. The papers also demonstrate a commitment to interrogate, complicate, and unsettle conventional ways of thinking and working through the ethical challenges of research work. They demonstrate that ethical challenges cannot be addressed simply by relying on institutional, deontological, and restrictive conceptions and rules. Similar to my own experience, the authors grapple with ethical issues that generally fall outside the purview of institutional ethics review processes. As a result, the papers interrogate and unsettle conventional ethical concepts such as informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and risk. The papers probe the ethicality of certain research programs or methodologies such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), community-based participatory research (CBPR), and archival research. They delve into issues such as the constitution and regulation of research subjects and participants through, for example, discourses of participation and collaboration in CBPR, and practices of collecting digital big data. They also probe the ethical dilemmas and political implications related to practices of representation and reporting on, for example, racialized transnational activism in the age of terrorism, racialized social workers' experiences of white dominance, negotiations of risk by homeless youth, stories of violence collected in archives, and, experiences of gender violence within normative discourses of helping.

An important theme emerging from the papers is the importance of situating research and its related ethical negotiations within social power relations such as white supremacy, nation building, and colonial histories; transnational politics of knowledge production; neo-liberal governmentality; medical and psychiatric systems of regulation of knowledge and research; and professional discourses of helping and benevolence. The socio-political and historical contexts of research also situate and implicate the researcher as a subject that is constituted in research and in the relationships between researcher and subjects/objects of study. For instance, several of the papers problematize the decision-making practices of researchers challenging ideas of neutrality and objectivity in decisions regarding methodologies, recruitment, reporting, writing, representation, etc. By so doing, the authors politicize decision-making practices in research regarding, for example, how racialized resistance and experiences of racism, negotiations of risk by homeless youth, experiences of

resisting gender violence, and stories of torture are constituted as data, interpreted, analyzed, and finally written in and/or out of research reports.

The contextualization of ethics and research leads to challenges of traditional conceptions of the researcher as self-contained, independent, and unencumbered by the research process. In this way, these papers destabilize traditional notions of research ethics by critically linking ethics, politics, and subjectivity. They propose situated conceptions of ethics linked to awareness of one's own location within research and in relation to research subjects. They also propose constitutive notions of ethics as uncertain and performative process of subject formation taking place within and through research work. Ethics emerge in these papers as entangled with politics and as critically implicating researchers at all stages of research work. This entanglement also means that ethics can never be about the search for spaces of innocence or certainty in research work. If research is always situated within social power relations, all research work is somehow complicit in those power relations. The contributors live with the impossibility of innocence by remaining critically reflective and aware of the power differentials between themselves and the people and communities participating in their research. They also remain cognizant of the power exercised through research-related decisions. They uncover and contextualize the subject-making practices at work in processes of representation. Finally, they even problematize and politically situate the very work of critique in which they are engaged in their contributions to this special issue.

It has been a tremendous honour and privilege for me to read the papers in their multiple versions and to engage the authors in enriching processes of discussion, thinking, and reflection about research, ethics, and politics. I hope the papers will also enrich readers, especially those searching for more nuanced, complex, and critical engagements with questions related to the ethics and politics of knowledge production in social work and social science research.

We begin this collection with **Harjeet Kaur Badwall's** discussion of the problematic of how to report on experiences of racism and racial dominance in social work while resisting homogenizing and essentializing the diverse narratives and experiences of racialized social workers. By framing her analysis as a commitment to reveal racial dominance while maintaining an anti-essentialist stance, Badwall turns the practices of writing against an essentialized story of racism into an ethical practice. By critically positioning herself as a racialized social worker and researcher, and interrogating her assumptions about shared experiences of racial dominance, she complicates accepted binaries of insider and outsider research. Badwall argues that by assuming an insider position, researchers may homogenize and essentialize diverse experiences and narratives and discount the power they exercise through their own reading, interpretation, analyzes, and reporting. Yet, she also recognizes that racialized researchers working on race cannot easily claim a position of outsider and that shared stories can help us understand historical and systemic conditions of marginalization and resistance. As an alternative, Badwall proposes a "third space" between insider-ness and outsider-ness in which researchers can account for their multiple subject positions, assumptions, and desires for

sameness and authenticity, interpretative frameworks, and diverse institutional locations. In this third space, researchers can remain committed to revealing racial dominance while accounting for the complexities, similarities, differences, and ambiguities found in narratives of racism and negotiated in researcher–participant relationships. In this third space, ethical practice is not a search for innocence, but rather an uncertain endeavour and commitment to negotiating the need for a story of racial dominance while honouring diverse and complex individual narratives.

In the second paper in this collection, I present an interrogation of the ethics of archival research by tackling the dilemma posed by the stories of violence I found while researching archival records related the Chilean Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture. I argue that while archival research generally falls outside of institutional ethics review processes, the issue of what to do with the human stories we find recorded in archives presents us with important ethical questions, questions I associate with the problematic of representation. In order to make explicit this problematic, I delve in the character of archives and research as socio-politically situated power/knowledge devices that at their very core imply violent processes of documentation and recording. When archival and research practices are concerned with issues related to historical injustices and violence, we find ourselves in the very messy situation in which the representation of violence can also become the violence of representation. I propose that we need to remain critically situated within the narrow space between violence and its representation in order to render thinkable in ethical terms the performative work of research and ethics. In this narrow space we can also remain aware of the social power relations that determine how our research will be taken up within national, transnational, and colonial projects. I ultimately argue for a conceptualization of ethics in archival research that remains unsettled, diffused, dangerous, and precarious at the same time that it recognizes the subject-making practices at work in the representation and writing of archived stories.

In "From activists to terrorists: The politics and ethics of representations of resistance," **Daphne Jeyapal** also takes up the question of representation, this time in relation to racialized transnational resistance movements in the age of terrorism and within the context of Canadian white settler and colonial nation-building projects. By using as a case study her research on the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests in Canada, Jeyapal argues for an ambiguous understanding of the work of representation at the centre of any research. She suggests that representation in research is a "double-sided" political event that, while calling attention to practices of resistance and challenging exclusionary practices of nation building, can also reinforce racist practices of othering and exclusion. Jeyapal suggests that an ethical reflection on representation in research requires that we politically situate research and the ethical negotiations we make when determining what to represent and what to leave out of research representation. This commitment to ethical representation means that researchers need to accept that representation is essential for knowledge production and social justice at the same time that we remain aware of the restrictive ways in which racialized others are allowed to speak within systems of colonialism,

white settlement, and racial dominance. Jeyapal proposes an ethical commitment to strategic decision making in research, in which stories of racialized resistance, marginalization, and pain are deployed only insofar as they assist in highlighting the role they fulfill in the establishment of the practices of commodification and racial domination in the age of terrorism.

Anne O'Connell's paper on digital big data interrogates the relevance and limitations of narrowly defined "rigid, individualistic and corporate" conceptions of consent, privacy, and confidentiality on which traditional research is based. Digital big data is not only being collected in ways that commonly bypass institutional research ethics review processes. These forms of data are also, O'Connell argues, actively reshaping privacy, consent, and knowledge and, by extension, the private and public realm. Furthermore, digital big data is producing and regulating the conduct of citizens within normative discourses of security. They simultaneously produce the ideal subject as the one who has nothing to hide and the Other as the one who, by refusing to give consent and share their information, becomes suspect. Finally, by situating digital big data within neo-liberal governmentality and biopower, O'Connell highlights how in the digital era, data and the knowledge it produces are being marketized, commercialized, and privatized in ways that require careful rethinking of available procedures and instruments for the protection of privacy and confidentiality as well as the securing of consent.

Bonnie Burstow presents us with a critique of research projects that seeks to improve electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) by asking the critical question of whether ECT research can ever be ethical. In answering this question, Burstow discusses the institutional and professional conditions that inform decisions about research and the power relations that implicate ECT improvement research in the violence, power, and control at work in ECT. Furthermore, through a discussion of a specific case example, Burstow throws into question notions of informed consent by situating the process and methods for obtaining consent within structural social conditions, such as poverty, that determine who and under what conditions informed consent can ever be freely given or obtained for ECT. Her conclusion is that as long as research is aimed at legitimizing the violence at work in ECT, organized so as to benefit and validate the psychiatric industrial complex, and conducted so as to ignore the experiences of ECT survivors, research seeking to improve ECT will remain fundamentally unethical.

In the sixth paper in this collection, **Julia Elizabeth Janes** explores the ethics and politics of collaboration within community-based participatory research (CBPR) and interrogates discourses that produce CBPR as benign and socially just. By using Foucauldian governmentality as a conceptual framework, Janes links CBPR to the macro techniques of power, control, and subordination of neo-liberalism, and to the micro biopolitics of control, surveillance, and regulation that shape collaboration, participation, and the subjects taking part in these research projects. Janes destabilizes commonly held beliefs in CBPR's capacity to democratize knowledge and address social inequality. In fact, Janes argues, CBPR places dual responsibility on communities making them both the "sites of social problems/intervention" and

"instrumental participants in finding solutions." The result is the construction of communities as marginal and responsible for their own conditions without addressing the social and structural conditions that cause marginalization. Communities, argues Janes, become "both a target and technique of governance" in processes that also constitute "community knowledge workers" as deficient and the target of the pedagogical interventions of academics and researchers. The end results are not just the responsibilization of communities and collaborators without consideration for social conditions; CBPR also constitutes and rescues the good and benevolent academic who promotes collaboration, educates collaborators, and critiques epistemic privilege, all while still engaging in paternalism. Janes proposes that more ethical work in CBPR requires an open and critical engagement with difference, constant attention to the material conditions within which participation/collaboration unfolds, and a commitment to situate CBPR and its knowledge workers within asymmetrical power relations.

Sue-Ann Belle MacDonald's paper deals with the ethical challenges of conducting ethnographic research with homeless youth within normative conceptions of youth as either at-risk or risky. MacDonald proposes that ethnographic research can offer more nuanced and ethical understandings of youth experiences by producing more than "snapshots" of young peoples' lives, moving away from extractive research practices, and allowing for the building of more complex relationships between researchers and subjects. Ethnography can lead to research results that account for how homeless youth negotiate risk by capturing their complex and diverse experiences and histories. However, by retrospectively reflecting on her own ethnographic research, MacDonald also recognizes that limitations and obstacles to ethical practice emerged from her own inability to critically take into consideration the power relations at work in her research, and her positionality and subjectivity as researcher and social work practitioner. She recognizes moments in which her subjectivity and value system shaped her research and interpretation of youth and risk. She also reflects on moments in which she obscured power and privileged in her relationships with the youth and held on to the need for accuracy in the collection and analysis of data. In this process of reflection, MacDonald remains committed to broaden conceptions of risk and to challenge reductionist perceptions of youth. However, she also proposes a "situated ethics" and a commitment to anti-oppressive research practices "as a meaningful and constructive avenue to acknowledge and deconstruct the dominant forces at play in research processes." These situated ethics require that the researcher give up claims to innocence, neutrality, comfort, and power in order to make herself vulnerable and open to scrutiny.

In the final paper in this collection, **Andrea Merriam Donovan** uses Foucauldian conceptions of ethics as processes of subject formation to unpack the practices of representation and subjectification at play in a concrete encounter between herself and a woman resisting violence. Donavan argues that practices of re-telling violence are mutually constitutive, simultaneously producing the survivor of violence as a passive object of the tale and the researcher/practitioner as agentic

subject doing the telling. The re-telling practice can, Donavan argues, efface the complex experiences of both survivor and professional while allowing the professional to "steal" the experience of violence in order to produce herself as both professional and innocent in the material effects of violence. Donavan demonstrates a commitment to "unsettled" practices of representation that render subject-/Other-making practices thinkable. These unsettled practices resist totalizing stories while politically and socially contextualizing violence, foregrounding resistance, transgressing normative representational practices, and building solidarity. This commitment is one that ultimately throws the representation of self and other into question while acknowledging the social contexts within which representation takes place and is necessary. While Donavan's paper is not centrally concerned with research practices, it offers a critical and situated analysis that centres the problematic of representation, writing, and telling that is so central to research.

References

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Author Note

Correspondence concerning this editorial should be addressed to Teresa Macías, School of Social Work, S816 Ross Building, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON, M3J 1P3, Canada. Email: tmacias@yorku.ca