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## Taking Ethics Seriously: Navigating the Ethics Approval Process at a Canadian University

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Anthropology

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## Abstract

Based on interviews with key stakeholders in the ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario, this thesis explores what it means to take ethics seriously in the context of formal, regulatory ethics policy and procedures. This study identifies several key tensions at play throughout the course of the ethics approval process, many stemming from often incommensurable understandings of ethical responsibility, ethical behaviour and ethics in research more generally. By centering key stakeholders and their relationships to one another and to the system that maintains and supports the ethics approval process, we can track many of these tensions to sincere displays of seriousness on the part of all actors, displays sometimes performed in contradictory and frustrating ways. Understanding the performance of seriousness, and its meaning to those involved, as part of the process can help us develop a more productive dialogue between administrative staff, researchers and board members, with the suggestion that all actors invested in improving the culture of their local Research Ethics Board draw from participatory research design to facilitate a sustainable discussion.

**Keywords:** Research Ethics, Ethics Approval Process, Audit Culture, Institutional Bureaucracy, Seriousness, Sincerity, Anthropology

## Summary for Lay Audience

When researchers in Canada want to conduct research involving humans, they have to receive ethics approval from their university's Research Ethics Board, which is a committee made up of volunteer researchers that assesses whether or not a proposed research project will expose participants to unnecessary risk and/or harm. Several key players are involved in the ethics approval process, including the aforementioned researchers and Board Members, as well as graduate students and administrative staff. Ethics in the context of research is governed, in Canada, by the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS), but a lot of the policy is open to interpretation, leading to sometimes conflicting notions about what is right and wrong in the course of research, as well as leaving open who has the final say when it comes to dictating what ethical research looks like in various contexts. To that end, many researchers, board members, students and administrative staff will claim to take ethics seriously without realizing that they may have differing interpretations of ethics and what it means to take ethics seriously. Tensions precipitated by these differing, often conflicting interpretations lead to further tensions between key players in the process. Acknowledging that these tensions exist, and making them part of the process as opposed to something that is often ignored or swept aside, can lead to more productive dialogues between everyone involved, with the hope that open dialogue will lead to more thoughtful regulatory practices.

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## Introduction

Researchers must navigate a complex ethical framework for their work, which includes ethics standards set by universities and professional associations, consideration for their research collaborators, as well as their personal research ethics, which are often informed by their own cultural and personal backgrounds. In Canada, universities that want to receive funding from the three major grant agencies have to follow the ethical standards set by the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. Keeping this complex ethical framework in mind, taking research ethics seriously often means navigating diverse, sometimes contradictory, mandates and obligations. Indeed, a robust critical literature about the tensions between what many have termed “formal research ethics” and the more general and arguably abstract “ethics of research” has propagated since the inception of regulatory frameworks around the globe. Some, like McCormack et al. (2012) and McClancy (2013) have identified discrepancies between regulatory ethics and the professional and personal standards of researchers, particularly those who work in qualitative disciplines. Others, such as Haggerty (2004) and van den Hoonaard (2011), take issue with the ambiguity of regulatory frameworks, arguing that formal ethics often reaches beyond its mandated scope, incorporating research activities that should fall outside the purview of ethical oversight. Literature from around the globe also deals critically with the people involved in the formal research ethics regime, particularly members of Institutional Review Boards and Ethics Committees; Angell et al (2006) identify additional inconsistency and overreach in decision-making by members of research ethics committees in the UK, echoing findings by Haggerty and van den Hoonaard in Canada. Overall, the consensus seems to be that ethics regulations are often needlessly restrictive, and they often fail to meet the needs of both researchers and participants (Pollock 2012). Some

researchers even go so far as to argue that we don't need formal research ethics at all, at least, not in the way it currently seems to exist at many institutions across the globe (Dingwall 2008; Lederman & Dobrin 2012).

This robust critical literature echoes how many academics approach the issue of research ethics—tepidly, at best, and with suspicion. It is not for nothing that this kind of literature has proliferated since the inception of more formal regulation of research ethics in countries like Canada, the US and the UK. Although Bosk (2007) makes the point that the critical literature can often feel like nothing more than a “chorus of complaints,” Lederman (2007b) makes the equally valid point that criticism, particularly from qualitative researchers, has led to practical changes in some regulatory systems. Yet the tensions persist. I became aware of how frustrating formal research ethics can be before I had ever had to deal with the system myself.

When I suggested the ethics approval process as a potential research topic, I initially did so as a joke—by and large, I had been led to believe that research ethics, and the systems and offices that support the process, were draconian and intractable. It was a pleasant surprise, then, when my supervisor reached out to the director of my university's Human Research Ethics Office and they agreed to let me interview board members. While planning my research in the last year of my undergraduate degree, I was even allowed to sit in on two board meetings, with the understanding that I would not be able to use anything I observed. Once I was accepted to the Master's program in the Department of Anthropology, I was able to submit my project for official ethics approval.

The ethics approval process itself was, as I was warned, a slog and a pain. The application took weeks of work and fine-tuning, and I ended up waiting nearly four weeks for the comments and recommendations. After that I underwent two rounds of revisions, during which I

was informed that I would no longer be able to observe the board meetings (none of the observations I made during the two meetings I was able to attend are included in this thesis). Nevertheless, my project passed muster, and I was able to conduct my research from 2018 to 2019.

Per my Research Ethics application, my study was to “explore key aspects of the Non-Medical Research Ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario from an anthropological perspective by documenting, comparing, and analyzing the varying perspectives of different stakeholders in this process.” Noting the problem posed by key “tension[s] between the demands of qualitative research and [those] of [Research Ethics Boards]” I envisioned a project that could “provide the University of Western Ontario with ethnographic data specific to our institution, with the goal of providing all relevant stakeholders with the granular details that underlie the complex process and understandings of ethical behaviour in the field of academia.” (see Appendix A for the full study description submitted to the Board).

My project has evolved significantly since I submitted my application in 2018. What you will be reading is a far cry from what I originally intended to do with this particular topic. This is a feature of emergent design, a method that is defined in the policy governing research ethics in Canada as research “in which data collection and analyses can evolve over the course of a research project in response to what is learned in earlier parts of the study” (TCPS2 2018, 194).

## Methods

I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews over the course of a year, starting in the summer of 2018 and trickling into late summer of 2019, with the last two interviews consisting of follow-up conversations with a staff member of the Ethics Office at the University of Western Ontario. Of the 24 interviews I conducted, 16 were with faculty members, 11 of whom were (at

the time of our interview) serving or had served on the non-medical research ethics board. Of the remaining 8 interviews, 6 were with graduate students and 2 were with administrative staff. I recruited most of my participants via e-mail, although I had a recruitment poster aimed at graduate students posted in the Social Science Building. Some of the faculty members I interviewed knew me prior to our meeting for an interview, and some were former professors. A few were involved in the development of my SSHRC and Master's proposals, and were aware of my research project before I was formally allowed to begin recruiting participants.

My interviews were semi-structured, meaning that, although I had a general interview guide (submitted as part of my ethics approval application), I tried to follow the lead of the interview participant, with the intention of letting their interests/concerns shape the conversation. Each interview, to some extent, affected the interview that followed it, as I learned more about the ethics approval process, the nature of the board, and the common concerns, frustrations and insights of all stakeholders involved.

Although all my formal interviews followed my general interview guide, this thesis was also informed by the informal conversations I had with peers, colleagues, faculty members, professors and friends. Rena Lederman (2006), who has also conducted an ethnographic study of her home Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Princeton, notes that doing work “in your own backyard” (i.e. in a university setting, with colleagues as your participants) can blur the line between formal and informal research. What Kristina Gunsalus calls “two people talking,” (2004) a style of research that involves a more intentionally casual exchange between two people, often fails to meet the standards of formal research ethics. Lederman notes that

human-subjects regulations construe the researcher and the researched as having radically different kinds of agency. They are construed not simply as unequal but as

incommensurable: always potentially opposed and most certainly in need of third-party mediation. Can this logic of protection be reconciled with that of collegial exchange?

(Lederman 2006, 488)

To that end, the casual exchanges I had with friends and professors, though not the bulk of the data for this thesis, have certainly played a part in how I have interpreted the ethics approval process, and they have informed the questions I asked during my formal interviews. Even though the people I spoke to informally were aware that I was doing research on the ethics approval process, I have chosen not to quote any of them directly.

### The Question

Doing research in my “backyard” (the university being not only the place where I am pursuing my degree, but also where I am employed and spend the bulk of my time) also works to “[relativize] and re-map one’s sense of similarities, differences, and relationships by shifting one’s point of view from the explicit to the implicit” (2006, 483). This relativizing and re-mapping was most evident for me when I would sit down to interview faculty members in their offices. The people I spoke with were my participants, but they were also professors; some of them had even been *my* professors. It is important to note from the outset that I am approaching this project not only as a researcher and an anthropologist, but also as a graduate student. When I would step into a professor’s office to start an interview, the power difference between myself and them, though not explicit, and never thrown in my face, was in the back of my head, and often came through in moments of slight discomfort, or when I felt compelled to say something impressive when I would have otherwise chosen to remain silent. One board member I spoke with compared the ethics approval process to peer review. When I asked them if students and

faculty members can truly be considered “peers” in that sense, they acquiesced that it might depend on the discipline, but that

In my own training, one of my mentors, when he ran a seminar he would say, ‘I’m just the first among equals,’ and that’s something that I try to aspire to in these kinds of situations. Obviously, that’s an idealized thing on some level, there’s obviously a huge power difference, and I do try to be really aware of that. I try to treat graduate students as peers. I think that seems like the thing to work toward, or the best-case scenario, is when graduate students feel like they have ownership over what they are doing, that they are not working for me in some capacity, but that they are doing their own work and I am in some supportive role

The power differences between students and faculty are not the focus of this thesis, but they are certainly at play: they were at play when I interviewed faculty members, and they have been at play in the way I have interpreted my data. Laura Nader calls this “studying up,” (1972) and though she argues that it is important to “study up” the structures of power, she acknowledges that one of the drawbacks of studying up is the sense of discomfort and potential hostility researchers might encounter when interrogating people in positions of power. No one I spoke with was hostile, and my sense of discomfort fit the general sense of discomfort most newly minted researchers feel when first entering the field. One interview I conducted, however, stands out, not due to any hostility or oversized discomfort, but due to the way it shifted, as Lederman notes above, my point of view from the explicit to the implicit.

This interview started like all my other interviews: I presented my Letter of Information to the participant, they told me they had already read it, they signed the consent form attached to the Letter, and we started talking. The Letter of Information, like my MA proposal and Ethics

Approval application, lays out the purpose of my study. Each category of stakeholder that I identified for the purpose of this study had a Letter of Information tailored to their specific subject position (see appendix B for all the letters of information used during recruitment). This interview was with a board member, so their Letter of Information read (to start),

You are being invited to participate in a research study concerning the ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario. As a member of the University of Western Ontario's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board, you provide a unique perspective as both a researcher and active participant in the ethics approval process. *This study aims to document, compare, and analyze the varying perspectives of different stakeholders in this process.* This study will explore key aspects of the Non-Medical Research Ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario from an anthropological perspective by documenting, comparing, and analyzing the varying perspectives of different stakeholders in this process...[emphasis mine]

At one point during the interview, my participant stopped me to ask “what exactly is it that you’re after?” Was I looking to evaluate the board, or just “understand the process?” The implication, in the moment, seemed to be that they didn’t quite understand what I was trying to achieve by pursuing this research project. They had read my Letter of Information, so I initially pointed back to the piece of paper, asking if they wanted to keep the copy. They declined, saying they already have enough papers that they don’t read, and the conversation moved on. I remember feeling caught off guard by the question, and feeling like I had not adequately answered it, in large part because, this early in my research, I didn’t *really* know what I was after. Was I supposed to?

I suspect the moment was more jarring for me than it was for them, yet earlier in our conversation, they had told me:

people have a right to know why you are asking questions, at the same time, if we're being truthful, you don't really know why you're asking the question. You have a sense of what you think you know...the fact is, when you end up writing up your research, the question that will come out will be really different. There's no way you can tell ahead of time what this will turn into

It was easy for me to read this, at the time, as a moment of confounding cognitive dissonance. With time, and a healed bruised ego, I am able to see that these kinds of contradictions are inherent to any instance of social life, of which this interview, and the ethics approval process, are certainly parts. To that end, this thesis will be full of contradictory, sometimes incommensurable statements and viewpoints.

### What I'm After

I hope that by putting these contradictions in conversation with one another I can provide an answer that satisfies the question of "what I'm after." Lederman points out that by situating themselves in the "every-day, both as persons and researchers, ethnographers expect to learn how their interlocutors negotiate the tangles of social life by observing, listening and getting partially caught up with them" (2006, 489). Situating myself in the "every-day" of my participants, in this case, was already built into the project at hand: in order to do research on the ethics approval process, I had to go through, and receive, ethics approval myself. The ethics of this particular project are unique (and thus amplified) relative to any other social science research only insofar as the metatext is explicit; in other words, the kind of ethics gymnastics that researchers do "behind the scenes" is here laid out in all of its messy glory. The kind of research



anthropologists do—what you will see unfold in the following pages—is exactly the kind of research, Lederman concludes, that highlights how incongruous certain methods, disciplines and modes of inquiry are with the regulations and demands of formal Research Ethics. Her point is not to dismiss the system nor the people caught up in it. Instead, continued scrutiny is necessary, and useful.

This thesis is divided into three parts, and will follow the different stages of ethics approval process itself. All three parts will reflect on the local and general problems that arise because (and in the course) of the process, with the aim of differentiating between local and general problems while also acknowledging how intertwined they both can be. Chapter 1 will focus on the ethics approval process itself: how it works, who is involved, and what is happening at the University of Western Ontario (and, perhaps, at similar universities in Canada) that has led to the current tensions and frustrations between faculty members and the Ethics Office and Research Ethics Board. Chapter 2 will provide a case study of these tensions and frustrations at play by focusing on the Department of Anthropology at the University of Western Ontario, as well as by focusing on the efforts of some faculty members in the department to develop boilerplate responses and a guide for Board members to make the ethics approval process easier for students to navigate. Chapter 3 will look at the idea of ethics generally, and research ethics specifically, to come to some understanding (or, at least, recognition) of the ethics gymnastics that often go unacknowledged in the system, but yet feature prominently (even if often unconsciously) in the minds of researchers working with human subjects.

## Theory

My understanding of the ethics approval process has been informed by Marilyn Strathern's concept of "audit culture." Academics will be familiar with audit in the form of

teaching assessments, financial reports and department evaluations, but “audit” and other practices of accountability pervade all aspects of academic work, including the ethics approval process. It is useful to think of formal research ethics as part of a growing academic audit culture. As Strathern points out, “Audit practices have direct consequences, and, in the view of many, dire ones for intellectual production. Yet audit is almost impossible to critique in principle—after all, it advances values that academics generally hold dear, such as responsibility, openness of enquiry and widening of access” (2000, i)—the same can easily be said of ethics as a concept. Moreover, conceptualizing an “audit culture,” as opposed to simply “audit practices” allows us to place front and center the relationships, networks and negotiations at play within a bureaucratic system like the system that enables the ethics approval process.

I will also be drawing on the growing body of work from the anthropology of ethics, in particular Michael Lambek’s “ordinary ethics” (2015). Borrowing as it does from the philosophy of ethics, ordinary ethics, as I will use it here, seeks to ground the ethical in and through practice and engagement among situated people/actors. From this perspective, ethics is something that people are simultaneously conscious of (or, at the very least, something that can be reflected on) and a concept that remains evasive precisely because it pervades all lives lived with others. Like audit culture, ordinary ethics can help us to consider the ethics approval process as a social and relational process—it cannot exist outside of the people who must negotiate and work with (or against) one another.

Finally, my analysis in Chapter 3 is heavily influenced by Lambek’s interpretation of seriousness (2015), as well as Webb Keane’s understanding of sincerity (2002). Both Lambek and Keane apply seriousness and sincerity primarily to studies of religion and religious thought/ritual, but I have found them to be equally applicable to any situation that requires

people to grapple with abstract and seemingly universal concepts. Ethics, as it is understood here, will mean different things to different people, yet it still functions as the conceptual linchpin, both for the process itself, as well as for the conversations I was able to have by asking people about research ethics.

### A note on Identification

When it comes to protecting the identity of your participants, anonymity and confidentiality are two different things: as Wiles points out, “confidentiality refers to the need to keep identifiable information about individuals private and anonymity is one of the ways in which data are kept confidential” (2013, 54). My Letter of Information guarantees anonymity, but hindsight being what it is, it does not address the problem of what Tolich, Wiles and other qualitative researchers identify as internal confidentiality, “the ability for research participants involved in the study to identify each other in the final publication of the research” (Tolich 2016, 39). Many of my participants who served or are serving on the board pointed out that there are only a few representatives from each discipline, and it can be easy for someone to figure out who might be speaking if I identify the department that the participant is affiliated with. For this reason, I have chosen not to identify the departments with which the researchers, board members and students I interviewed are affiliated with. Some of my participants are easily identifiable, despite their not being named. These individuals agreed to be interviewed knowing that their identities would be easier to discern than others I would be talking to, and I hope to honor the trust they placed in me.

Where I can, I have tried to make it clear whether a quote is coming from a board member, researcher or student.

# Chapter 1

It will be necessary, before we can pick at the tensions that undergird the ethics approval process, to first see the forest for the trees, and understand what we are referring to when we say “the ethics approval process.” One thing that became very clear as I conducted my interviews was that few people have a clear understanding of what the ethics approval process looks like in full; in particular, people gave me conflicting reports regarding the role of the institution, the place of the State, and the place of researchers within the “Research Ethics Regime” of the University of Western Ontario. The concept of “the State” remained nebulous throughout my interviews; the people I spoke to were more concerned about the day-to-day trivialities and insipid banality of institutional oversight than they were about governance of research ethics at the federal level (to be fair to the people I spoke to, I did not directly ask them about the “politics” of ethics in that sense). However, it is worth noting that, beyond the two members of the administration that I spoke with (those being the ethics officer and the VP of Research Western) no one could give me a clear answer as to who or what the Board is answerable to. Many believe that the board is answerable to the University, and to some extent they are correct; however, I will venture to argue that these kinds of misconceptions (those that are not fully incorrect, but are perhaps based on a limited understanding of the system) hurt rather than help elucidate the frustrations researchers have with the ethics approval process. I hope the following chapter will go some way towards illuminating how the research ethics regime is organized, both at the University of Western Ontario, and as a matter of concern and oversight at the federal level. This will include a brief overview of the history of Research Ethics in Canada, with a specific focus on the creation and enforcement of “The Tri-council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.” I will then provide a brief breakdown of how the

ethics approval process happens at the University of Western Ontario, keeping in mind that the process will be specific to Western as a university with a large and robust research community. To that end, this breakdown has the potential to reflect the process as it happens at similar universities, while still remaining specific to the ways the process unfolds at Western. In that sense, the University of Western Ontario can both represent any number of universities while still remaining indelibly tied to its specific institutional culture. It will also be necessary to provide an overview of the various players I have identified as key to the process, both institutional and individual, and this will also serve to give a proper explanation of the differences and relationships between the key entities, mainly the Ethics Office and the Research Ethics Board. I found this type of explanation and differentiation somewhat lacking at the University of Western Ontario, and hope that providing one here will serve to put the system into context for the people caught up in it. Finally, this background will help us address a few key tensions present at the University of Western Ontario, and understand how they reflect both larger issues around research ethics (both in Canada and abroad) but also how these issues reflect tensions and frustrations with contemporary institutional bureaucracy.

## History of Research Ethics in Canada

Much academic business, argues William Clark, “became and is just bureaucratic” (2006, 17). This includes, and is certainly not limited to, the ethics approval process. In Canada, the bureaucratization of research ethics has, by virtue of the formalization of both research and expectations of ethical behaviour in research, followed what appears to be a fairly linear process: from the unruly early days of research unencumbered by standards and protocols, to the current Research Ethics Regime that provides guidelines for researchers, as well as oversight, usually on behalf of the State. Tracking the history of research ethics in Canada means acknowledging both

the social and political pressures, at play here and elsewhere, that drive formal oversight procedures; after all, it wasn't that long ago that research ethics was a matter of personal and professional integrity (Truman 2003). It was public concern, particularly after WWII and the findings of the Nuremburg Trials (but see Dingwall 2008 for a complication of that narrative) which led some countries to adopt more formal systems and procedures to regulate research, and ensure and/or increase public trust. In Canada, the three federal granting agencies – the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) (collectively the Tri-Council), adopted their first policy on research ethics in 1998. Titled “The Tri-council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans” (more commonly, TCPS), the policy expresses the Tri-Council’s “continuing commitment to the people of Canada to promote the ethical conduct of research involving humans” (2018, 3). To that end, compliance with the policy is mandatory for Universities in Canada that want to receive funding from the three Councils; in other words, it is mandatory for all Universities in Canada.

The policy is a “living document” (2018, 107), and from its inception has been subject to change. Early drafts of the TCPS were heavily criticized for prioritizing the biomedical perspective over the perspectives of disciplines that rely on qualitative and not quantitative methodologies (van den Hoonaard 2016, 60). A working committee was put together to draft a second version of TCPS, called TCPS2, which was released in 2014 and was last updated in 2018. A significant addition to TCPS2 was Chapter 10, titled “Qualitative Research,” which provides a comprehensive definition of qualitative research “in its many shades” (van den Hoonaard 2016, 59), and delineates the key differences between qualitative methods and biomedical/clinical approaches to research with human subjects. For the purposes of this thesis,

when I refer to “the policy” or “TCPS2” I am referring to the latest version of the Policy Statement, unless otherwise indicated.

In order to comply with TCPS2, institutions must establish at least one Research Ethics Board (REB) to oversee ethics review. REBs are “independent in their decision making and are accountable to the highest body that established them for the process of research ethics review” (2018, 70). Ethics approval, in the context of TCPS2, refers to the REB’s designation of research as either compliant or non-compliant with TCPS2, as it is interpreted by the members of the board. TCPS2 clarifies that “a REB approval applies to the ethical acceptability of the research, and does not, in itself, constitute authorization for the research to proceed” (2018, 71). In other words, ethics approval is one component of authorization to pursue a research project; at play are also project viability, research funding, department backing, institutional support and community approval (where applicable). That being said, ethics approval is often the final step before research can officially start on a proposed project, and ethics approval, or at least the indication that you will be seeking ethics approval if your project involves working with human subjects, is increasingly a prerequisite for funding, as well as for publishing in many reputable academic journals.

### The Ethics Approval Process at the University of Western Ontario

Researchers at Western who want to work with human subjects have to submit a study protocol for review to one of Western’s two Research Ethics Boards, the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) or the Health-Sciences Research Ethics Board (HSREB). The NMREB reviews research including “social, behavioural and cultural research in a non-clinical, non-patient-based

population.”<sup>1</sup> This typically covers protocols from Arts and Humanities, the Don Wright Faculty of Music, Education, Engineering, Information and Media Studies (FIMS), Law, Social Science and the Richard Ivey School of Business.<sup>2</sup> The HSREB reviews research “that takes place inside a medical or health care environment or that involves medical patients or medical patient data,”<sup>3</sup> as well as any protocols that include some level of physical intervention and/or exertion, or require the use of medical devices (such as X-ray, PET scan and MRI machines).

Deciding which board to submit to is not always clear cut. At the time that I conducted my interviews, there was debate at the two Western REBs around the definition of clinical trials, which could mean that some research that is not medical in nature, but still related to health or well-being, would be reviewed by the HSREB rather than the NMREB. This is important because the HSREB and NMREB have different requirements – for example, the NMREB does not ask for participant numbers, where the HSREB does consider sample sizing a crucial component in whether or not a research project should receive ethics approval.

Study protocols for the NMREB and the HSREB will thus look slightly different, depending on the information that is considered important and/or necessary to include in order for the research to be approved. Nevertheless, all protocols should cover the “who, what, when, where and how” of the proposed research project. Logistically, according to the Ethics Office guidelines, a study protocol “should include sufficient detail for reproducibility, and allow for changes to the document via future amendments to be reflected clearly.” The way study

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://www.uwo.ca/research/docs/ethics/good\\_bad\\_ugly\\_2018.pdf](https://www.uwo.ca/research/docs/ethics/good_bad_ugly_2018.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.uwo.ca/research/ethics/human/submission.html>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*



protocols are generated is geared towards their very specific purpose: to be commented on, and to have any changes made based on those comments properly and easily tracked.

To that end, protocols for both the NMREB and HSREB are generated through the online protocol submission platform WesternREM. WesternREM replaced the previous platform, called ROMEO, on September 7, 2017. WesternREM was meant to address a number of problems researchers were having with ROMEO, which was notoriously hard to navigate. WesternREM is billed as being more intuitive than its predecessor, and “built on the principles of transparency and consistency in submissions requirements.” WesternREM is a “smart form,” meaning new prompts will be generated based on how you fill it out. Study protocols also include any supporting documentation (e.g. recruitment material, letters of information, consent forms, study instruments, interview questions, surveys, and the like), which must also be uploaded to WesternREM. Students submitting a study protocol must list their supervisor as Principal Investigator (PI), and must get their supervisor to sign off on the protocol before it is submitted for review. Once the study protocol is submitted, the study will either go to full-board review or delegated review. Full-board review is reserved for protocols that are deemed to be above minimal risk to the participants involved, while delegated review is reserved for protocols that present minimal, or less than minimal, risk to the participants.

It is worth noting that, before 2007, “delegated review” was known as “expedited review.” The change in name was made, according to a Western guideline document from August of 2007, because the term “expedited” created an expectation that “expedited review” meant a “speedier” review with “less administrative burdens.” Unlike full board review, delegated review has no set deadline, and protocols are reviewed “approximately two weeks after

they are received.”<sup>4</sup> Full-board review occurs once a month, during the monthly full-board meetings. Any protocols submitted after the full-board deadline will be tabled until the next monthly meeting. Delegated review will be assigned to one reviewer deemed knowledgeable in the material of the study protocol. Full-board review is done by all board members present during the meeting.

It is not up to the researcher to decide whether their study protocol will go to delegated or full-board review. However, most researchers seem to have a good indication of whether their work is considered minimal or high risk—either by consulting with the Ethics Officer before submitting their application, or from experience, having submitted protocols in the past.

Once the protocol is submitted and reviewed, the researcher will receive feedback in the form of comments and recommendations for changes (turnaround is estimated at about two or three weeks for delegated review.) Responses to all comments and recommendations must be tracked in a separate document, to be re-submitted to the board along with the protocol, once changes have been applied.

If the researcher’s responses are deemed to have sufficiently addressed the comments and recommendations of the board, the researcher will receive an e-mail notification that their protocol has been approved and they may begin their research as it is outlined in their application.

## Key Players

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.uwo.ca/research/ethics/human/deadlines.html>

The process delineated above is supported by a system of key players, all part of a network of offices and individuals. These will reflect the key players at the University of Western Ontario, but overlap with most other configurations of key players found in the literature around the research ethics regime in Canada and the United States. It is worth breaking down the who and what of ethics approval, something that eluded a significant number of my participants. As one researcher pointed out, “it’s a huge apparatus, the board, the officers, this online system. I think because it’s this huge bureaucracy people lose sight of what they’re doing.”

#### Institutional/Administrative (Ethics Office and the REB)

The Office of Human Research Ethics (OHRE, more commonly the Ethics Office) houses the human research ethics team which (according to the Western Research website) “on behalf of Western's Research Ethics Boards (REB), manages the approval and monitoring process for the use of humans in research at the university and its affiliated hospitals and research institutes.”

The current Ethics staff consists of one director, one ethics coordinator, and five ethics officers, three of whom are assigned to the HSREB and two to the NMREB. The Ethics Office staff “provide consistency, expertise and administrative support to the NMREB and HSREB, and serve as a daily link between the NMREB and HSREB and the research community” (University of Western Ontario, 2019).

The Research Ethics Board (for the purposes of this study, we will be focusing on the NMREB) is “a body of researchers, community members, and others with specific expertise (e.g., in ethics, in relevant research disciplines) established by an institution to review the ethical acceptability of all research involving humans conducted within the institution’s jurisdiction or under its auspices” (TCPS2 2018, 201). When contacting board members for interviews, I worked with the February 2017 NMREB membership list, which lists 15 departments, as well as

one affiliate college, the libraries and community members (another stipulation of TCPS2 is the presence of community members on the board). Two departments, health sciences and philosophy, had no listed representatives on the board (instead, the list says members are TBD). In total, the February 2017 list shows 50 members on the board, not including ethics officers.

Board membership is a voluntary administrative assignment, the same, I was told, “as being on the admissions committee, or the grades review committee, or the programs committee. It’s just a committee assignment.” The NMREB at Western has a notoriously high turnover rate, although there are volunteers who have been serving on the board for multiple years.

OHRE staff and board members, though often conflated (especially when people complain about “The Board” as a monolith or entity unto itself) have different (though sometimes overlapping) mandates, as well as different professional and institutional obligations (Bosk 2007; Van den Hoonaard 2011). As one board member pointed out,

there’s a real status difference, that faculty like to pretend doesn’t exist, between faculty and staff, and sometimes staff feel intimidated to call out faculty or to take a strong role, because ethics is something faculty is supposed to be deciding on, that’s their job, but there is a role for staff to intervene and often staff don’t feel comfortable doing that, for good reason

Ethics officers are the main facilitators for board members and researchers, and do serve on the board, however, they are not researchers or members of faculty; they are employees of the university. Their work is mainly focused on what the ethics officer called the “administrative review” of protocols:

we would review the project when it first comes in, we would review it for completeness, and we also are qualified and ‘experts’ on the ethical issues. So, we would review the project, enter our comments, and then we delegate for delegated projects someone from that faculty or department to evaluate the project and then make their feedback. They review our feedback and agree that we can send out all our recommendations, if there’s anything that we’ve put in there that they don’t agree with, they can let us know and take it out

Ethics Officers cannot make the final decision on whether or not to approve a protocol. They serve primarily (in the Ethics Officer’s words) as the “one constant” throughout the ethics approval process, but their mandate is to facilitate the work of the board members. The mandate of the board was harder to track down; when I asked board members directly what the mandate of the board is, I got different, sometimes contradictory answers. These answers fell into three broad, sometimes overlapping categories:

- 1) The board is in place to protect participants
- 2) The board is in place to ensure compliance with TCPS2
- 3) The board is in place to protect the university

The official mandate, as far as I have been able to tell, is provided in the Standard Operating Procedure documents (available on the Research Western website). Western’s NMREB Standard Operating Procedure<sup>5</sup> covering “Duties of NMREB Members” states that “each NMREB member’s primary duty is the protection and welfare of the individual person(s) who are serving as participants in research.” The ethics officer made it clear to me during our interview that an important part of their role is “to consider things from the participant’s perspective.” Still, board

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<sup>5</sup> All SOP documents for both the NMREB and HSREB are available through the Research Western website

members were either not properly educated on the specific mandate of the board, or if they had been, they admitted to not retaining the mandate in full.

I also received varying responses when it came to the training board members received, although newer board members seemed to have received more thorough and standard training (often involving sitting in on board meetings, as well as completing the TCPS2 Core Tutorial) than board members who had been serving many years. In addition to initial training, board members will go on retreats, where they can raise key issues and have discussions as a group. The chair of the board noted that board members will often complain about the nature of the board during retreats, and board members will frequently bring up their concerns that the board is overreaching its mandate. When complaining about the board, board members themselves tend to refer to the board as an entity unto itself, to which the various ills of the ethics approval process can be attributed (we will explore this further below). The chair of the board was quick to point out to me that “it’s important to bear in mind that the board is not a person, it’s a democratic entity” and (perhaps only slightly contradictorily) “there’s no one entity called the board that makes decisions about how TCPS2 is interpreted.” Moreover, the chair wanted to make it clear to me that the board (or, the members of the board) is bound by policy, and cannot exercise control (or make substantial changes) beyond the parameters of the policy. It is worth noting that several board members admitted that they had a poor grasp of policy, with many not having gone back to it in full since completing the TCPS2 Core Tutorial when they first started on the Board. This can affect how board members approach review, particularly where policy parameters are concerned. As one board member pointed out,

we’re not really trained in that kind of [administrative] review, the ethics officers are, they know the tri-council policies a lot better than we do, and they read a lot more of

these, and they see different iterations of these as they get refined. So, on the one hand you need the faculty in the room to talk about and make sure that it's being reviewed, but they're a potential problem as well, they can derail it because they get too...you can have disciplinary differences or you can have personal rivalries...anything really, people are fallible

In that sense, the chair is right to caution against seeing the Board as an "entity."

## Researchers

When we talk about researchers in the context of ethics approval, we are talking about researchers who work with human subjects. However, although all researchers seeking ethics approval work with human subjects, not all researchers who work with human subjects need to apply for ethics approval. Article 2 of Chapter 2 of TCPS2 covers what kind of research requires research ethics review. Research, in this case, is defined as "an undertaking intended to extend knowledge through a disciplined inquiry and/or systematic investigation" (2018, 13).<sup>6</sup> The term "disciplined inquiry" refers to "an inquiry that is conducted with the expectation that the method, results and conclusions will be able to withstand the scrutiny of the relevant research community" (2018, 13). Article 2.2 covers research that is exempt from Research Ethics Board review, and is limited to research that relies *exclusively* on information that is publicly available, or in the public domain (2018, 15). Articles 2.5 and 2.6 cover activities not requiring Research Ethics Board review and these activities fall broadly into two categories: "evaluations" (e.g.

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that during one of my interviews with the ethics officer, they pointed out that the definition for research in TCPS2 is different from the definition for research found in Western's Collective Agreement

quality assurance studies, performance reviews, etc.) and “creative practice” (2018, 18-19).

TCPS2 clarifies that

A determination that research is the intended purpose of the undertaking is key for differentiating activities that require ethics review by an REB and those that do not. In some cases, it can be difficult to make this distinction, underscoring the need to have reviewers or ad hoc advisors who can assist with this determination. It is important to note that choice of methodology and/or intent or ability to publish findings are not factors that determine whether an activity is research requiring ethics review (2018, 14)

Significantly, journalists (and journalism majors) do not have to undergo research ethics review.

This was a source of frustration for some of the researchers and board members I spoke with, and one board member admitted that the issue had come up during a monthly board meeting. One researcher noted that “it’s kind of a two-way street that if you want to consider in-depth journalistic writing to be scholarly writing, then should it go through ethics? Is going through ethics the hallmark of scholarship, is that one of the things we make you do in order to call it scholarship?” As a student I spoke to pointed out, “nobody is going after the Toronto Star for not going through an Ethics Board.”

Interviews, particularly with public figures, or more intimate work with one or a few individuals, often falls into this murky middle ground between “something like journalism” and “research” (as defined by TCPS2). One researcher mentioned a specific case in which an article they were looking to write, and had already secured interviews for, was significantly delayed by ethics:



I had to have an LOI written out for every individual that I already had e-mail correspondence from saying, 'sure, I can help out with this article.' Absolutely no risk at all to them, and it's really slowed down this whole process. I have to honestly say it is because there is no risk to these individuals. The interview consists of [a small number of] questions...

What is and isn't research, as well as who does and does not have to undergo ethics review continues to be a matter of contention for the board, and will likely be a matter of contention as research expands beyond the known parameters established in TCPS2. Online research, as well as creative and community-based research practices will undoubtedly become ground in the coming years for debate about the exclusion/inclusion parameters of TCPS2, and Research Ethics Boards will need to make decisions based more on their interpretation of policy than on clear policy directive.<sup>7</sup>

## Students

Graduate students are in a peculiar position, being researchers in name, yet not possessing any of the foundational or institutional knowledge of seasoned researchers. Students have to rely on their supervisors and departments to prepare them for research ethics, and preparation is not standard across the university. Van den Hoonaard found that students' perspective on research ethics can be significantly affected by their supervisor's position on the necessity and validity of the ethics approval process (2011, 230), and I find that to be true of students at the University of Western Ontario as well. Although students take for granted that they have to complete the ethics

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<sup>7</sup> although an American example, see Shore et al. 2011 for a comprehensive guide to the key differences between Institutional and community-based research ethics requirements; for an overlook of the issues with internet ethics, see Hesse-Biber and Griffin 2013.

approval process (generally shortened to “going through ethics”), the few I spoke to formally (and the many I know socially) often reflected faculty members’ cynicism regarding the process. To that end, many of the students I spoke to were unaware of many aspects of the ethics approval process, including resources meant to help them during the process, such as the ethics officer’s availability for consultation during office hours.

Additionally, a student’s supervisor, and not the student themselves, are the Principle Investigator on a protocol, meaning students need their supervisors to sign off on their protocol before they are allowed to submit it for review. One student I spoke to met with significant roadblocks because of an uneasy relationship with their supervisor, and a faculty member in a supervisory position admitted that they feel uneasy being in charge of a student’s protocol. Although this faculty member understood that supervisors have a responsibility towards their students, they did admit that having the legal responsibility for a student’s project “makes me reluctant to encourage my students to do research with human subjects, because of that fear and that worry.”

All these things put together put graduate students at a significant disadvantage when it comes to the ethics approval process. One board member admitted that, “if you want to do a kind of ‘where is the systemic bias here’ it’s with the grad students.” Delays in approval, for example, which can sometimes eat months of research, while frustrating for faculty researchers, can be potentially disastrous to student researchers, particularly MA students, who typically only have a small window of time within which to conduct their research. Taking the time to push back against board recommendations is also a luxury few students can afford (for a specific example from the University of Western Ontario, see Mason et al. 2016), meaning student research must often be altered to suit the (perceived) restrictions of research ethics.

Missing from the list of key players are, perhaps glaringly, the participants of research themselves. In some way, my participants served as the participant voice, but it is important to keep in mind that in this context, my participants probably do not reflect most participants in most studies at Western. This thesis is more concerned with the actors entangled in the bureaucracy of research ethics; those who are recognized as actants in the system. Studies on audit culture argue that actors in auditing systems “are constructed as ‘accountable selves’ and free agents, who succeed by mobilizing their resources and managing their behavior to optimize ‘what counts’” (Shore and Wright 2015, 422). In other words, the subject position of such actors is necessarily transformed by the system they are now implicated in. Research Ethics and the ethics approval process falls comfortably into the study of audit culture as a process that measures and evaluates research, making it more legible to bureaucracies (see Strathern 2000). One board member pointed out that

one of the things about audit culture is that somebody who has no immediate awareness or familiarity with the matters at hand, a good auditing system is one that allows them to arrive at the judgement based upon the reports given to them, even if they know nothing about the substance...but in that sense auditing depends on ignorance and it’s trying to produce something based on some kind of veil of ignorance between the auditors and the practitioners. And that’s why this sense of a split between researcher and board member sounds like a split, because the audit thing is really meant for someone who doesn’t have a horse in the race, to figure out what’s going on

This board member did not believe that the ethics approval process represents a “good auditing system,” and the key tensions identified by participants reflect and reinforce that perspective. The key tensions at the University of Western Ontario also reflect tensions identified in the

literature around research ethics, but they are, in a way, particular to the people enmeshed in the system at the University of Western Ontario. These tensions are worth exploring, however briefly, in the hopes of figuring out “what’s going on.”

### Key Tensions at the University of Western Ontario

This is by no means a definitive list of all the various tensions and grievances researchers at the University of Western Ontario have with the ethics approval process. They do, however, represent the most common complaints people had about the process, and reflect wider dissatisfaction with the University system as a whole, which will be addressed shortly. I have also limited myself to three key tensions for the sake of (relative) brevity: what I have termed “bullshit work,” tensions around whether board concerns are “methodological versus ethical” as well as questions of “ethics and liability.” I feel that these three complaints adequately encompass a wide enough swath of the issues the people I spoke with have with the ethics approval process. I have additionally broken them down to reflect the different stages of the process, from filling out the research protocol, to review, to the “aftermath” of completion, submission and approval:

#### Bullshit Work

As coined by anthropologist David Graeber, “bullshit jobs” (2013) are the meaningless administrative tasks office workers are subject to that seem to exist only to take up time. The bullshit work of bullshit jobs more often than not consists of filling out forms – a surfeit of documents, whether paper or electronic, that take time to complete, require a significant amount of intellectual energy, yet simultaneously do little to challenge you in a way that *feels* meaningful. One participant I spoke to wondered whether “there may be a sense among some

safely ensconced with work in academia that such ‘bullshit’ is seeping in in ways that risk turning the work of scholarship and teaching into just another bullshit job?”

The bullshit work of ethics approval is centered on the filling out, submission and subsequent resubmission (after review) of the research protocol. “The form” is the collective referent for the WesternREM smart form, which makes up the bulk of your research protocol. Alongside the smart form, researchers must also submit “clean” (and then, subsequently, “tracked”) copies of any additional documents that will be required for their research project. As noted above, this includes documents like the letter of information, consent form, recruitment material, etc. Before the form, protocols were physical documents that had to be submitted to the board for review. Riles argues that “documents are paradigmatic artifacts of modern knowledge practices;” (2006, 2) having lost a physical paper trail, researchers have perhaps gained an easy short-hand for, and a paradigm of, bullshit work. Research protocols are nothing more than a series of documents, meant to “demarcate research from nonresearch by identifying its locations, time frames, personnel, and procedures” (Lederman 2007a, 310) but they come to mean so much more, and significantly less, than the seemingly simple procedure to which they are essential; more, because they are now chores we are submitted to, and less, because they are not a chore we take particularly seriously (see Bosk 2007, 196-197). Filling out the form is often a perfunctory exercise; for some of the faculty members I spoke with who are familiar with the process, the form is an afterthought – it does not contribute in a significant way to the design of their protocol outside of the context of the ethics approval process, nor does it reflect the ethical considerations put into their project.

And yet, the purpose of the form, according to the ethics officer, is not perfunctory: “rather than looking at them as black and white boxes to check off or not check off,” they told me,

It's a way of informing the whole project, the whole process, and I think that's so important to think about the integrity of the project, the integrity of the research enterprise as a whole that gets lost because of the tensions, it gets reduced to an application on the computer as opposed to really recognizing the underlying reason that we're here to begin with

To that end, the form is subject to change, in order to better reflect contemporary research practices, as well as any major changes in policy or policy interpretation. As an example, the ethics officer pointed out that "if you're using the LOI template from 2013, it's not going to be the same...we're continually evolving as we do this work, and different scenarios come up." The changes are another source of frustration: as a perfunctory exercise, filling out the form is often treated like a game of fill-in-the-blank. Students in particular are often given old, successful protocols as templates for their own research protocols, or they will seek out other students who have completed protocols for advice and guidance if their supervisor is unable (or unwilling) to guide them through the process. One student called what circulates in these peer networks "folk knowledge," passed down from one generation of students to the next. Relying on folk knowledge, says the ethics officer, will likely cause more problems than will be solved, in essence because students are using out of date information. They recommend relying on the guidance documents provided by the Ethics Office through the WesternREM form. The problem is that for many of the people I spoke with, the guidance documents can feel as obscure, alienating and "bullshit" as the form itself. A lot of work goes into ensuring that the guidance documents accurately reflect what researchers need to have in their protocol in order to ensure an expedient review, but the ethics officer admitted that it can be difficult to strike the right balance for every department and discipline with a stake in the process: "we try to guide the form as

much as possible to try and pull out the necessary information. It's hard to be honest. Think also to human error." Although the guidance documents are in place to mitigate some of that human error, that they are themselves only capable of reflecting the information available to the people who write them at the time that they are written can make the use of them feel like another futile part of the ethics exercise, no matter the care and precision that goes into formulating them.

One board member admitted that the exercise of completing the form can feel like jumping through so many hoops. They acknowledged that there are some times where some questions prompt people to think about something in a new way, "but it can also be constraining and drive thought in an unproductive way too. There's no guarantee either way." The changes that get introduced, in this board member's estimation, "break things down in a slightly different way and I think they seem to be a little more productive in terms of the thinking aspect of it. But I do think that usually [researchers] will design the study first, then [they] will consider the ethics separately, and so [the form] is not an essential part of the thinking process for most people."

### Methodological versus Ethical

Once the form is submitted, it is reviewed (as stated earlier, either at the delegated or full board level), and the researcher will receive feedback in the form of comments and recommendations. A common complaint, from both board members providing feedback, as well as from the researchers receiving the feedback, is that comments tend to be "methodological and not ethical," or similarly "clerical and not ethical." Methodological, because the comments are taken as critical of a discipline's methodological practice, and clerical, because the comments are taken as unnecessarily nitpicky, particularly over matters of grammar, sentence structure and the like. I take these two complaints to be gesturing largely to the same underlying tension, the fear of what Haggerty coined "ethics creep," wherein "REBs have unintentionally expanded their

mandate to include a host of groups and practices that were undoubtedly not anticipated in the original research ethics formulations” (2004, 392).

When talking to board members, this supposed “creep” into methodological matters often lay in the positivist mindset of *other* board members, or else a rigidity in thinking when it came to accepting research methods deemed outside the norm established by the board’s interpretation of TCPS2. The idea that there is a bias towards quantitative methods over qualitative methods was shared by a number of the board members and researchers I spoke with—keeping in mind that most of the people I interviewed were qualitative researchers. Literature from the social sciences supports the worry that qualitative work is being in some way disenfranchised through the ethics approval process. Tolich (2016a) makes the case for the uniqueness of qualitative research, while Israel and Hay chart the relationship between social scientists and institutional ethics oversight, noting that “social scientists are angry and frustrated, their work is being constrained and distorted by regulators of ethical practice who do not necessarily understand social science research” (2006, 1). Dingwall (2008), amongst others, makes the case against ethical regulation for social sciences and humanities, again leaning on the argument that qualitative methods are unique, and ill-suited to ethical regulation as it exists within the current ethics regulation system.

That being said, the handful of researchers I spoke to who adopt primarily quantitative methods *also* told me they feel their work is unfairly criticized, and they too evoked the “methodological and not ethical” refrain. When I asked board members about this criticism, many echoed the sentiment, even as they acknowledged (or pondered on) the fact that, in the case of ethics approval, the divide between “methods” and “ethics” isn’t nearly as clear cut as we may like it to be. One pointed out that



People on the board often say, ‘we’re not here to judge the methodology we’re here to judge the ethics’ but it seems to me, you can never fully separate those things. There’s always going to be a zone where they overlap, and there does seem to be the possibility for, and it rarely comes up, where the methods that the study is proposing are exposing the participant or the researcher to some kind of significant risk

It is important to note that there is no standard answer across the board (at least, as far as I could tell from the board members I managed to speak to) as to where that zone lies. As another board member pointed out, in a similar vein to the answer above, “methodological frameworks have an ethical dimension,” but

there are other aspects of one’s study that also have an ethical dimension, above and beyond methodology. The theories that we choose, as analytic frameworks for our studies, those are ethical choices. And the ethics board isn’t concerned with that because it’s not viewed as a choice that would necessarily have a direct impact on the participants, that would be something that has a direct impact on how the data is analyzed later, so I’m not suggesting that they take that on as well, but I don’t think ‘ethics’ is the same as methodology, they are very separate things. Methodology is how you are carrying out your study, and there are ethical aspects to that

When I asked the ethics officer about the conflation of ethics and methods, they pointed out that some methods will have more “ethical implications” than other methods: “we look at the risk of the work. Very similarly, someone doing surgery, their method is going to be more scrutinized than someone doing a survey, so we definitely don’t discriminate against methods, but we look at the associated implications of it.” Both the ethics officer and chair of the board assured me that it is not the board’s job to scrutinize the methods of any one discipline or school of research. The

ethics officer and chair also both pointed out to me that no one research method is singled out for added scrutiny, and that there have been few cases, if any, of the board putting a stop to research. Some research will be delayed, but the “methodological” comments are often a way for the board to gather more information, not punish or malign any one approach to research:

Explain to us what you mean. It feels confrontational because if the board is baffled and doesn't understand what you're doing, the board says, 'you're not approved yet.' But note that the board, in my experience, only once has the board said, 'no, you can't do this research.' Instead, the board usually says, 'please give us more' so that we know what we're approving

Tolich notes that research jargon, when not properly defined, can “antagonize the ethics committee” (2016a, 36). One board member admitted that

Of course in [my discipline] we speak plain, ordinary English, but these [other] people are speaking gobbledygook, and that's how they feel about us. If it has a good effect, the kinds of difficulties one has, is it puts a premium on dropping the buzzwords and saying what you mean, and if you can do that I actually think there is an ethical side to that which they don't see as an ethical issue...at some point, maybe ethics is drawing to that

That being said, the problem of jargon cuts both ways. Researchers I spoke with often complained that the form forces them to adopt clinical language that is not well adapted to their style or method of research. Additionally, the language can feel obtuse; as one researcher noted, “no one talks like that.” In order to conform to the normative language of the protocol guidelines, certain methods have to be massaged to fit. It can happen that in their attempt to conform,

researchers lose something in translation. We will come back to the issue of translation in Chapter 2.

### Ethics and Liability

At the University of Western Ontario, and elsewhere, there is the overriding suspicion that research ethics is nothing more than a means for institutions to cover their own asses. “The attraction *for institutions* of singling out ‘ethics,’” (emphasis in original) argues Lambek, “is as a means to avoid liability” (2015, 268). In her dealings with the Research Ethics Board at Western, Mason, whose study was shut down after (but not due to) complaints from local activists, argues that the REB’s fear of litigation drove some of the decision making that led to the closure of her study, and that “an increasing awareness of the willingness of REBs to view their work in legalistic, contractual terms opens up research further to stoppage by shrewd activists” (2016, 64). One researcher pointed out that “I’m not sure where ethics ends and liability begins in all these deliberations,” while another noted that the REB appears to be more concerned with protecting the University than it is with protecting researchers or participants. A board member admitted that during deliberations and board meetings, “sometimes it feels like all we’re doing is trying not to get sued.”

What is “owed” to the university in terms of prioritizing institutional security lays bare some of the uncomfortable realities of being both researcher and employee of the institution. As one researcher pointed out to me,

we are not just following some mystical vocation, we are employees of this institution and there are all kinds of things that create parameters for the work we do, like the fact that in teaching we need to give 15% of the grade before the drop deadline. That’s not a question of academic freedom, that’s just a rule, and we are bound by a whole series of

rules. And so similarly the university is bound by the obligation to oversee research and I don't think that we would want that to not be the case. I think that we can imagine all kinds of things that could happen in research, you know, clinical trials of all kinds, that we would not want there to be no oversight in. I think we feel aggrieved because we feel like we're not understood

The chair of the Board likewise centered the double identity of the academic researcher, pointing out that everyone on the board is a member of the University of Western Ontario research community: "we all look better if our university has more research output. The more effective Western is as a university, the better my career goes, and that's true of every single person in that room."

Board members did not uniformly see their role as institutional; some saw their role as a board member as separate from their role as researcher. Others did not believe you could separate the two, and that being a researcher was integral to informing their role as a board member. If those board members believed that the Board is in place to protect the university, or felt that the Board itself often seemed more concerned with liability than the ethics of the project, then they themselves espoused the conviction that the institution is secondary to their consideration of participants and fellow researchers.

To call these merely "complaints" does the tensions listed above a slight disservice. At the same time, it is worth noting that many of these tensions are reflective of wider institutional tensions and divisions (Jaspers et al 2013); not for nothing that the University is often singled out as the culprit of any maleficence or frustration. As one board member noted,

it really does seem like the local culture of the university, and of the faculty on the board, but also of the research unit really has a big impact. I know one of the people who wrote

the qualitative researcher report that informed the development of the TCPS2 and talking to them about the ethics procedures at their university [it became clear] that we don't do it that way at all

Several of the researchers and board members I spoke to indicated that they believed the University of Western Ontario has an unnecessarily strict ethics approval process, especially compared to other universities in Canada. Counter to that prevailing feeling, the ethics officer told me that

I've gone to the annual Canadian Association of Research Ethics Board Conference for the past two years...I was actually really comforted talking to other colleagues from other institutions who are all dealing with...we all have the same struggles, and we are all trying to balance it as much as possible, and some of the impressions that I got was that actually other institutions have been more strict, and...more black and white on certain issues, whereas we were a little more open to the grey, but also understanding the importance of balancing what do the guidelines say, how are we applying these articles, how does it get applied in practice...but every board does it differently, and every board is set up differently...some boards are still doing paper reviews, some boards the ethics officers are literally just administrative reviews, whereas we play a heavier role in the process here, so it's very varied by institution...but I would be interested...I wonder if it's just the timeline, because some institutions are small, so they have fewer faculty, fewer submissions, so they can get through them faster, so I think it's really difficult to say where...I think it's easy to say we're more strict, and that it's harder to get through us, but I think there's probably a lot of variables that contribute to that

Key to this response, I believe, is the heavy role the board and administrative staff play in the process. It is interesting, then, to counter the above issues with what became key to the responses I received when I brought up one or the other issue with the VP of Research Western, or with the ethics officer. Never unkindly, both made the point that, if researchers at the University of Western are having problems with the system as it currently exists, they are in the unique position to be able to do something about it; after all, the REB is made up almost entirely of their fellow researchers.

It's a point made elsewhere, primarily by Bosk (2007), who argues that ethnographers in particular, but researchers in general, lack a certain degree of self-reflexivity when it comes to their own position within the system they complain about (however legitimate those complaints may be). The board members I spoke with were not lacking in self-awareness. The majority of the board members I spoke to were, to some extent, able to recognize their own complicity within the system. Some disparaged it, others were resigned to it. Some still insisted that the majority of the problems came from the willful misunderstanding of certain actors, but it is interesting to note that often, the board members I spoke with who were most critical of other board members were equally critical (some might say dismissive) of the methods and practices of other disciplines, in ways not dissimilar to the ways in which they complained their own methods and practices were being dismissed.

### The Issue of Trust

This perceived dismissal often centers on the idea of trust, particularly trust in the researchers. Jaspers argues that

Local, institutional context of RECs [Research Ethics Committees] plays an important role in ethical review. Even in a quite formal, bureaucratic REC, interpersonal trust and knowledge of local peculiarities played an important role in the ethical review process. Trustworthiness is not only judged on professional/expert reputation, but also on the basis of a REC's previous experiences with a researcher and his or her ability to deal with the REC's criticisms (2013, 316)

The chair of the board assured me that there is no burden of proof placed on researchers: "we believe them...the number of times that it's said, 'well, we'll just have to trust our colleague on this' is quite high." However, when I asked board members and researchers whether the board operated on the premise of "guilty until proven innocent," or "innocent until proven guilty," the majority admitted that they felt it was "guilty until proven innocent." The chair of the board tried to caution me against looking at ethics review as a judicial proceeding, but many of the people I spoke to used the language of judgement and sanctions to describe their experiences with the process and the board. The ethics officer noted that it can be easy to take the feedback as a form of judgement on the quality (and validity) of the research project:

when you receive back a list of recommendations, those are all... they're perceived as all the things you've done wrong, and I realize when we submit assignments for grading, we get a grade, we might get some feedback, but we're not usually aiming for 100% whereas with the ethics application it's almost like trying to get to that 100% and pinpointing all the errors, and I can imagine how frustrating that is, and as you said, as researchers, almost taking that personally

For Lambek, judgement is a form of evaluation "with respect to situations, actions, and, cumulatively, actors, persons or characters" (2010, 42). Judgement comes from others (therefore

it is implicitly social and thus conventional) and is a form of self-construction. The chair and ethics officer may not see the ethics approval process as judicial, but judgement permeates far beyond legal judgement and adjudication. The judgement from the Board is often interpreted as a set of barriers being placed on research, something board members are acutely attuned to. One board member admitted “sometimes members on the board mistake their role not as an enabler of research but as a barrier to research, and often we approach these protocols the wrong way. We’re looking for problems [in the protocols] rather than looking for what works.” Another board member attributed this attitude on the board to a form of group think:

if the presumption is that everybody is operating in good faith, you might give them the benefit of the doubt. But, if you’re using the strong version of the precautionary principle, which is, ‘if there’s any doubt, treat it as serious,’ then all of a sudden it turns the other way around, and the general attitude that I saw [on the board] was...somebody would come up with a problem, and, not to be outdone, someone else would spot a problem too! And they’re off to the races!

Other board members made similar observations, and we begin to see a glimpse of the board culture at the University of Western Ontario (but see van den Hoonaard 2011 and Lederman 2006 for eerily similar board experiences). Bosk (2007), along with other ethnographers such as Lederman (2007b), argue that the “idiosyncratic local problems” (Bosk 2007, 206) of ethics oversight, once parsed from the problems generic to the review process across institutions, can more easily be solved through “local solutions,” particularly through the education of, and engagement with, administrative staff and board members. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the Department of Anthropology at the University of Western Ontario offers a good example of what that engagement can look like in practice, and it is worth considering what



actually happens when local solutions are implemented in a system that still contends with the generic problems inherent to the processes at play.

## Chapter 2

In Chapter 1 we were introduced to the ethics approval process as it unfolds at the University of Western Ontario. We were also introduced to the key players in the process, including board members, Ethics Office staff, researchers and students. In turn, we learned about the various idiosyncratic and generic problems several of these key players have with formal research ethics, many of which focus on a seeming disjuncture between the expectations of the Board, interpretations of TCPS2, and researchers' understanding of their own work and the ethical components of that work. Chapter 2 will serve to laser in on some of these idiosyncratic and generic problems by focusing on the specific tensions between the Department of Anthropology and the REB at the University of Western Ontario. This is, in part, because these specific tensions are what drove me to write this thesis. However, I venture to argue that these tensions are also representative of larger issues with research ethics in general, and also of the state of affairs at the University of Western Ontario specifically. Lederman and Bosk argue that local problems require local solutions. To that end, the Department of Anthropology is one of the few departments I was able to identify who have been dialoguing with the Ethics Office and Research Ethics Board, though some may argue that this dialogue has at times been contentious, or unproductive. Nevertheless, it has been consistent, and serves as a useful case study for how local solutions can play out at a University like the University of Western Ontario.

In addition, I want to make the case for why these specific tensions feel so important, and consequential, to the members of the Department of Anthropology. Tracing anthropology's somewhat singular disciplinary trajectory will hopefully shed some light, for those unfamiliar

with the discipline, on why anthropologists often make the case that ours is an exceptional calling. At the same time, I also hope to complicate some of that “exceptionalism.”

## The Department of Anthropology at the University of Western Ontario

Taking up Lederman’s call to “educate your board,” the socio-cultural and linguistic anthropology researchers in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Western Ontario (many of whom have students under their supervision submitting for ethics approval) put together a guide for the board explaining and justifying common methods in anthropology, particularly participant observation (see Appendix C for the full guide). Participant observation and other common methods and approaches such as snowball sampling have been the source of tension between the Department of Anthropology and the Ethics Office, with members of the department feeling that anthropological methods have been at a disadvantage when it comes to expedient ethics approval.

The guide, titled “Protocols Guidance for Anthropology Applicants: Participant Observation” was prepared for members of the REB and is attached to the ethics protocols of researchers from the Department of Anthropology. At the time that I was conducting my interviews the guide was still in development, although I believed during that time that the guide was in circulation, either to the Ethics Office administrative staff, or to all board members. When I asked board members if they had heard about, or read, the guide, most indicated that they had not, or if they had, they did not remember what it said.

The guide was developed by Anthropology faculty members—primarily from the Socio-Cultural and Linguistic streams of Anthropology—after several discussions and meetings with the staff members at the Ethics Office. Lederman notes that one of the most challenging aspects

of “educating your board” is finding ways of “effectively communicating the rationale for improvisational, informant-driven, open-endedness in informal interviewing and participant observation” (2007b, 34). This was the driving force behind those early discussions and meetings; of particular concern for the Department of Anthropology at Western was how misunderstandings of standard anthropological practices (like participant-observation) often led to significant delays in protocol approval. The Board, the Chair assured me, is not intended to be a roadblock to anthropological research. Methods like participant-observation, however, do need to be explained to the board in a way that is comprehensible *to the board*. Lederman found that using the boilerplate responses generated by her department had a “helpful, familiarizing effect” on board members, leading to fewer problems during the review process.

The anthropology guide is in its early days, but one problem that has been consistent, not only for the anthropology department, but many other primarily qualitatively driven disciplines at Western, is the high turnover rate of the board. This means that the guide, even if it is used consistently by researchers in anthropology, may not have the same familiarizing effect that Lederman describes (see Angell et al. 2006 for consistency in decision making by REBs).

Still, the guide demonstrates an effort on the part of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Western Ontario to make certain anthropological approaches legible to the Board. There are examples of these kinds of guides and boilerplate responses from Anthropology Departments across Canada and the United States, each tailored, as Lederman recommends, to the specific institutional board they are dealing with. This approach is not unique to anthropology, nor is anthropology uniquely singled out by REBs and IRBs in Canada and the United States.

## What is Anthropology?

It stands to reason that part of the problem is that anthropologists are not very good at explaining, in lay terms, what it is that they do (though the guide serves as an attempt to remedy that, somewhat). A few of the anthropologists I spoke to admitted as much: anthropologists, I was told, may have an easier time telling people what we are not and do not do than letting people know what we are and how we do our jobs. As one anthropologist I spoke to put it, “the broader component for our department and the discipline as a whole might be to think about how to define the research we do in a positive way, not in a negative way: if it’s not a clinical trial, if it’s not big data, if it’s not...science...what is it?”

Another anthropologist I spoke to pointed out that

anthropology’s really different...even from some forms of sociology, certainly psychology. It’s not just qualitative, it’s actually more than that, because you can still have qualitative research but follow a strict model of what is your research plan, whereas we just build up from what we hear and observe, and what people want to talk to us about and we don’t ever really know where it’s going

This is a good answer when you’re talking to another anthropologist, but runs into the same problem of placing more emphasis on what anthropology *isn’t*: it isn’t sociology, and it definitely isn’t psychology.

If you look on the Department of Anthropology website, a little blurb on the side asks visitors, “Did you know? Anthropology is dedicated to documenting and understanding human beings, wherever and whenever they live(d), in both their cultural and biological dimensions. We study the many ways of being human in the past, in the present, at home and around the world.”

Many people do not know what anthropology is, nor what anthropologists do, and anthropologists have identified that as a key problem for the discipline as a whole, without ever really getting to an answer that has been satisfactory enough to see widespread use. If people are familiar with anthropology, it might be through the concept of “culture,” which has been the source of contention and debate within the discipline since the late 70s. Culture’s appropriation as a concept into the common lexicon, and its subsequent misuse (according to anthropologists) led to a movement in the late 80s and early 90s to get rid of the concept altogether (see Geertz 1973; Abu-Lughod 1991; Friedman 1994; Borofsky 1994; Appadurai 1996). As one anthropologist I spoke to put it, “we gave up [on culture], so now we have a method as opposed to a central concept.”

The guide, as noted above, is focused on defining, for the Board, the method that has de facto become anthropology’s calling card. Participant Observation, according to the guide

involves living explicitly as a researcher among the people whose circumstances we seek to understand, and interacting with them by conversing with them in their own languages, fitting in with their rhythms of life, participating with them in those activities to which we are invited, and abiding by our hosts’ preferences with regard to note-taking and other forms of recording. Participant observation contrasts with interviewing and conventional experimental procedures insofar as it does not involve extracting participants from their normal social settings (Lederman & Dobrin 2011, 5. *Cited in original source*)

Pels argues that anthropologists “in the field or in writing can always be suspected of fraud” (1999, 107). Fieldwork, in the context of participant observation as it is described above, often involves a doubling of the anthropologist, what Pels calls the anthropologist’s “duplex” position, “situated, like a trickster, in between different moralities and epistemes” (2000, 136).

What this means for the anthropologists I spoke to is that participant observation makes for a messy fieldwork experience, in the sense that you can't always anticipate what will happen once you are in what anthropologist Margaret Mead called "the knife-edge present" of the field. As one anthropologist I spoke to put it

in some ways it's like naturalistic observation, but the thing is, you don't construct the context, you identify the context and work within it, and so, among other things is, watching things happen and how people respond to it and produce situations, as opposed to hypotheticals, 'what would you...' or, 'how do you feel about...' or any of those things

Moreover, anthropologists develop close, often long-lasting relationships with the people they work with: a "duplex" position, in this case, encompasses not only the different "moralities and epistemes" that an anthropologist must juggle and contend with (whether those be legal, institutional, professional, personal etc.) but also the different obligations implied (or averred) therein. As one anthropologist I spoke to told me, "you have these other obligations. And I think this is part of the larger issue, that we have these ongoing relationships with the communities where we work, so we're actually bound as much by that as by any institutional rules."

Pels argues that "in a sense, all scientific methodologies...are meant to constitute a subject that is universal and transparent, a non-presence that can serve as a perfectly neutral carrier of truth" (2000, 153). To some extent, anthropologists try to side-step the problematic implications of the "non-presence" by adopting a hyper-presence, and an accompanying hyper-awareness of the implications of being a presence amongst the people they work with (Castañeda 2006; Bosk 2007). Still, as Pels notes above, in the field and in writing, the anthropologist can be suspect, if not outright duplicitous. This is by no means a malicious trickery, only that, as

Lambek points out, “it is not sufficient to assure interlocutors of our trustworthiness or to fool ourselves that being trustworthy is a simple matter of goodwill, since, in the end, (and actually all along), we do two big things that challenge this: we leave and we write” (2015, 275).

*What* an anthropologist will end up writing about is also a matter of uncertainty. As another anthropologist put it,

we don’t always know at the moment of collecting the data how we’re going to use it, so you can’t exactly warn [participants] and say ‘here’s what might happen’ because you’re going to write about it, in whatever way, and the thing that turns out to be interesting to write about is something other than what it is you were talking about

Does formal research ethics lay bare the fraud?

### History of Ethics in Anthropology

To answer that question, it is worth considering what ethical standards and practices anthropologists have in addition to formal research ethics (for the sake of brevity, and for the purposes of this thesis, I will limit myself to the professional standards established by the American Anthropological Association). As one anthropologist I spoke to put it,

we have our own ethical standards, and they’re not about the [standards set by TCPS2], and they often go well beyond what the rules are. Whether it has to do with sensitive, private information that we wouldn’t write about, or whether it has to do with sensitive, private information in a political context which would put our research participants at risk...I find that institutional process...the standard is actually lower, but it’s pickier

Here, the meaning is, I believe, more explicitly about the personal ethical standards individual anthropologists cultivate as they develop relationships with their research participants (more



often called “collaborators,” or, simply, “the people we work with”). However, there is also implicit in this statement the history of ethics in Anthropology. I argue that the history of ethics in anthropology cannot be extricated from the often visceral response many anthropologists have towards formal research ethics. One anthropologist admitted that

it may be that as a discipline we have gone through this process of self-critique and questioning issues that relate to representation, and also the impact that our research has had on communities and people all over the world and all that. Maybe it’s because of that that I don’t feel that this [points to the LOI] is where anthropology students get their guidance as pertains to ethical behaviour in the field

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) developed its first Code of Ethics in 1971, as a direct result of mounting protests within the membership over counterinsurgency research for the US government. The “Principles of Personal Responsibility” (PPR), as it was initially called, was fully ratified in the mid-80s, and significantly modified in the 90s and early 2010s (see Mill 2003; Horowitz 1973). The Code started as a direct response to clandestine research, and initially prohibited anthropologists from conducting state-sponsored research. Later, arguably more anodyne iterations (Berreman 1991), scrubbed the prohibition on clandestine government research, and shifted the PPR’s priority from adjudication to “ethics education” (Mill 2003, 49). Today, there is no structural enforcement of the Principles; whatever authority the PPR carries is to be found in the self-regulation of those who are meant to abide by it. As Pels notes, the PPR makes room for ambivalence, for the “humanity” in the “humane,” with an emphasis on forgiveness rather than punishment, this emphasis “reveals the extent to which the American Anthropological Association...was more of a learned society than a

professional association with official sanction to punish infractions of its code of conduct” (2000, 139).

Anthropologists are not singularly preoccupied with the ethical implications of their work; plenty of other professional associations have a code of conduct or Hippocratic oath that serve as “quasi-legal principles” (Pels 2000, 141) by which members of that organization can properly adjudicate themselves, and each other. However, in anthropology there is an ongoing and open reckoning with the potential for ethical culpability. Call it, as noted above, an obsession with self-criticism and self-reflection. This process of self-reflection (some might say self-recrimination) is most obvious when exploring the key tensions that have animated anthropologists over the years. Most notably, there is the ongoing question of anthropology’s duty as a discipline, particularly towards research subjects and research collaborators, which is deeply tied to the ways anthropologists believe they should act in the field, how they should approach their subjects, and how deeply embedded and enmeshed they should become with their participants. Scheper-Hughes called for a “militant” anthropology, as a direct correlate to a moral and ethical anthropology, writing that: “anthropology, if it is to be worth anything at all, must be ethically grounded. If we cannot begin to think about social institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes me as quite weak and useless” (1995, 410). Call this statement another spoke in the ever-turning wheel of anthropological discourse; as one anthropologist I spoke to noted, “the theme of every conference: does anthropology matter? We should matter more! And we always have these insular conversations at closed meetings with other anthropologists.”

The past few years have also witnessed a growing movement within anthropology that directly addresses the ethical and moral dimensions of social life. It is interesting to note that the

anthropologists who make up this “ethical turn,” as it has come to be called, do not often directly address formal research ethics. Anthropology has arguably always concerned itself with ethics, but this ethical turn marks an effort on the part of some anthropologists to build a robust system of inquiry, and a vocabulary to delimit and demystify the ethical and the moral. As Mattingly and Throop point out, “One of the most interesting features of the ethical turn has been its many subversive attempts to destabilize received anthropological ideas and concepts. The ethical is a privileged site for this destabilization in part because the stakes of ethics are so high” (2018, 485).

That the ethical turn seems, for the most part, unconcerned with formal research ethics may be due to the nascent nature of the turn; terms are still being debated, and schools of thought are still being formalized (Mattingly & Throop 2018). It may also be that anthropologists do not see formal research ethics and the ethics approval process as relevant to the kind of ethics that the “ethical turn” concerns itself with.

### Further Exploration of Key Tensions

Lambek, one of the key figures in this ethical turn, acknowledges that anthropologists generally distinguish “ethics” from “regulatory ethics,” and that this is one of the reasons he does not usually write about formal research ethics when he writes about “ordinary ethics” (2015, 267). In fact, the chapter in his book that does address formal research ethics is titled “Ethics *out of the Ordinary*” (emphasis mine):

what is interesting about anthropology is the way it is distinctive with respect to ethics [as a criteria for review]. Compared to the everyday, our consciousness of the ethical as intrinsic to action is heightened in any fieldwork worthy of the name, insofar as the

situation impels us to continuously exercise judgement in the face of new, sometimes radically new, circumstances and criteria, and to come face to face with the contingency and limits of the ethical criteria, values, principles, and rationalized rules and guidelines we bring with us (2015, 270)

Like many researchers, some of the anthropologists I spoke with largely see the work of ethics approval as “bullshit”—one anthropologist felt that filling out an ethics protocol is just “jumping through the hoops” and “forces people to fit these molds.” There is the additional tension, however, that anthropological methods are specifically being singled out by that bullshit, and anthropological approaches are often the exception to the established rules and norms of formal research ethics. Many of the anthropologists I spoke to would tell me that anthropology doesn’t fit neatly into the criteria established by research ethics; as one noted, “the form and underlying logic of the institutional review process is set in such a way that it’s going to make cultural anthropology research an exception.”

I was able to identify four key issues that concerned researchers in the Department of Anthropology. These issues are not singular to this department, and reflect a great deal of the critical literature that has come out of anthropology since the inception of formal research ethics review in Canada, the United States and the UK (Bosk 2007), but they are still worth considering in both their idiosyncratic and generic iterations:

### Snowball Sampling

Snowball sampling may be the source of tension most prevalent at the University of Western Ontario, although plenty of other qualitative researchers have documented their own run-ins with REBs that balk at the use of “bad snowball sampling.”

Snowball sampling is a research and recruitment method whereby contact is made with one or two key informants who can provide a researcher with a list of people they think might be interested in being interviewed. “If you follow this protocol at the end of each interview, your list of new names keeps growing exponentially,” essentially snowballing (Mannik and McGarry 2017, 71). Snowball sampling is often seen as coercive, or, at the very least, “potentially concerning” (according to the Ethics Officer). One board member told me that there is “good” and “bad” snowball sampling: “bad” snowball sampling happens when someone you are interviewing gives you a list of potential participants (or you as the researcher request one), with no guarantee that the people on the list want to be contacted, or know they will be contacted. The Board’s preferred approach (or “good” snowball sampling) is for the researcher to give *their* information to a participant, who can then distribute that information to people who they think will be interested in participating.

For some of the anthropologists I spoke to, dismissing so-called “bad” snowball sampling dismisses the reality of field work. Claudia Bell, in documenting her own problems getting her REB to approve snowball sampling, noted that she found her most useful sources in decidedly non-formal situations, when talking casually to taxi drivers, real estate agents and tourists. These chance encounters offered her a network of informants. However, “A research funding proposal stating that the researcher intends to go to Bali for three weeks and rely on chance encounters with retirees in bars, cafés, and at cheap homestays is never going to gain ethics approval” (Bell 2007, 161). Moreover, “good” snowball sampling felt, at least to one anthropologist, as coercive as “bad” snowball sampling, since the researcher is essentially “turning a participant into a sort of assistant.”

## Letter of Information and the Consent Form

The letter of information, described as a “fetish of consent” by Wynn and Israel (2018, 795), is a particular source of frustration for the anthropologists I spoke to. “Nobody talks like that,” said one anthropologist, and “nobody wants to read that.”

The letter of information is a document, typically attached to the consent form, that provides potential participants with the who, what and how of the study they will potentially be participating in. TCPS2 dictates that consent is to be “voluntary,” “informed,” “ongoing” and, most importantly, “documented,” either “in a signed consent form or in documentation by the researcher of another appropriate means of consent” (2018, 46). Wynn and Israel note that “many ethics review bureaucracies present signed, written forms administered at a single point in time as the default, best-practice method for obtaining and documenting consent to participate in research” (2018, 795). This default, they argue, puts anthropological research at a significant disadvantage, since many anthropologists work with communities where legal and signed documents are culturally inappropriate or historically insensitive. Moreover, many anthropologists, including some of the ones I talked to, argue that signed consent can, in some cases, be unethical. As one anthropologist told me,

The closer you are to this prototypical subject who is western-educated, who can read the legalese and can understand the concept of consent, then the more true to consent you can be, but the further away you get from that type of person who is participating, then it just waters down to, do they trust you, and do they trust that you will do the right thing?

A board member said as much, when they told me that they see the Letter of Information as genre more than anything else:

it's a thing that you learn the conventions of, and it becomes easier to write, and it also becomes easier to read, so for somebody who hasn't had to write one, or who hasn't had to look at a bunch from serving on the board, it's just like terms and conditions, just hit ok. Participants will basically skim it and then I'll talk them through the thing

As with all things concerning the ethics approval process, I was assured by the ethics officer, and several board members, that the board makes room for alternatives to written consent (for example, consent can be obtained orally, and letters of information can be submitted as scripts to read out when obtaining consent); however, the consent process itself, whichever way it is implemented, must be documented in some manner (see TCPS2 stipulation above). The board member cited above also told me that written consent is considered "the gold standard. It's about freezing the moment of consent." Moreover,

That's what the board deals with is documents: creating documents, keeping documents. If there's no document of the consent process, then that doesn't work so well. A purely verbal, informal agreement doesn't allow for those subtleties and I think there is a value in externalizing it, and at the very least you have to write it down in a notebook, otherwise I just feel that we can't trust our memories, it has to be grounded in some way. As long as it's documented in that way, I think the board is open to alternatives

"Informality," here, is perhaps a nebulous term. Many of the anthropologists I spoke to used "informal" to describe the close relationships they developed with their participants. They would not themselves describe their research as informal, even if they were to use informal agreements to get consent from their participants. Although Lederman distinguishes informal research from formal research in part by the demarcations necessitated by funding and ethics proposals (meaning that participant observation is formal research, even if the associated

conditions of participant observation are “purposefully uncontrolled” (2006, 487)) her definition of informal research can be useful here. Informal research, Lederman tells us, dispenses with any and all associated conditions of fieldwork, particularly those established by funding and ethics proposals,

but the absence of such investigator-defined initial conditions with respect to places, time frames, and other conditions of research does not mean that informal research is unconstrained. On the contrary, it is structured by the researcher's charge to remain systematically and critically attentive to the social conventions of the field communities in which she or he is progressively embedded (2006, 487)

“Formal Research,” the kind demarcated by the creation and keeping of documents, is certainly easier to track; it is also more legible (both literally and figuratively) to the bureaucratic technologies (like TCPS2) that mark them as the “gold standard” (Shannon 2007). Informal research, and informal relationships, are much harder to read, and by extension harder to make into something legible. One board member admitted that, at the end of the day, the consent process is “mostly an interaction between two people and someone projects a certain authority as a researcher.” By that same token, they also cautioned, “just because something is relational does not mean it’s a good thing.”

### Anonymity

The frustration with anonymity follows from many of the frustrations anthropologists have with written consent. Anonymity, like written consent, is considered the “gold standard” for research ethics. TCPS2 notes that



Ethical concerns regarding privacy decrease as it becomes more difficult (or impossible) to associate information with a particular individual. These concerns also vary with the sensitivity of the information and the extent to which access, use or disclosure may harm an individual or group. The easiest way to protect participants is through the collection and use of anonymous or anonymized data, although this is not always possible or desirable (2018, 59)

The “next-best” alternative to anonymous or anonymized data is to “de-identify” the data, where “the data are provided to the researcher in deidentified form and the existing key code is accessible only to a custodian or trusted third party who is independent of the researcher” (2018, 59). Collecting identifiable information is listed only as a last resort, and with the caveat that the information should be de-identified as soon as possible. As with written consent, this emphasis on anonymity can feel culturally insensitive. As one anthropologist I spoke to pointed out,

in the communities where I work, we’re often documenting traditional knowledge, and in that context, people look at you funny when you ask if they want to be anonymous, because why on Earth would they want to be anonymous...to not attach someone’s name to it is hugely disrespectful, and even putting the question feels very strange, because then they start to say, ‘well, why would I [not] want to give you my name?’ Because it’s such an off the wall question in their community...it completely shifts the mood

It is worth noting that Chapter 9 of TCPS2, which covers “research involving the First Nations, Inuit and Metis people of Canada” (but which can ostensibly be applied to indigenous communities outside of Canada), does stipulate that

researchers have an obligation to become informed about, and to respect, the relevant customs and codes of research practice that apply in the particular community or communities affected by their research. Inconsistencies between community custom and this Policy should be identified and addressed in advance of initiating the research, or as they arise (2018, 119)

No specific mention is made in this provision regarding anonymity (nor, for that matter, is the preference for written/documented informed consent mentioned), but it, and other provisions in Chapter 9, can be used to make a case for exemption. However, as I was reminded by a few of the researchers I spoke to, many of the decisions made by the REB come down to the ways in which policy is interpreted. When an anthropologist I spoke to pointed out that “the whole process presumes Western sensitivities and cultural understandings,” they also noted, with frustration, that when it came to these presumptions, “it feels like there’s no discussion. There are assumptions about right and wrong.”

The specter of the University (as mentioned in Chapter 1) looms large amidst some of the frustrations identified by researchers, including those in the Department of Anthropology. One anthropologist noted, “[the University of Western Ontario] also prides itself on its international research profile, so it seems those are two places where I wonder if there’s a way to at least acknowledge within the structure of the forms and everything that [different cultural understandings of ethical behaviour] might be a possibility.”

### Bioethical Framework

The three core issues above have their roots (at least, according to many anthropologists and other qualitative researchers critical of formal research ethics) in the bioethical and

biomedical framework of the ethics approval process (see Haggerty 2004; Lederman 2007a). The first draft of TCPS was criticized by social scientists for prioritizing a biomedical perspective, and for “not properly reflecting the wide range of disciplines” (Rolleston et al. 1997, 69). Van den Hoonaard argues that TCPS2, and the addition of Chapter 10 on qualitative research, went a long way towards addressing those criticisms. Chapter 10 was developed by a panel of social science and humanities researchers, who convened under the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Working Special Committee (SSHWC). The panel drafted the chapter in a way that would address the concerns of qualitative researchers while still honoring the core tenets of the policy; in other words, “SSHWC wrote in a manner that presented a “dialogue” with the TCPS rather than willful rejection or full-out critique of the TCPS” (van den Hoonaard 2016, 63).

Although Chapter 10 may go a long way towards providing policy language that anthropologists can use to make their case to the Board, the biomedical origins of the process, at least at the University of Western Ontario, still present a significant roadblock for many of the qualitative researchers I spoke with, including anthropologists. As one anthropologist I spoke to noted, “it uses that kind of medical language...there are certain kinds of words that I would never use for my research where every time I have to fill out the form for my annual review or my end of study report I’m thinking, ‘what the hell are they even asking me?’”

One of the more frequent criticisms I heard was that the board at the University of Western Ontario has a predominantly quantitative mindset. When I asked the ethics officer if the system was built to better incorporate quantitative over qualitative research, they pointed out that

I think if we think about research as a whole, a lot of it’s just very quantifiable, that’s the nature of research more generally, that’s what people typically think of, whereas I think

qualitative research it's been emerging, in amazing ways, and I think it gets at a lot of rich data that's been lacking in a lot of the more quantitative research, and it brings up a lot more ethical issues, I think, in some cases...but we do, at least here, health sciences research ethics board was the stronger ethics board, and then the non-medical board is informed by the quantitative type paradigm, but we've also improved in a lot of ways over the years, recognizing the difference between quantitative and qualitative research

It is important to give voice to those improvements; as the ethics officer pointed out to me, there are things that are asked of researchers submitting to the Health Science Board that are not asked of researchers submitting to the Non-Medical Board. For example, although both the Health Science Board and Non-Medical Board ask for anticipated participant sample sizes, the Non-Medical Board does not require an amendment if you go over your stated sample size, nor is that information required on the Letter of Information (as it is when submitting to the Health Science Board). At the same time, it is also worth noting that improvements can also feel inconsequential when a bioethical and biomedical framework persists. However, it should be noted that the source of that persistence is, at least in the eyes of the many of the researchers I spoke to, a matter of institutional culture as much as a matter of policy, policy interpretation and/or system exigencies like the form and letter of information:

When I first applied for research ethics, and I was not yet on the board, I got extremely frustrated by the quantitative research mindset that was governing and policing qualitative research and it's been often a difficult struggle to get people on the board to understand, and I don't mean the administration, I mean colleagues who serve on the board, to understand that qualitative research cannot be mapped out the same way quantitative research can

## Incommensurability

So, is it the case that the board is incapable, to some extent, of understanding what anthropologists do? When I asked the chair of the board about this seeming (and persistent) misunderstanding of fundamental anthropological methods, they replied

looked at from a broader perspective, you had to tell someone what you were doing, that's all that is. What's the alternative? Don't tell what you're doing when you're going out and interacting with participants in the name of the university? Right? Like, if someone is going out and representing themselves as a member of the university, and they're going to be engaging with these individuals for the purpose of generating research that's going to have the university name on it, to suggest that we shouldn't have to tell anyone what we're doing, or we can use a label for it that people don't understand if they don't have a PhD in anthropology...like, when I say 'participant observation,' I'm [not an anthropologist], I don't know what that is. I do now, but I didn't when I started, of course there has to be a document explaining that

Did the guide, with which we started this chapter, bridge the gap? The answer exists in a grey zone (at least for now). As stated above, it has been hard to tell how efficient the guide has been at "educating the board." The chair assured me that it has been effective:

we had a meeting with anthropologists, and we discussed what the needs of TCPS2 were, and we asked them to put together a document that explained the history of participant observation and how they thought, as experts in the field, it aligned with the individual principles of TCPS2, and they went and produced that document, and now it gets

submitted with every participant observation protocol and they all get approved! So, it's a matter of, make us understand, and then we will defer to your expertise

Whether or not the board has deferred to the expertise of anthropologists remains in question. As noted previously, the high turnover rate of the board can make these kinds of education initiatives difficult (and frustrating) to sustain; one board member admitted that "this new system with its endlessly rotating membership is a nightmare because nobody is building up a real depth of expertise." For the Department of Anthropology, the frustration is amplified by the seemingly persistent misunderstanding of anthropological methods. As one anthropologist pointed out,

I would say that in this department there's a general feeling that it's not for that board to say anthropological methodology isn't valid, because we have over a hundred years of research results showing that actually not having a clear set of questions at the beginning leads to many important and interesting insights that wouldn't be gained if all your measures were already set and you couldn't change it

Additionally, it is important to note that, counter to what the chair is perhaps implying, the anthropologists I spoke to are not frustrated that their protocols are being denied: as both the ethics officer and chair pointed out, to their knowledge, there has only been one case at the University of Western Ontario where a protocol was denied ethics approval. As many anthropology students and faculty members told me, the frustration lays more in the delays in approval; anthropology students, in informal conversation, were often concerned that their protocols are taking sometimes up to four months to be approved. Moreover, many of the anthropologists I spoke to identified a deeper lack of fit or synergy between the existing research ethics process and anthropology. As one noted,

I think where my big concern, or I guess, my cynical perspective comes from is this universal standard being generated and applied from a very specific context, and treated as if this is what matters most. And to be fair I think the ethics board does try to take each project as a...I think that everybody...this is why we have these meetings that allow for exceptions. But for me, and for anthropology, I don't see how any of it fits

For Lambek, “incommensurability does not imply a complete absence or blockage of communication or translation but a partial barrier, a lack of clear or complete equivalence that must lead to distortion, juggling, compromise, or working misunderstanding” (2015, 223). It's arguable whether the case presented here is one of “working misunderstanding.” The guide may serve as the beginning of a working misunderstanding, but it may ultimately fizzle out. Where does that leave anthropology, then, in the ebb and flow of the ethics approval process?

### The Pebble in the Shoe

When it comes to formal research ethics, one of the anthropologists I spoke to noted that, as anthropologists, “we're kind of on the frontlines of realizing the limits of an ethical framework that is comforting to people in the West because of its universalizing claims, so we fit always as a pebble in the shoe, we're not always going to easily accommodate to it, or be easily assimilable to it.” What does it mean to be “a pebble in the shoe” of research ethics? As has been pointed out to me, a lot of what anthropologists do in the field is not followed up on by the Board or by the Ethics Office. Those “problematic” behaviours (not using the LOI, snowball sampling, etc.), then, can easily occur under the nose of the board, as long as the protocol reflects “correct behavior.” This is something the ethics officer acknowledged, while pointing out that

these things are not necessarily problematic...and that's where qualitative research like anthropology, which is so open-ended, necessarily, becomes challenging, because you can't always anticipate these things, whereas in quantitative research, medical research, or research in a lab, it's a lot more cut and dry and so the logistics are a lot clearer, and so that's where it can get a lot more challenging, some of this more anthropological research, where the boundaries are really grey, and so that's where we have to stick to: recruitment, consent, data security and confidentiality, and the general nature of the conversation or interactions, at least to evaluate what the ethical implications might be and to be able to put in appropriate safeguards wherever possible, so it gets a little messy

What makes anthropology so grey, and (seemingly) ethically messy?

#### Anthropology's Ontological Anxiety

Anthropology's ontological anxiety (do we have a future, are we relevant, will we continue to exist?) is certainly part of that messiness. This anxiety stems largely, according to Lambek, "from the material conditions of our social reproduction—government and university bureaucracies and budgets" (2011, 317). This includes, to some extent, the bureaucratic exigencies of research ethics. It is hard to tell the cause and effect sequence for this particular "problem": is anthropology a mess because it can't keep itself together, or is it a mess only insofar as the technologies of its reproduction (at least, in academia) make it impossible for anthropology to be otherwise? Where does it start, with anthropology as a discipline, or with the academic structures that decide how a discipline should make itself known? If anthropology exists in the "grey," it is because the parameters for the "black and white" of research ethics were set to make it an exception to the rule.



By taking a close look at the “case of anthropology” the aim was not to have made the argument that anthropology, by virtue of its distinctiveness, should be exempt from the formal research ethics approval process. I think that would be unproductive, and do nothing to resolve the real issues researchers (not just anthropologists) have with the research ethics regime in Canada and elsewhere. But neither is anthropology’s ontological anxiety, its distinctiveness and sometimes incommensurability in the face of formal research ethics, simply a matter of self-delusion or self-aggrandizement.

Anthropology both is and is not distinct, at least where matters of disciplinary boundaries are concerned. When it comes to the ethics approval process, anthropologists have had the burden of justification placed on them because many of the approaches they take while out in the field do not satisfy the standards adopted by the form, at least as it has been constructed at the University of Western Ontario. All the same, it is the researcher’s job to adequately meet the requirements of research ethics, and that includes providing justification for (and where needed, clear explanations of) their chosen methods. One anthropologist I spoke to joked that “questions of method make anthropologists really nervous.” That nervousness and anxiety is perhaps intrinsic to anthropology as a whole; that this makes us unassimilable (in some sense) to formal research ethics is an unfortunate byproduct of a state of being that, while restrictive and sometimes constrictive, does produce, I would argue, a class of researchers with a perspective (call it specificity) that makes room for the particular in the universal. This is by no means unique to anthropology, but, at least to the anthropologists I spoke to, it was an important point of pride. As one anthropologist noted, “we may [work with] a small number of people who we wouldn’t feel comfortable generalizing to, say, all of North America. So, we give up on that kind

of expansive claim but what we get in exchange for that is rich depth, and a really strong and robust sense of context.”

That kind of specificity breeds intimacy, and trust becomes an important tenet of anthropology. Participants have to be able to trust the anthropologist, and anthropologists have to be able to honor that trust in culturally relevant ways; as one anthropologist I spoke with noted, “it has nothing to do with what the institution says I can and can’t do, but I respect the many people who have shared stories with me.” The key sources of tension listed above, particularly the Letter of Information and Consent, as well as the default towards documentation and anonymity, have the sometimes undesirable effect of putting that trust, and thus those relationships, at risk

for many reasons it can totally undercut the research we’re trying to do, and I wonder if that’s particularly the case in disciplines like anthropology, where a lot of our interactions with people are informal, and people know who you are and what you’re doing and why you’re there, but suddenly you have to haul out the sheet of paper, ask them if they prefer to be anonymous, and suddenly they start thinking, ‘Why, what are you gonna do?’

On the other hand, maybe the letter of information runs the equally uncomfortable risk of laying bare the anthropological “fraud”: as stated earlier by Lambek, we leave, and we write. When we leave, it is to return to institutions that pay us to write, and/or fund our research. Anthropology’s ontological anxiety, tied up in bureaucratic measures of success and career advancement, can’t help but be laid bare by the technologies of bureaucracy (all those documents) that we are required to fill out, and in turn, provide to our participants. All the same, and career anxieties aside, the anthropologists I spoke to all emphasized, to some degree or another, their duty of care towards the people they work with. Pels identifies the anthropologist’s

trickster spirit, noting that “maybe anthropologists have always been forced to maintain the secret that, in the end, they can never be completely trusted by anyone, because there are no overarching values to which any of their projected audiences can definitely hold them” (2000, 164). But, he also adds that “contrary to what is usually maintained by liberal political theory, the guarding of secrets can be a supremely moral practice” (ibid). As one anthropologist I spoke to told me, “one of the things that drives most [anthropologists] crazy is the sense that having dealt with [ethics approval] dispenses you of all ethical obligations is just, [it makes us] laugh.”

It is important to note that, at least for the ethics officer, the process, once completed, does not dispense the researcher of all other ethical obligations. There is, in this instance, another moment of incommensurable understandings where the concept of “ethical obligations” is concerned. And it is worth stating once more that the ethics officer and many board members made it clear to me that the Board is open to alternative forms of research, including anthropological methods like participant observation. But being the exception to the norms established by the Board (and, it should be noted, TCPS2) does not engender warm feelings towards the process as a whole. One anthropologist put it this way:

You can't anticipate everything in a board meeting, and I think that as a researcher you can't be expected to then not do things. You have to struggle with that on a case-by-case basis...there are certainly people who refrain from publishing or talking about certain topics because it wouldn't be good for [your participants]. And so, I guess we have our own ethical principles, 'is this the right thing to do?' Which shouldn't be guided by a fear of the REB. It should be based on actual ethical and moral principles

Many of the anthropologists I spoke to acknowledged that we can go a long way towards having a better answer to the question of what it is, exactly, that we do. *That* is the interminable

disciplinary anxiety that, in part, drives some of the frustrations anthropologists have with the board. But, as I will discuss in the next chapter, so too is there a tension and friction between the ethical principles of the process (as mandated by TCPS2) and the above noted “*actual* ethical and moral principles.”

## Chapter 3

Chapter 1 served to explain how the ethics approval process works for everyone involved, while also acknowledging and maintaining the complex engagements and tensions that exist between the actors embedded and/or implicated throughout it. Chapter 2 provided a case study, showing the complicated interplay between the idiosyncratic and general problems inherent to formal research ethics. The tensions explored in Chapter 2 are not unique to anthropology as a discipline, nor confined to the University of Western Ontario. I am sure that many qualitative researchers (and perhaps researchers in general) were able to see some of their own issues with research ethics reflected in the issues anthropologists have encountered while trying to navigate and negotiate ethics approval. It is worth exploring why these issues are so persistent and commonplace. Why are researchers taking these issues so seriously, when the process itself appears to be, at best, a mild annoyance? I want to take this final chapter as an opportunity to expand the case presented in chapter 2, and complicate the process as I presented it in chapter 1, by asking, finally, what does it mean to take ethics seriously? In order to do that, we will need to define our terms: what does it mean to take something seriously? What do we mean when we say that we take *ethics* seriously?

It will not be the goal of this chapter to fully answer any of the questions posed above; what I hope to do by raising the specters of seriousness and ethics is to arrive at a comfortable impasse, where incommensurability and frustration (what Tsing (2005) terms friction) can perhaps have some kind of transformative potential (or, maybe, leave us with more useful questions). To that end, it is worth engaging with ethics in a more abstract (some might argue philosophical) manner than we have been thus far in this thesis. I noted in chapter 2 that

anthropology has in the past decade seen its own “ethical turn,” which Mattingly and Throop attribute in part to anthropology’s longstanding engagement with philosophy. This engagement has at times been adversarial, as anthropology has historically called into question philosophy’s “universalist ideals” (Mattingly and Throop 2018, 477). For the purposes of this thesis, by a “philosophical engagement” with the concept of ethics, I simply mean a step away from what Lambek terms “prescriptive ethics,” in this case ethics as it is understood under the umbrella of “formal research ethics,” and into the less stringent (more personal) ethical and moral values that the people I spoke to hold.

### Taking Ethics Seriously

This chapter is borne from one question I asked of most of my participants: “what is ethics?” The answers I received informed the follow-up question I asked myself as I was analyzing my data: what does it mean to take ethics seriously? In order to answer that question, it is important to lay out what we mean by seriousness. In order to understand seriousness, we will also need to understand the concept of sincerity. A few people I spoke with raised the issue of sincerity and/or seriousness, either explicitly or implicitly. When it comes to research ethics, the people I spoke to believed themselves sincere in their convictions, and serious in their application of those convictions. Whether those convictions line up with formal research ethics as it is outlined in TCPS2, or as it is interpreted by members of the University of Western Ontario’s REB, is another matter. But to understand why that may be, it is necessary to consider what sincerity and seriousness mean in this context.

### Sincerity

Sincerity is a function of seriousness, and is worth exploring in full before we dive into the concept of seriousness as it applies to the various stakeholders embedded within the ethics approval process. One board member I spoke to told me that they find the ethics approval process “insincere” but admitted that “most people are sincere in their commitment to ensuring that research subjects are protected.” Keane argues that “sincerity is a way of characterizing a relationship between words and interior states. To be sincere, in this respect, is to utter words that can be taken primarily to express underlying beliefs or intentions” (2002, 74). Moreover, “sincere speech adds and subtracts nothing in *words* that was not already there in *thought*” (74). How, then, can a process be insincere and its actors sincere?

One board member noted that

I don't think [ethics approval] regulates anything in real terms, I think it just prescribes a formality, or a certain performance of a commitment to certain criteria that I think a lot of people don't follow. So regardless of the good intention of many of those involved, I think it falls short, for me, of making me feel like I'm involved in a process that really tries hard to take into account what I think are real ethical dilemmas and problems

Keane further posits that “insofar as the concept of sincerity assumes that words could reflect inner states, it involves us in the linguistic questions about intentionality” (75). Do the people involved in research ethics have “good intentions?” If sincerity, as Keane sees it, “says something about...the character of the speaker” (75) we can say that those good intentions, not borne out through the system but sincerely felt, must count for something, if only for a public accountability of one's convictions. As an insincere process, then, the ethics approval process cannot help but nullify (to some extent) or (partially) engulf the sincerity of those involved in it.

What then is left for people embedded in the system? How might the board member quoted above take the process seriously if it is insincere?

### Seriousness

Seriousness, according to Lambek, is or refers to the “general quality of action and the relationship of performers to their acts” (2015, 176). When one is serious, it could be said, one is also sincere, or at the very least demonstrating sincerity by performing it outwardly, to others and to oneself. Yet, Lambek cautions that “(outer) seriousness is not to be confused with, seen as a mere expression of, reduced to, made dependent on, or viewed as lesser than (inner) sincerity” (2015, 177). What then to make of displays of seriousness? When it comes to ethics approval, the people I spoke to demonstrated a commitment to “taking ethics seriously.” However, depending on their position, and their various investments in the process itself, those demonstrations of seriousness took various forms—what ties them together, or perhaps, what makes them interesting to consider alongside one another, is the different understandings of both “seriousness” and, invariably, of the “ethics” that is being taken seriously. One student I spoke with told me that “right or wrong I have treated the REB as a very serious matter. It’s an institutional requirement [and] I do not want to act in a way that would be inappropriate on behalf of Western.” Having said that, the student also pointed out that “my supervisor said, the ethics approval is one thing, but the ethical standards that you hold to yourself and the people that you are working with are what’s really important, and I’ve never forgotten that. As long as I hold that standard, I’m not going to do anything that’s going to harm Western either.”

Tolich argues that “formal ethics review is at best partial: neither ethics committees nor...researchers can predict the big ethical moment that will develop in the field” (2016b, 193). The researchers and board members I spoke to often talked about formal ethics as if it existed



apart from the personal and professional considerations that *actually* inform those big ethical moments; as the student above told me

The REB is trying to establish an ethical standard on behalf of the institution, but I think all of us as researchers have our own ethical code of behaviour, [and it's something that we all need to have as human beings] especially when we're doing this kind of work where you're into other people's homes, and lives, and you're asking questions and probing, and [you need to have] respect, and dignity and care

We saw this in the duplex position described by Pels in Chapter 2, where anthropologists (and, it can be argued, all researchers) hold varying, sometimes incommensurable subject positions when out in the field. It is important to note that the duplex position is, in some regards, a position of privilege; researchers have the benefit of being able to hold multiple, sometimes reactionary views on ethics and the ethics approval process. It is also worth noting that not everyone involved in the process regards the ethics approval process as partial. As the ethics officer told me

I think helping researchers internalize conducting themselves as ethical researchers is really important. So, rather than looking at us as the enemy, looking at us as...I don't know, maybe we can help inform them, or maybe we can help them with the tools to be able to think about these things, *because it's not just a matter of getting your ethics approved*, submitting your application, 'ok, I've got my approval now I can do what I want.' And I don't even think getting the approval...like, 'I'm just gonna put this in because this is what the ethics board will accept', I think it's bigger than that in informing ethical research before you even begin designing your study, thinking about, 'what are

the potential implications of my work? How can I go about this in a way that is most consistent with the ethical guidelines?’ [emphasis mine]

Of course, researchers are not simply submitting their ethics applications and then “doing what they want” without care or consideration (nor, do I think, was that the ethics officer’s meaning or intention). However, there are different degrees of investment (and perhaps degrees of seriousness attributed to the process itself) at play in how researchers approach ethics that may not fit with the vision of internalization described by the ethics officer above.

It is interesting then, to think about how *board members* specifically perform seriousness. Board members are expected, as one board member told me, to “perform to the criteria of the board” while maintaining their subject position as researcher and expert on their particular discipline. As noted in chapter 1, board meetings are often where ethics creep will set in (recall, for example, the conflation of ethics and methods); as one board member told me:

the way the meetings work is they put up [the comments] so your comments are always visible, both in the system, and at the meetings they’re projected up on the screens, so you don’t want to look like the slacker, so you want to feel like you’ve said something in every place. Often I would go in late on purpose so that you could just say, ‘I agree with so-and-so’s comment,’ because usually someone else has covered that ground, but I feel like there are probably people on the board who feel like they have to say something different. So, definitely, I don’t know how else you would do it, or do it better, but I feel like it fosters a situation where everybody feels [pressure to say something], and that pressure contributes to a lot of those discussions where I felt that what we were actually talking about was methods rather than ethics

Another board member pointed out to me that,

You have to look for holes in the application with an eye that I think you develop from hearing other people's comments on the ethics board on what it is that we're looking for, and what are the potential pitfalls of a research project in terms of what the ethics board considers to be important, which is not necessarily what I consider to be important

This sentiment was echoed by other board members I spoke with; one other board member made it clear that despite having deep reservations about the process, they understand that when they step into the role of board member they have to take it seriously, and in a way that reflects what the board wants them to do, "if I were to bring my personal views on all of it, I wouldn't be able to do it."

When it comes to seriousness, Lambek notes that "it doesn't matter what performers think to themselves; the act of participating in a ritual commits them to accepting both the public message and the metaperformative means by which such communicative acts are enabled and specific messages are established" (2015, 178). As an element of the "ethics creep" that Haggerty warns against, the displays of seriousness noted above are worth paying attention to: I would argue that a fair amount of the frustration (both with the board and within the board) can be traced back to good faith efforts on the part of board members to show that they are taking their roles seriously. Whether or not they mean what they say, or are sincere in their convictions, is perhaps beside the point, although it seems to matter a great deal to the people embedded in the process. Key here is that there is a culture on the board that promotes the need to perform a certain level of serious engagement. As noted in chapter 1, more consistent and standard training for board members might help smooth over some of the inconsistencies that arise when board members make what Haggerty has termed "precautionary" commentary and recommendations

based on (as noted above) “an attempt to respond to subjectively assessed worst-case scenarios rather than empirical consideration of what is likely or probable” (2004, 403). This means that (perhaps ironically), as one board member pointed out, “when researchers see the board make a hash out of the silly stuff, you don’t want to give them anything serious to deal with.”

Part of the problem may be that the ethics approval process, and formal research ethics in general, operates as if what is being taken seriously can exist as a discrete and knowable system of thought, easily delineated if people are willing to put in the (serious) work.

What is Ethics?

The chair of the board told me that

I wouldn’t mind if the ethics board were known as something else, like if it were just called the TCPS2 board, or the tri-council compliance board because I think being told that you haven’t been approved by the ethics board feels like you’re being told you’re naughty, when we don’t make judgements over whether or not we think people are being naughty, or rather we do, but not as a board, I mean, individual people are going to make their judgements about people every day, but if we were called the TCPS2 compliance board, I think people would have a stronger sense...but of course the TCPS2 mandates that we establish an office of human research ethics, so that’s what we are. If people just thought we were deciding go or no go on their research, not ethical or not ethical, they might look at us a bit differently

By framing the question as “ethical or not ethical,” the process of ethics approval can, perhaps, feel more consequential than it actually is. As the chair further pointed out to me,

the board has no enforcement powers...the only thing we do is interpret and apply TCPS2, we can't take away someone's funding, we can't even tell you that you can't do the research, all we can really say is that we don't approve. If you go and do the research anyway then that's on you, and you'll have to face the various consequences, but we have no punitive jurisdiction of any kind"

Of course, part of the issue is that, although having no "punitive jurisdiction," the board *does* enforce its interpretation of TCPS2, and not receiving ethics approval has consequences that can be detrimental (and often are detrimental) to the continued existence of a research project. That being said, if we take the chair of the board at their word—if formal research ethics are not enforceable, and if the consequences of going forward with a research project without approval fall outside of the purview of the board—what is ethics, then, in the context of formal research ethics?

Reflecting on a long history of philosophical debate on the topic of ethics, Lambek distinguishes between "prescriptive ethics" and "virtue ethics." While "prescriptive ethics" is akin to the regulatory principles typically associated with the ethics approval process and formal research ethics, "virtue ethics recognizes the continuous engagement with person, events, and situations, the weighing and reweighing, attachment and commitment to specific courses of present, future and past action" (2015, 271). When I asked people "what is ethics?" their answers tended to fall somewhere in between prescriptive and virtuous. Many of the researchers I spoke to distinguished between ethics as they understood it in regulatory terms and ethics as the personal moral and ethical standards that they hold themselves to when conducting research. It is worth exploring what exactly distinguishes one from the other.

## Ethics in TCPS2

The chair told me that the board doesn't have "the luxury of deciding what ethics means, instead we have to decide that ethics means compliance with TCPS2, and then our decision becomes, what do the words of TCPS2 mean."

TCPS2 does not define "ethics," nor is the policy necessarily *designed* to define ethics. In the case of formal research ethics, "ethics," or more specifically, "ethical behaviour," exists within a narrow set of parameters; however, TCPS2 *does* define key concepts that are exclusive within these parameters. What Lederman and Dobrin call "regulatory ethics," which are distinct from "disciplinary ethics" or other named "ethics" (i.e. personal, professional, etc.) (2012), may exist (or can be formed, or interpreted) by the supplementary definitions provided in the policy.

When it comes to assessing "ethical behaviour," TCPS2 focuses on two key concepts: risk and harm. According to TCPS2, harm is "anything that has a negative effect on the welfare of participants, and the nature of the harm may be social, behavioural, psychological, physical or economic" (2018, 21). Risk is "a function of the magnitude or seriousness of the harm, and the probability that it will occur, whether to participants or third parties" (2018, 21). The concepts of "risk" and "harm" are, purposefully, open to interpretation, which, as Haggerty points out (and as we saw in Chapter 1) may lead to "pronouncements about the 'risk' of research projects [that] are more akin to a subjective imagining of potential scenarios unconstrained by empirical evidence" (2004, 403). As one board member noted, "when it comes to risk and harm, there's an issue about inflating the whole idea, and risk becomes a notional thing, and you have people sitting around trying to dream things up."

When I asked a few of the board members what the policy definitions of “risk” and “harm” are, they admitted to not knowing them off hand; one board member pointed out that during full board meetings

we often talk about risks that are, in my opinion, actually not risks, and that’s a frustrating thing about being on the board, it’s so easy for somebody to start something, to say, ‘what if…’ and you have these unreasonable discussions about a completely impossible risk scenario, and suddenly start trying to enforce policies for things that are so unlikely to happen. Say, for instance, the risk of somebody being harmed by a question or a methodological strategy is so small that to police it makes no sense, and yet we spend an inordinate amount of time talking about these things, and so there’s really no proper assessment of the actual risk associated with a study, and yet we treat it as if it’s quite likely

As Haggerty points out, “if REB members can imagine that an untoward eventuality *might* occur, then they can ask a researcher to manage that scenario. Given that the members of these boards are bright, motivated, well-intentioned, and highly skilled at dealing with hypothetical scenarios, they seem to have no difficulty envisioning any number of potentialities that should be managed through increasingly onerous regulations” (2004, 403). Another board member I spoke with admitted that “people do seem to have different definitions of what is risky or what is considered a vulnerable population.”

If ethics, then, boils down to “what do the words of TCPS2 mean,” we are at somewhat of an impasse, at least where the definitions of risk and harm are concerned.

Ethical Research

If we are to take anything from TCPS2 and the various interpretations of the words of TCPS2, it is that, first and foremost, ethical research is about protecting participants. People I spoke with who consider their work “low-risk” still framed ideas of risk and harm around the protection of participants, and when I asked people about the mandate of the board, many answered that they hoped or expected the mandate to be about protecting participants. Of course, as noted in Chapter 2, *who* we consider the typical participant has a significant effect on what kinds of protections become entrenched and codified. There is also the question, raised again in chapters 1 and 2, over what kind of research presents the most risk and harm to participants—often, qualitative researchers will raise the specter of biomedicine when citing “research gone bad,” whether invoking past studies like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, where a group of African-American men were deliberately left with untreated syphilis in order to observe their symptoms over time, or simply by pointing out that their work is “non-invasive,” with all that that implies. One student jokingly pointed out that he shouldn’t have to go through ethics,

look I’m not gonna [sic] inject your eyeballs with arsenic just to see what it does...I understand why you probably want someone to go ‘wait a minute, this could be a problem,’ but I shouldn’t have to justify to the ethics board the purpose of my project...but honestly I do think they should be reading a proposal, rubber stamping it and moving along. Deal with the arsenic eyeballs, leave me alone. This is literally just a survey

This is not to say that qualitative researchers believe themselves to be above research ethics; as one board member cautioned me,

I would, however, disagree with the assertion that qualitative researchers should be exempt from it, in as much as I think...qualitative research can be harmful, and I’ve had



very rare occasions where I've done research where I think I've conducted it completely ethically, or within the confines of my ethics protocol, where participants nonetheless got quite upset

That the researchers I spoke to (whether qualitative researchers or otherwise) hold themselves to high ethical standards is not in question, but what we mean by ethical research continues to be a matter of contention and debate.

#### “Actual” Ethics

As one board member pointed out, “everybody wants to be ethical, but what does that mean? Because there isn't one meaning. So, it is a hard task that the board has, is to try to create something that will fit.” The board members, researchers and students I spoke to often differentiated between “actual ethics” and the ethical prescriptions of TCPS2, where “actual ethics” reflected a more genuine engagement with the ethical complexities of research and field work, and TCPS2 (and to an extent, the board) reflected, at best, the partial engagement with the realities of research described by Tolich above. “Actual ethics” often invoked the moral dimensions of research, which were deemed by many of the people I spoke to, whether explicitly or implicitly, to fall outside the tidy boxes (both literal and figurative) of formal research ethics. When I asked one board member if they thought that TCPS was written under the assumption of a universal ethics, they told me that “I don't think it's an assumption of universal ethics, I think it's an assumption of universal morals.” They continued,

Morals are the codes of what is right and wrong, and ethics is trying to impose what is right. If you're trying to impose correct behaviour of how to do research in the right way, it's the right way to treat the people that you're working with, but they're under the

assumption that there's a particular moral code, which is the one that needs to be followed, which are the things of, you need consent, and you need written consent, and so there's a whole set of assumptions on what the right thing to do is. What kind of moral code is embedded in it

One researcher I spoke to put it this way:

how did they end up being the ones with a privileged access to these higher order ethical principles that we should adhere to, who do they answer to? Frankly, this day and age, and again, I have no idea, but you have to imagine a lot of it is just basically concerned about liability, negative media. Nobody wants to have an article in the London Free Press saying '[person] injured while participating in research experiment.' The university doesn't want that, it's not part of their branding. Not to say that ethics has been coopted by corporate branding, but I think there's a lot of forces that the REB is answering to that are not just ethical first principles

Lederman points out that for academics, "the moral inflections of our knowledges are learned early enough and with sufficient ambiguity and danger that they are most often tucked out of sight" (2007a, 309). I argued in chapter 2 that the ethics approval process may lay bare the fraud of anthropology; perhaps, then, it also lays bare the moral inflections researchers have thus far only had to deal with internally. As one board member pointed out, "when I was a student there was none of this, we had to write a paragraph at the end of our proposal basically promising to be ethical, and consider other people, and not do anything wrong to sully the reputation of the university. That was it." When I asked them if they thought that was enough, they responded:

well, I mean I didn't do anything any differently, I don't think. There was no consent form to sign, like, we just went out there and talked to people and did the research, and there was this sense of responsibility and honor, and whatever you want to say, ethical considerations, and of course, we're talking with the supervisor and then they would say, 'you should do this, you shouldn't do that,' it was sort of on an individual basis...

What then to make of "actual ethics," where this new system of ethics approval is concerned? That the ethics approval process fails to capture "actual ethics," while simultaneously invoking it at every turn, says as much about the people embedded in the system as it does about the system itself. This is something Giri notes in her discussion of the rise in auditing tools within academia (of which the ethics approval process is certainly one instance): "do academics as well as academic institutions really hold dear the values of responsibility and openness? Is it that their failure and lack of concern about upholding these values has contributed to the audit explosion in the first place?" (2000, 183).

### Philosophy versus Practice

One board member cautioned me that

You can't just go about staring out the window and thinking about this stuff and then say, 'great, I'm going to go home now.' You think about this stuff and you dialogue with people about this stuff, and you have your arguments in reference to these abstract principles, whatever they may be, because at the end of the day we have to work together as a community, even if it's just as a research community at the university. We all have to decide what are we going to do, and why?

It was not this board member's intention to imply that, somehow, people involved in the process, particularly researchers, are looking for an easy way out of difficult conversations. However, inherent in the push and pull between philosophy and practice (i.e. those abstract principles and the, arguably, mundane realities of bureaucratic ethics approval) is a worry that these abstract principles are being reduced to something less than what they are, or should be. A few board members and researchers went so far as to tell me that they felt the whole process made people less ethical, or even unethical. One board member pointed out that trying to institute one moral code to fit every research scenario doesn't hold water when people conduct research in foreign countries:

I think it's hard because institutions can't see farther than their own moral codes, and in bureaucracy you tend to think that the world that surrounds you is just the way the world is, that you can't really see farther than what you know, and you're not aware of all that variation, and yet when you're in an institution like this one, where people are doing work all over the world, then there's no way you can cover all those different moral codes

In addition they pointed out that, "there are some moral codes that under a western lens are...wrong. So, it would be unethical to even try and follow them, so it's a very hard question." Another board member was more blunt in their assessment of the value of the process, telling me that, "I think that from our perspective I don't feel that doing the ethics protocol has ever helped one of my students really become more ethical, or even think about things that really matter to them, it has been a hurdle to jump through." This isn't a perspective unique to this board member; literature critical of the ethics approval process in the US, Canada and the UK often calls into question the ethicality of ethics approval (Dingwall 2008; Wynn & Israel 2018).

Part of the problem when philosophy turns to practice within a bureaucratic system are the sometimes incommensurable understandings of that philosophical concept. The chair told me, “I think that me deciding whether something is or isn’t ethical, it depends entirely on my own prior ideological commitments, and so that’s why I’m glad that my assignment at the ethics board isn’t to *be* the ethics board...cause what do I know?” And yet, board members are, in some way, being asked to arbitrate (and, in the words of one board member, “freeze the moment of”) ethical conduct and ethical values, at least where research is concerned. Yet, as Trouillot cautions,

once launched, the concepts we work with take on a life of their own. They follow trajectories that we cannot always predict or correct. We can place them in orbit, design them with a direction in mind, but we know they will be challenged in and out of academe. There is no guarantee that the final meaning will be ours (2002, 53)

With that in mind, what is ethics? Lambek contends that “ethics is intrinsic to human life and can be understood as immanent within it even while it is frequently claimed to transcend it” (2015, 1). When I asked one of the researchers I spoke to what is ethics, they warned me that “it’s like asking a lawnmower repairman what constitutes a beautiful design.” And yet, they were able to tell me that:

first of all I think ethics is a form of philosophical practice, and by that I simply mean that it’s not simply the philosophy of what is right and what is wrong, but it’s the act of meditation on questions of what is right and what is wrong, but in a setting where those things have practical implications. I guess when I think of ethics in the modern world, I think of it as a form of philosophical practice, where we are thinking about, we are dialoguing with colleagues on issues relating to what is right and what is wrong with reference to perhaps abstract principles, perhaps with reference to historical precedent,

perhaps in reference to religious principles...I don't really know necessarily what principles are being referred to in that dialogue...that's the philosophical part, the practice is that all of those discussions of course are taking place and unfolding because as a community we have to come to terms, or we have to make collective decisions about what it is that we should be allowed to do and what it is that we should not be allowed to do

How to capture all of that succinctly, and in a way that is easily standardized and applied to a wide variety of disciplines, is the larger question, and tension, of the ethics approval process.

### Friction and Incommensurability Revisited

Can there be commensurable understandings of ethical principles? Moreover, should that be the aim of formal research ethics? Lambek points out that “human beings acknowledge the inevitability of difficulty, lapses, competing descriptions and commitments, incommensurable and imposed criteria, and sometimes the inadequacy or sheer absence of any criteria with which to face a given situation” (2016, 36). Of course, acknowledging that something is inevitable will only take you so far. When it comes to incommensurable understandings, Lambek argues that “in the best-case scenario [incommensurability] leads to productive dialogue and a breakthrough to commensurability at a new level of abstraction” (2016, 223). Whether this current dialogue around research ethics will be productive is yet to be seen. Part of the problem, as many in the current literature point out, are the bureaucratic structures and strictures that dictate not only what ethics is meant to be, but the kind of dialogue we are capable of having. I argued above that board members operating in good faith may perform seriousness to the detriment of (at the very least) an expedient ethics review. Lederman further argues that

So long as structures of ethical accountability are only imaginable in the form of managerial auditing (using unitary compliance criteria *external* to the historically elaborated disciplinary standards of good practice), practitioners will be forced to *simulate consilience* with the regulatory ideal so as to appear compliant, cooperative and transparent—therefore ethical—to their local IRBs (2007b, 33)

No wonder, then, that the researchers I spoke to resent the process, even as they take the concept of research ethics very seriously. One board member pointed out, “never mind the REB, I have my own sense of [what is ethical].” When I asked how they then reconcile those two senses of ethics they told me

I don't think they're at odds necessarily it just means I can't spout [the policy definition] off, but I think that they sometimes have a too narrow definition of what falls into line. So, they have these parameters set up, ok, but I think it's too narrow in that there are other activities that they would say no to that I think would still be ok. So, we haven't got a different value, or a different definition of the principles, or the values, what's different is the interpretation of activities as being yes or no within that scope. That's where I think it lies. Most people are going to share the principles and the definitions at some level, but the difference is going to be in what counts as within that or not, or violating that or not

Friction, like incommensurability, is a site for potential productivity (Tsing 2005). When it comes to a universal concept like ethics, the case can be made that a shared understanding, however incommensurable it may be, can lead, at the very least, to an interesting conversation, if not (as Lambek terms it) a moment of felicity. It would be easier, certainly, if we all shared a common understanding of ethics (or, it would be easier if TCPS2 could provide that common understanding). Yet I suspect that the stakeholders involved in this process would chafe at such a

simple and reductive understanding. Tsing points out that people in conversation, or collaborating on a project, are assumed to share a common understanding, or will have received training to standardize their understanding of the situation or concept at hand. Of course, even with the best training, that isn't always the case. Moreover, she argues that the more different in their understandings collaborators are

the more they must reach for barely overlapping understandings of the situation. Their common cause is also a cultural encounter, and the objects on which they appear to agree are most successful when they appeal simultaneously to divergent cultural legacies. Furthermore, collaborators may or may not have any understanding of each other's agendas. Such collaborations bring misunderstandings into the core of alliance. In the process they make wide-ranging links possible: they are the stuff of global ties. They are also the stuff of emergent politics: they make new objects and agents possible (2005, 246-247)

While Tsing's work is arguably more focused on global connections than local/institutional cultures and/or structures, friction is suited to any engagement between differently situated persons. Research ethics will continue to be a site of (necessary) contention and debate. Should it ever reach the level of productive friction that Tsing describes, it will be necessary to call into question the systems and procedures that led to the friction in the first place.

### Sincerity and Conviction

Before concluding, I want to return to sincerity one last time, if only to provide a final illustration of what I have come to see as people taking ethics seriously. Lambek argues that "seriousness entails a commitment to ensuring that the performative acts in which one



participates are carried out felicitously; conviction can be understood as the knowledge that they can be. These can only be realized after the fact” (2015, 179). Of course, one can carry out a performative act without conviction. Quoting Austin, Lambek points out that one can act infelicitously, either through “misfire” (acts purported but void) or through “abuses” (acts professed but hollow). Insincerity, therefore, acts as a kind of abuse—to claim that something is insincere is to mark it as “abusive” in the sense outlined above; that is, without meaning. Although, as noted above, some might consider the process insincere, what of the sincerity (or insincerity) of conceiving research as an ethical endeavour?. One board member I spoke to posited:

in many ways you can say that any kind of research is unethical, because we’re making people do something and ultimately it’s to our benefit, and you can argue that any study I’ve done in the many years I’ve been at Western has been inherently unethical. The research I’ve done...has not made an ounce of change [in the way people experience the particular area that I study] but it’s made a big difference to me, it’s given me tenure, it’s given me a good salary, it’s given me, to some extent, a reputation in the field. In other words, I’m actually kind of exploiting some people out there for my own personal benefit, so you could argue that just about any research is unethical...but it’s a rabbit hole we’d rather not go down

Another board member pointed out that “you can have valid research that’s completely unethical, but who gets to judge that is another thing.” It’s a series of questions worth asking, on top of the many other questions asked when it comes to ethical research, particularly in the context of formal research ethics: is unethical research valid? Can valid research be unethical? Is all research unethical? Who gets to decide? Moreover: is there room in formal research ethics for

this kind of nuance? Some of the people I spoke to would argue that there isn't; a few made the point that if there is to be an ethics approval process, it should be handled by a series of sub-boards. As one noted

the trouble is that ethical issues are not the same across the social sciences and the humanities, you know, whatever "non-medical" is supposed to mean, it's interesting that it's called the non-medical REB, because it's a very positivist approach to conceptions of what research is and a lack of a shared understanding of ethical specificity that are relevant to particular disciplines, and sometimes we spend a lot of time discussing things that if it were just a few people from education it would be a non-issue, but we have to go through it, because there are psychologists, and people from other positivist disciplines that we don't necessarily understand

We see this reflected in the literature that addresses the incommensurability between qualitative research and the ethics regime, and certainly there is a lot to be said (and I hope to have adequately reflected) on the often unnecessary hurdles qualitative researchers must often jump through in order to get ethics approval. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the problems faced by qualitative researchers are also subject to nuance. Moreover, many of these issues are felt by quantitative researchers as well (see Grayson and Myles 2005). It is also worth noting that the University of Western Ontario *did* once have sub-boards. Accounts of their efficacy vary, but the ethics officer pointed out that they ultimately did not meet the standards set by TCPS2:

if you're all part of the same club...ethically speaking and looking at the principles and applying those core principles, we get some applications where it's like, 'I know what

I'm doing.' I know that you're a researcher who's done this for a lot of years, but you actually overlooked this...and so I think there's a lot more opportunity for problems

I want to make it clear that it is not the ethics officer's intention to question the integrity of anyone on the board. But neither is it their job to take people at their word: their job is to assist the board, and more to the point, ensure that the policy is being followed.

Ultimately, more questions will be raised than answered in any kind of observation and analysis of the ethics approval process. Some of these questions can be tackled at the level of the institution; others will need to be tackled through policy—it is heartening, perhaps, to remember that TCPS2 remains a “living document,” and (in theory) will continue to change in order to address the research community's concerns.

After telling me that all research is unethical, the board member quoted above did leave me with their own justification for why they continue doing research. It is, in my estimation, as sincere and succinct a justification as I have been able to come by, and I have found myself coming back to it by virtue of its straightforwardness: “maybe writing about the challenges that my participants face helps validate that experience. That's what I hope my research will do: accurately and compassionately reflect the lives of the people who gave me their time.”

If Keane estimates that sincerity is a kind of public accountability (both for ones self and to ones self) then the above exchange (between a master's student and a faculty researcher, and simultaneously, between a researcher and her participant) can be seen as one occasion of taking account: as Keane notes, “in being sincere, I am not only producing words that are transparent to my interior states but am producing them *for you*; I am making myself (as an inner self) available for you in the form of external, publicly available expressions” (75). Still, the board member

quoted above did caution that “it’s one of those nice things researchers can say, but in our every day work it might not be in the foreground.”

It is hard to say if the ethics approval process presents an opportunity to bring that kind of sincerity to the foreground. Given the existing tensions, we may be a long way from the process reflecting the kind of seriousness displayed throughout this thesis. But though the process may not reflect that seriousness, it has prompted enough reflection to support a robust critical literature, and (at least here, in this thesis) a dialogue that, should anyone wish to pick up on it, may prove fruitful, at least where some of the idiosyncratic problems with research ethics are concerned.

## Conclusion

What does a productive dialogue about the ethics approval process look like? I was able to sit down with Mark Daley, who at the time of our interview was the Associate Vice President for Research Western (he has since been named Special Advisor to the President on Data Strategy) to talk about the process, and research ethics in general. There are a number of threads I could pull from our conversation that would be worth discussing. However, for the sake of clarity and brevity, I will focus on three aspects of our discussion that have the kind of potential for productivity that Lambek and Tsing describe as outcomes of incommensurability and friction. These three aspects also broadly reflect the three chapters you have just read:

1. The role of the institution, professoriate and staff in managing frustrations and tensions around the ethics approval process
2. The divide between qualitative and quantitative researchers' approaches to research and research ethics
3. The desire, and need, to categorize "ethics" and "ethical behaviour" within a formal research ethics system

By focusing on these three areas this conclusion will serve to both re-iterate a few key points, as well as highlight some of what Dr. Daley was able to tell me. Not all (or any) of these final observations will necessarily be actionable—some of it will depend entirely on the willingness of the people reading to see something done about the underlying tensions and frustrations around the ethics approval process. Recall that for Lambek, as well as for Tsing, productive incommensurability and friction rests less on action than on small moments of felicity. Incommensurability, it bears repeating, "provides a significant basis for imaginative creation,

speculative thought, and innovative practice, as well as for ambiguity and undecidability” (2015, 222) but it is not a magic bullet, nor is it a simply a stepping stone to some mythic commensurability. At best, both incommensurability and the friction that incommensurability may engender will lead to something akin to consilience, which is, again, at its best, an embrace of the misunderstandings that shape our conversations with situated others (Tsing, 2005). If I can say one thing about the conversation that I had with Dr. Daley, it is that it enabled me to clear up a lot of misconceptions I had about how the system works: who is in charge, what offices are involved, who can be invoked when it comes to the tensions and frustrations. I was also, hopefully, able to challenge some of the things he took for granted, even as he challenged the things I had come to believe about how research ethics works.

It’s up to us

My conversation with Dr. Daley happened around the same time that the Department of Anthropology was working closely with the Ethics Office to get the Anthropology Guideline (described in Chapter 2) off the ground. To that end, both he and I were very aware of the tensions between anthropologists and the Ethics Board, and I had become aware, through my interviews with other board members and researchers, that these tensions extended to many departments and disciplines across the University (and, it should be said, across the global research community). Yet I want to drive home a point made by Bosk (2007), Giri (2000) and to an extent Lederman (2007b), which is that when it comes to a lot of these idiosyncratic problems, the ball is very much in researchers’ court. As Dr. Daley pointed out,

it’s a jury of your peers making these decisions, so when you say, ‘isn’t it up to the institution?’ No, it’s up to us. Putting on my professor’s hat: we’re the problem. Because

it's the professoriate who makes up that board, and it's that board that makes these decisions

Of course this in many ways dismisses the very real role that institutional structures play in the idiosyncratic problems that plague the board; not for nothing that a majority of the professoriate that I spoke with often brought up larger systemic issues at the University when they talked about their frustrations with research ethics. However, I agree that the point stands: as Dr. Daley further noted,

the enabling rules here require that this be a group decision of human beings, and you're an anthropologist, you know what groups of human beings act like. If there's no one with actual expertise at the table, people will either ask more questions, or someone who doesn't have expertise will pretend they do have expertise, and that makes things even worse

Several of the anthropologists I spoke to talked about their role on the board as a duty they fulfill towards their department, and towards their students and colleagues. One anthropologist I spoke to noted that

In our department there's, if not enthusiasm, a fair commitment to serving on the board because if we're not at the table it could turn out really badly. I mean, it's really important to have a voice there just to be able to talk about these things

However, they did caution that "there is an awful lot of turnover and part of it is just the workload, especially during the teaching year."

The question of workload is important to consider, and certainly ties into the larger issues around institutional and academic culture in general (see Berg and Seeber 2016). One researcher

I spoke to pointed out that, as much as they would like to see changes made in the culture of the board they have chosen to prioritize other battles. They also pointed out that, should any changes be made, “the procedures will become more refined, but what that means is they’ll become more elaborate, so the workload gets to be pretty staggering, and so there’s a high turnover.”

Dr. Daley also made the point that researchers are not necessarily looking to invest further in a process they see largely as a nuisance:

No one is excited to feed more money into the bureaucracy, even if that means your ethics turnaround time will be faster. So, you’re crunched by the political nature of not being seen as a unit that’s generating a lot of opportunity, you’re just seen as a barrier, and you’re ultimately not, you’re enabling ethical research to continue, you’re protecting the entire community, not just our own campus community but the Canadian research community, but that’s the long game, the short game is why am I putting more money into this bureaucracy that’s just causing me pain?

This is as much a condemnation of a bureaucratic system as it is of the professoriate caught up and implicated in it; as Giri points out, “Accountability is measured not by a demonstration of morality, good teaching, etc. but by demonstrating that the systems of control are in place and exist” (2000, 178). At the same time, Giri also notes that “if academics and academic institutions feel incensed about the threat to their autonomy by the audit culture, then they would have to create conditions of responsibility and critical self-reflection on their own” (2000, 185).

“[Educating] your board,” as Lederman suggests, is certainly one option open to researchers, but, as noted above, it is an option that has to be prioritized over other, equally important, responsibilities and obligations.



## A Note on Precarity, Responsibility and Obligation

At the heart of many of the frustrations researchers have with research ethics are questions of precarity, responsibility and obligation. I noted in chapter 1 that researchers, who are for the most part faculty members, may sometimes overlook the real status differences that exist between them and employees of the Ethics Office, particularly ethics officers. So too is there a status difference between tenured professors and contract faculty, and between faculty researchers and graduate student researchers. Everyone I spoke to felt, to some extent, a degree of precarity; as I have noted previously, many researchers indicated that they were nervous about talking to me, lest their position on the board be put in jeopardy. The Ethics Officer also admitted to being a little nervous to talk to me, and they had the additional pressure of feeling like they had to represent the perspective of the Ethics Office, where they are employed. It is important to keep in mind, then, that the people involved in this process do not always have the same responsibilities and obligations, particularly where matters of continued employment are concerned.

It is also important for me to point out that students, more than any other category or researchers, stand to lose the most when the system fails to meet their needs. I was only able to interview six students for this thesis, and it is therefore lacking the rich data necessary to properly address the specific problems students face when trying to navigate the ethics approval process. I can speak from my own experience and say that a delay in my research would have been detrimental to this project, and though my turnaround time was over the two-week “standard” highlighted to me by the ethics officer, the ethics approval process did not significantly slow down my research. It will also behoove supervisors to keep in mind the significant role they play in the success of their students’ applications. I am happy to report that

many of the researchers I spoke with who supervise MA and PhD students invest time and effort into helping their students navigate the process as quickly and easily as possible. As Dr. Daley pointed out, this isn't necessarily a matter for the Ethics Board, or the Ethics Office, but

In general, I think we need better social norms as an institution, my students are like my family...not everyone has that approach and that's fine, but there should be a base level, because in any large population of humans you have humans who have different ideas about things, and certainly I know of examples where students get essentially no support, and that's not what a PhD or a Master's is supposed to be about, it's supposed to be an apprenticeship in research, and in an apprenticeship there needs to be time with your master and that culture change, I don't know how to fix, because if people aren't actively abusive, if they're tenured, then they have a great deal of discretion. I always advise students, go talk to the other students in a research group before you sign up with a supervisor

To that end, whether intentionally or not, "it's up to us" extends far beyond the ethics approval process, only because so many of the underlying frustrations and tensions at play with research ethics extend to larger institutional, and academic, issues.

### Cross-Disciplinary Cross-Talk

Because I was coming into our conversation as an anthropologist, and a student affiliated with the Department of Anthropology, Dr. Daley and I ended up talking a lot about the nature of anthropological research. It was interesting to hear someone interested in anthropology, but not trained in the discipline, talk about anthropological methods and approaches.

Dr. Daley acknowledged that, when it came to anthropology, the Board had often failed to adequately accommodate our methods and approaches: “the board acknowledging that this is a distinct mode of scholarship that needs to be evaluated differently from most of the rest of what you see...ultimately the goal of the REB is to enable the research mission of the university, and we’re not doing that well for anthropology right now, and we can do better, but you need to tell us how to do better.” Again, this comes down to how much time and effort researchers who feel aggrieved or frustrated by the process are willing to invest in working with the REB. Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter 2, it is hard to tell how effective some of those efforts will be. The guide written by members of the Department of Anthropology is supposed to represent a step in the right direction, but it is hard to tell at this stage whether it has had the intended “familiarizing” effect on Board members.

Lederman points out that when it comes to cross-disciplinarity,

Epistemological assumptions implicit in intradisciplinary arguments over adequacy and ethics become more evident when they are situated in a cross-disciplinary landscape: juxtaposing controversies about acceptable and unacceptable uses of deception within social psychology and only apparently similar controversies within sociology; comparing sociology and anthropology with respect to the problematics of the researchers' positionality (e.g., their relative emphasis on intimacy or distance); or considering contrastive stances concerning the value and ethics of naming names in anthropology, history, and journalism (2006, 483)

What the ethics approval process does is reveal that talking across disciplines is not as easy as we want it, or need it, to be. Dr. Daley had a more hopeful perspective: “the singularity and silos between the disciplines are already eroding. We’re entering an era of convergence research

where all disciplines start informing each other, and that 19<sup>th</sup> century Linnaean instinct to categorize everything, sub-split it – the research of the future doesn't look like that.” He does acknowledge that “we the professoriate have to acknowledge [that] we have to change how we do things. I think that we're getting there.”

Of course, there is still the looming specter of bio-medicine to contend with. When it comes to research ethics, a driving concern among qualitative researchers is the imposition of so-called “positivist” tools, methods and mind-sets on disciplines that rely on less formally rigid, yet still equally valid, ways of doing research. Dr. Daley again displayed some optimism for the future of academia, noting

that's the model of future scholarship, and it's not about imposing a bio-medical model on the social sciences, it's about everybody learning from everybody else's model.

Scientists have a lot to learn about qualitative research, and concepts like ‘saturation of ideas’ versus ‘I can do a T-test on this:’ these are profoundly complex and hard domains, I can't reduce them to univariate statistics. I mean, if you can reduce your problems to statistics, great, but you can't observe a culture and expect to turn that into a two-sided T-test, and there's the paper; way too complex, so how do you deal with complexity? By using different tools, and it's going to be the interplay of all of that where most of the most exciting things in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are going to happen

One need not dismiss the very valid concerns of qualitative researchers to acknowledge that there is something worth learning from positivist approaches. That they have become the dominant (and often favoured) approaches of the “objective,” “factual,” and, therefore, “correct” is worth pushing back against, and one place to start is certainly with research ethics and the ethics approval process. And in some way, you cannot divorce any discussion of research ethics from

larger conversations around what is and is not “correct” research; as Lederman points out, “kinds of research practice—ways of producing worldly knowledge—are distinguished by their ethical signatures; by which their products also become identifiable as of particular kinds—history, biology, and so on” and so we evaluate them relative one to the other (2007a, 308). In that sense, “what is research?”—an equally loaded and complex question—is as much a part of the conversation as “what is ethics?” It is a debate with a long and storied history, in which small inroads have been made when the conversation is premised on mutual respect, or at the very least, productive incommensurability and felicitous friction.

I do not know if I share Dr. Daley’s vision of future scholarship, but it is worth considering the ways in which we can better communicate with people in other disciplines before we dismiss their approaches, and accuse them of dismissing ours.

### What is Ethics?

Finally, we come back to the old nugget: what is ethics? Dr. Daley made the point that you cannot presuppose the existence of a human universal theory of ethics, and as we’re doing ethics in a global world...this actually keeps me up at night! I Now have empirical evidence that goes along with my gut instinct that there isn’t a universal notion of what’s ethical, so, how do we reconcile any of this? I think the best we can do is...like, I think the REB model is actually a good one because it’s saying within this culture here, at this institution, a jury of your peers feel that this is ethical and this is not – maybe that’s the closest that we can get to truth, because there doesn’t seem to be any underlying axioms

of human ethics, which as a mathematician deeply disturbs me, I want there to be a universal rule that applies in all situations, but there isn't, it's way too hard

Is the vision of ethics embedded in the REB model and ethics approval process really the closest we can get, promoted as it is as being applicable to such a wide range of interactions and engagements? I think many of the people I spoke to would object; many made the point that the system as it currently exists fails to reflect the more serious ways researchers tend to think about and live out their ethical obligations. However, I will concede to Dr. Daley's point that the REB model is the system we *have*, even if it is not the system we want. When it comes to questions of ethical research, (in Canada) the Tri-Council has decided that regulations need to be in place to protect participants from bad actors; there have been bad actors in the past, and we must have a system in place to preclude the actions of future bad actors.

Dr. Daley noted that

long term it is critical that we protect the society that we're meant to be serving from unethical elements. That's less than 1% of the professoriate and the rest of us who want to be trusted...no, we can't. There are rules that say we can't trust you. So, you've already set up an adversarial situation where this isn't something people are excited to do...you're setting up from the outset a situation that's adversarial where people see bureaucracy that isn't giving them something in the short term, and that's true across institutions

Again, the evocation of "unethical" and "ethical" places a consequentiality on the proceedings of the ethics approval process that is, perhaps, unwarranted. Yet questions about the ethics of research are worth asking, and whether it is the intention of TCPS2 or not, these questions will

continue to come up in the course of the ethics approval process. A few board members I talked to noted that they wished these kinds of questions came up more often during training or board retreats, “I think it’s the type of conversation that would be worth having in a retreat: what is the mandate, what is the role...what is risk!”

Asking “what is ethics” in the context of the ethics approval process may be a question worth asking of board members, if only to stimulate conversation, and reach some level of productive incommensurability and friction. It is interesting to harken back to something the chair of the board told me (and that I quoted in chapter 3): “we don’t make judgements over whether or not we think people are being naughty, or rather we do, but not as a board, I mean, individual people are going to make their judgements about people every day.” It may be worthwhile, for board members, to explore exactly what judgement means, in the context of whatever they decide formal research ethics is.

### The Larger Conversation

It is worth considering, before we reach the end, where this work fits in with the literature at large; what it has been able to contribute, and where it may have fallen short. By framing the matter of ethics as one of seriousness and sincerity, I follow in the footsteps of Haggerty (2004) and van den Hoonaard (2011) by centering the people embedded in the system, and taking a critical look at what drives much of the decision-making involved in the ethics approval process, particularly amongst board members. The concept of “ethics creep,” as coined by Haggerty, and “seduction,” as coined by van den Hoonaard, both drive to similar conclusions: that “ethics” is a concept that researchers, board members, administrative staff and institutions can easily get carried away with, being both a seductive concept and always in danger of creeping beyond the

expected mandate of REBs. Framing the issue as one of “seriousness,” then, is perhaps derivative of the work Haggerty and van den Hoonaard have done; however, I would argue that “taking ethics seriously” allows us to broaden the scope of the conversation around ethics, both in its formal and informal iterations, as well as make room for the complex inter-relations and inner lives of the people embedded in the systems that prescribe what ethics means in the context of research with human subjects.

I hope, in particular, to have made room for formal research ethics in the ongoing conversations that are shaping anthropology’s nascent ethical turn. Call it disciplinary bias, but I believe there are lessons to be learned from anthropology’s ongoing ontological reckoning that may prove useful for the formal research ethics regime. In particular, there is something to be gleaned from anthropologists’ struggles to define and implement collaborative strategies that do justice to the role of participants, often called collaborators, in the course of research. The AAA El Dorado Task Force notes that “in collaborative research, local experts work side by side with outside researchers, with a fully dialogic exchange of knowledge (that would not, of course, preclude conventional forms of training)” (Lassiter 2005, 84)—it is easy to see shades of what Dr. Daly called “consilience,” (i.e. the “model of future scholarship”) in the Task Force’s description of collaborative research. I have already expressed my reservations about this future model, and it is therefore worth calling into question the AAA’s rosy explanation of collaborative research. What is, for instance, “a fully dialogic exchange of knowledge?”

Here is where many of our efforts, mine included, may fall short. Often missing in these conversations are the participants themselves—how I would have included the voices of participants without asking researchers to break confidentiality (and, therefore, their ethics protocols) is both my convenient excuse and part of the problem.



The crux of seriousness and sincerity is that they require engagement with situated others; recall what Keane says: “in being sincere, I am not only producing words that are transparent to my interior states but am producing them *for you*; I am making myself (as an inner self) available for you in the form of external, publicly available expressions...” (2002, 75). In that sense, should the actors embedded in the ethics approval process wish to see substantive changes made to make the process “better” (whatever “better” may mean to them) the solution will need to center the relationships at play: between faculty members, between faculty and administrative staff, between qualitative and quantitative researchers, and between researchers and participants.

### What Next?

I have made vague allusions to possible solutions, insofar as I have suggested that people invested in improving the ethics approval process *talk* to each other. I recognize that this isn't the most useful solution, particularly as I have made the case that *talking* can only get you so far when friction and incommensurability are at play. During my defense of this thesis I was asked what steps I would recommend were I to write a report for the board (something my supervisor and I floated by the Ethics Office as a potential deliverable early on in the process). Defences being what they are, I can't recall exactly what my answer to the question was (although, having passed the defence, I assume my committee was satisfied enough with the answer). Having had time to reflect on the question, however, I cannot say that I have the kind of solution that would easily fit into a deliverable that would satisfy bureaucratic exigencies, at least as far as I have come to understand them. Here is what I can say: researchers and administrative staff are going to have to ask themselves what values they want this process to reflect; in that sense, it is worth defining, for ourselves and the course of this process, what is “research,” as much as what is

“ethics.” I know that the Ethics Office is currently working with researchers from Arts and Humanities disciplines to figure out if, and how, certain projects formerly exempt from seeking ethics approval can be incorporated into the process. Perhaps this is the time, then, to reflect on what we mean by research in this context. It is important to remember that TCPS2 already provides a definition of research—one that is, as noted to me by the ethics officer, different than the definition provided in the faculty collective agreement—and to that extent researchers at the University of Western Ontario are confined to the parameters established by policy. In that case, changes need to be made at the federal level, which is outside the scope of this thesis; however, this does not preclude these conversations happening, nor does it mean an ongoing dialogue at Western, between all invested actors, would not prove useful.

I mentioned collaborative research above; I think it is well worth applying collaborative practices to these ongoing dialogues, should they take place. I got the chance to participate in a workshop on collaborative practices in April of 2019, facilitated by Dr. Lindsay Bell in the department of Anthropology. The workshop drew on concepts popular in participatory design research, particularly the work of Dr. Ann Light and Dr. Yoko Akama. Light and Akama point out that “The act of engaging others involves an embodied knowing, with moment-by-moment shifts in position, focus and delivery” (2012, 61). Designers, in this case, act as facilitators during workshops meant to bring disparate actors together to solve local problems. It is interesting to note that in my final conversation with them, the ethics officer told me that they would much prefer to be called an “ethics facilitator” as opposed to an “ethics officer.” This final conversation served a similar function to my conversation with Dr. Daly; the ethics officer and I were both able to elucidate points for one another—on my end, I was able to demystify some key tenets of anthropological work, and on the ethics officer’s end, they were able to speak more

candidly than in our past interviews about the ambiguity and nuance of their position. For example, they made the point, with keen insight, that guidance documents, although an attempt on the part of the Ethics Office staff to acknowledge the ambiguity of both research and the ethics approval process, may end up seeming like more rules that must be followed, and barriers to overcome. Facilitators, according to Light and Akama, are not “neutral;” they too are embedded actors, as much a part of the “people work” of a project as any other participant. What motivates the facilitator is thus as important as what motivates all other interested parties. Light and Akama note that

understanding and honouring motivation is not an incidental feature of this [work]. It defines working with groups that adhere through interest (be that topic-, place- or fate-based). It runs through it all, from why there is a project being suggested to why there are participants making themselves available to bring it into being (2012, 68)

If we take seriousness as a motivating factor, perhaps we come close to understanding what is happening, and therefore what solutions will best fit the problem at hand. Understanding that motivation, and thus seriousness, is complex and contradictory will not make this particular exercise easy to undertake. In the same way that the ethics approval process is viewed as “bullshit work,” so too can the work of making the process better take on many of the characteristics of any kind of bureaucratic bullshit.

I have tried to frame my conversation with Dr. Daly as a possible example of the start of a conversation. Against my own advice, it has not been a sustained dialogue, so in that sense, perhaps I have failed my own vision. But I hope to have also made the point that even an ongoing dialogue is not a complete solution. Ethics approval is framed around a concept that cannot help but escape even the most tenacious investigator. It is subject to innumerable nuances,

and will thus always be the cause of confusion, disagreement and, where we can find it, what Lambek terms felicity (taken from Austin [1962]), or the difference between a happy and unhappy utterance. In that sense, whether one is sincere or not (felicitous or not), both matters a great deal and not at all—the wheel will continue to turn, and ethics, particularly in the context of formal research ethics will lead only to further conversation, whether in agreement or disagreement. Good.

### A final Word

Of course, it's all well and good to think about ethics in the abstract; that's the privilege of the researcher, really. The point that the research ethics regime makes, however, is that beyond these abstract concepts are the real and sometimes irrevocable consequences of our actions as people in positions of authority. The Stanford Prison Experiment, during the course of which participants were mentally and physically tortured by other participants with little to no intervention by the researchers in charge, as well as the aforementioned Tuskegee Syphilis trials, loom large as cautionary tales of research gone bad. They are meant to be a mirror of our worst, most unchecked selves. Of course, not every researcher is undertaking research at the scale of either of those two notable experiments. What of this research project? Have I conducted myself ethically? I can say that I have, for the most part, followed my ethics protocol. There is one notable incident, (ironically, with the ethics officer) where I did not follow my protocol, sending them an informal, friendly e-mail to ask them to participate in my research, and not the form e-mail I was meant to use for all my participants. This ended up putting the ethics officer in an uncomfortable position: as a potential participant, they had every right to ignore my request for an interview. As an ethics officer, however, it is their job to answer e-mails from students. Though not my intention, this left them with no option but to reply. Did I behave

ethically, in this case? Lambek notes that judgement can only happen after the fact: “we can only ‘catch up with ourselves,’ come to realize that we do indeed mean what we say (or intend what we do) after the fact, in light of felicitous performances” (2015, 188). In this case, the ethics officer had, prior to my contacting them, indicated that they would be interested in talking to me. And, in part due to my blunder, I was able to have a productive conversation with the ethics officer about the uncomfortable position I inadvertently put them in, and it gave me additional insight into the process and the reason it is in place the way that it is. Had things turned out differently, the incident might not have played out the way it did, both as I write about it here in this thesis, and in the way it affects how I understand my ethical conduct as a researcher.

The ethics approval process does not preclude that you will never err. It is in place, ostensibly, to ensure that all precautions are taken to make mistakes as easily avoidable as possible, and where they occur, that the university cannot be held liable, and the Canadian research community is not raked through the mud because of one bad apple. Can researchers, then, take the intention behind ethics approval seriously, even as they continue the important work of remaining critical of the system as it exists in practice? I have suggested one possible avenue, and I certainly encourage researchers to reach out to the Ethics Office and turn to the expertise of their ethics facilitators, not in order to defer to their expertise (nor have them defer to researchers), but to create some kind of sustained dialogue, designed with purpose. What that purpose may be is, of course, up for debate and at constant risk of changing on a dime. As it should be.

Good luck.

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## Appendix A

*The following paragraph is the final version of the description of my study that was submitted for ethics approval:*

This study will explore key aspects of the Non-Medical Research Ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario from an anthropological perspective by documenting, comparing, and analyzing the varying perspectives of different stakeholders in this process.

Researchers from various disciplines in Canada and the United States have identified research ethics and the ethics approval process as relevant topics of study, and there is a growing literature concerning institutional ethics processes overseen by Research Ethics Boards (REBs) or Institutional Research Boards (IRBs) that highlights how such processes commonly involve stakeholders with different, sometimes incommensurable, understandings of why such processes are important, and what they are meant to accomplish (see, for example, McCormack et al. 2012; Lederman 2006; Haggerty 2004). Some of this work focuses specifically on the “tension” between the demands of qualitative research and of REBs (McCormack et al. 2012; Lederman 2007). In my research project, I will interview different stakeholders involved in the Non-Medical Research Ethics process at Western to determine the extent to which tensions and issues identified in this literature are present here.

The findings of this project will contribute to a growing body of literature concerning the ethical practices of academic institutions and answer anthropologist Rena Lederman’s call for a “comparative perspective” across institutions in North America, particularly the United States and Canada (2006, 479). In addition, this project aims to provide the University of Western Ontario with ethnographic data specific to our institution, with the goal of providing all relevant

stakeholders with the granular details that underlie the complex process and understandings of ethical behaviour in the field of academia.

## Appendix B

### Letter of Information (Researchers)

You are being invited to participate in a research study concerning the ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario. This study will explore key aspects of the Non-Medical Research Ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario from an anthropological perspective by documenting, comparing, and analysing the varying perspectives of different stakeholders in this process. For the purposes of this study, stakeholders have been identified as Board Members, faculty and graduate researchers, and ethics officers. As both a researcher and professor here at the University of Western Ontario, you provide an invaluable perspective on the ethics approval process, having submitted protocols for review yourself as well as facilitating the submission of protocols by any graduate students under your supervision.

Should you choose to participate in this study you will be asked general questions about your experience with the non-medical research ethics approval process. If you currently have research under review, your participation in this study will have no effect on the approval process. Additionally, choosing not to participate will have no effect on the approval process. Interviews will be conducted on campus at the University of Western Ontario, and should take no more than 60 minutes. There is the possibility of a follow-up interview, also lasting no longer than 60 minutes, although you are under no obligation to respond to a request for a follow-up. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the recording, and only the researcher will be transcribing the audio. Should you decline to be recorded, the interview will be recorded in a notebook by the researcher. Only the researcher will have access to this notebook.

As a faculty member at the University of Western Ontario, you may benefit from a deeper understanding of the ethics approval process, and your unique perspective will be taken into account. The University of Western Ontario prides itself on public outreach and research that aims to promote the public good. Ensuring that researchers remain aware and critical of research ethics is an important component of the University of Western Ontario's continued support of research. There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participation in this study.

Once defended, the MA thesis based on this research will be publicly accessible on-line through the Scholarship@Western portal. You and other stakeholders in the non-medical research ethics approval process will therefore be able to access my findings in the future, and I hope that it will prove informative to all.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you will not be compensated for your participation. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on your academic standing.

Data collected and stored will be de-identified, and you will be given a pseudonym in the study records. In order to enable me to properly document the different perspectives I am collecting in this project, the only piece of identifying information that will be retained in association with your interview data will be the category/categories into which you fit as a faculty member, graduate student, ethics officer, and/or member of the NMREB. To accomplish this, a master list will be created to link category identifiers, pseudonyms, names and e-mail addresses to interview data, and this list will be stored in a secure place accessible only to the researcher. A master list allows the researcher to correctly identify interview data during analysis, and may serve to re-identify you in the disseminated results should you wish to be identified. We will give you any information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

Any identifiable information that you do not wish to appear in the study will be removed from the MA thesis, academic papers, reports and presentations. You will be given a pseudonym in any published works, and all steps will be taken to guarantee anonymity. For the purpose of this study, your role (whether Board member/researcher, faculty or graduate researcher, or ethics officer) will be identified in the final study product, which may allow someone to link the data and identify you. If you do not wish to have this information published, please inform the researcher, and steps will be taken to remove identifiable information from published works. Direct quotes from your interview may be used in the dissemination of this study, and may allow someone to link the data and identify you.

## Letter of Information (Board Members)

You are being invited to participate in a research study concerning the ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario. As a member of the University of Western Ontario's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board, you provide a unique perspective as both a researcher and active participant in the ethics approval process. This study aims to document, compare, and analyze the varying perspectives of different stakeholders in this process. This study will explore key aspects of the Non-Medical Research Ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario from an anthropological perspective by documenting, comparing, and analyzing the varying perspectives of different stakeholders in this process. For the purposes of this study, stakeholders have been identified as Board Members, faculty and graduate researchers, and ethics officers.

Should you choose to participate in this study you will be asked general questions about your experience with the non-medical research ethics approval process as a researcher and a member of the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board. You will not be asked about specific protocols previously reviewed or currently under review by the Non-Medical Research Ethics, and you will be asked to not disclose information about any protocols you have reviewed or that are currently under review by the Board. Interviews will be conducted on campus at the University of Western Ontario, and should take no more than 60 minutes. There is the possibility of a follow-up interview, also lasting no longer than 60 minutes, although you are under no obligation to respond to a request for a follow-up. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the recording, and only the researcher will be transcribing the audio. Should you decline to be recorded, the interview will be recorded in a notebook by the researcher. Only the researcher will have access to this notebook.

As a member of the Board, you may benefit from the perspectives different stakeholders have regarding research ethics and its implementation in ethics approval. The University of Western Ontario prides itself on public outreach and research that aims to promote the public good. Ensuring that researchers remain aware and critical of research ethics is an important component of the University of Western Ontario's continued support of research. There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participation in this study.

Once defended, the MA thesis based on this research will be publicly accessible on-line through the Scholarship@Western portal. You and other stakeholders in the non-medical research ethics approval process will therefore be able to access my findings in the future, and I hope that it will prove informative to all.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you will not be compensated for your participation. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on your position within the Board.

Data collected and stored will be de-identified, and you will be given a pseudonym in the study records. In order to enable me to properly document the different perspectives I am collecting in this project, the only piece of identifying information that will be retained in association with your interview data will be the category/categories into which you fit as a faculty member,

graduate student, ethics officer, and/or member of the NMREB. To accomplish this, a master list will be created to link category identifiers, pseudonyms, names and e-mail addresses to interview data, and this list will be stored in a secure place accessible only to the researcher. A master list allows the researcher to correctly identify interview data during analysis, and may serve to re-identify you in the disseminated results should you wish to be identified. We will give you any information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

Any identifiable information that you do not wish to appear in the study will be removed from the MA thesis, academic papers, reports and presentations. You will be given a pseudonym in any published works, and all steps will be taken to guarantee anonymity. For the purposes of this study, your role (whether Board member/researcher, faculty or graduate researcher, or ethics officer) will be identified in the final study product, which may allow someone to link the data and identify you. If you do not wish to have this information published, please inform the researcher, and steps will be taken to remove identifiable information from published works. Direct quotes from your interview may be used in the dissemination of this study, and may allow someone to link the data and identify you.

## Letter of Information (Students)

You are being invited to participate in a research study concerning the non-medical ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario. As a graduate student at the University of Western Ontario, you provide a unique insight into the ethics approval process, and your perspective as a researcher still in the process of learning the ins and outs of an academic system would provide valuable data. This study will explore key aspects of the Non-Medical Research Ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario from an anthropological perspective by documenting, comparing, and analysing the varying perspectives of different stakeholders in this process. For the purposes of this study, stakeholders have been identified as Board Members, faculty and graduate researchers, and ethics officers.

Should you choose to participate in this study you will be asked general questions about your experience with the non-medical research ethics approval process. If you currently have research under review, your participation in this study will have no effect on the approval process. Additionally, choosing not to participate will have no effect on the approval process. Interviews will be conducted on campus at the University of Western Ontario, and should take no more than 60 minutes. There is the possibility of a follow-up interview, also lasting no longer than 60 minutes, although you are under no obligation to respond to a request for a follow-up. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the recording, and only the researcher will be transcribing the audio. Should you decline to be recorded, the interview will be recorded in a notebook by the researcher. Only the researcher will have access to this notebook.

As a graduate student at the University of Western Ontario you may benefit from an analysis of the ethics approval process that takes into account the perspective of student researchers, something that is currently lacking in contemporary literature on the subject. The University of Western Ontario prides itself on public outreach and research that aims to promote the public good. Ensuring that researchers remain aware and critical of research ethics is an important component of the University of Western Ontario's continued support of research. There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participation in this study.

Once defended, the MA thesis based on this research will be publicly accessible on-line through the Scholarship@Western portal. You and other stakeholders in the non-medical research ethics approval process will therefore be able to access my findings in the future, and I hope that it will prove informative to all.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you will not be compensated for your participation. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on your academic standing.

Data collected and stored will be de-identified, and you will be given a pseudonym in the study records. In order to enable me to properly document the different perspectives I am collecting in this project, the only piece of identifying information that will be retained in association with



your interview data will be the category/categories into which you fit as a faculty member, graduate student, ethics officer, and/or member of the NMREB. To accomplish this, a master list will be created to link category identifiers, pseudonyms, names and e-mail addresses to interview data, and this list will be stored in a secure place accessible only to the researcher. A master list allows the researcher to correctly identify interview data during analysis, and may serve to re-identify you in the disseminated results should you wish to be identified. We will give you any information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

Any identifiable information that you do not wish to appear in the study will be removed from the MA thesis, academic papers, reports and presentations. You will be given a pseudonym in any published works, and all steps will be taken to guarantee anonymity. For the purpose of this study, your role (whether Board member/researcher, faculty or graduate researcher, or ethics officer) will be identified in the final study product, which may allow someone to link the data and identify you. If you do not wish to have this information published, please inform the researcher, and steps will be taken to remove identifiable information from published works. Direct quotes from your interview may be used in the dissemination of this study, and may allow someone to link the data and identify you.

### Letter of Information (Administrative Staff)

You are being invited to participate in an anthropological research study concerning the non-medical research ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario. This study aims to document, compare, and analyze the varying perspectives of different stakeholders in this process. This study will explore key aspects of the Non-Medical Research Ethics approval process at the University of Western Ontario from an anthropological perspective by documenting, comparing, and analyzing the varying perspectives of different stakeholders in this process. For the purposes of this study, stakeholders have been identified as Board Members, faculty and graduate researchers, and ethics officers.

Should you choose to participate in this study you will be asked general questions about your experience with the non-medical research ethics approval process as an ethics officer. You will not be asked about specific protocols previously reviewed or currently under review by the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board, and you will be asked to not disclose information about any protocols you have reviewed or that are currently under review by the Board. Interviews will be conducted on campus at the University of Western Ontario, and should take no more than 60 minutes. There is the possibility of a follow-up interview, also lasting no longer than 60 minutes, although you are under no obligation to respond to a request for a follow-up. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded. Only the researcher will have access to the recording, and only the researcher will be transcribing the audio. Should you decline to be recorded, key points from the interview will be recorded in a notebook by the researcher. Only the researcher will have access to this notebook.

As an employee of the Ethics Office at the University of Western Ontario, you may benefit from the perspectives different stakeholders have regarding research ethics and its implementation in ethics approval. The University of Western Ontario prides itself on public outreach and research that aims to promote the public good. Ensuring that researchers remain aware and critical of research ethics is an important component of the University of Western Ontario's continued support of research. There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participation in this study.

Once defended, the MA thesis based on this research will be publicly accessible on-line through the Scholarship@Western portal. You and other stakeholders in the non-medical research ethics approval process will therefore be able to access my findings in the future, and I hope that it will prove informative to all.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you will not be compensated for your participation. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on your employment at the Ethics Office.

Data collected and stored will be de-identified, and you will be given a pseudonym in the study records. In order to enable me to properly document the different perspectives I am collecting in

this project, the only piece of identifying information that will be retained in association with your interview data will be the category/categories into which you fit as a faculty member, graduate student, ethics officer, and/or member of the NMREB. To accomplish this, a master list will be created to link category identifiers, pseudonyms, names and e-mail addresses to interview data, and this list will be stored in a secure place accessible only to the researcher. A master list allows the researcher to correctly identify interview data during analysis, and may serve to re-identify you in the disseminated results should you wish to be identified. We will give you any information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

Any identifiable information that you do not wish to appear in the study will be removed from the MA thesis, academic papers, reports and presentations. You will be given a pseudonym in any published works, and all steps will be taken to guarantee anonymity. For the purposes of this study, your role (whether Board member/researcher, faculty or graduate researcher, or ethics officer) will be identified in the final study product, which may allow someone to link the data and identify you. If you do not wish to have this information published, please inform the researcher, and steps will be taken to remove identifiable information from published works. Direct quotes from your interview may be used in the dissemination of this study, and may allow someone to link the data and identify you.

## Appendix C

### **Protocols Guidance for Anthropology Applicants: Participant Observation**

The following provides a brief guide to help reviewers better understand what participant-observation means in anthropological research, and **in order to clearly distinguish it from 'interviewing' and 'observation'** used in non-anthropological methods (TCPS2:141) Meeting the ethical standards set by the institutions where anthropologists are based *as well as* the local ethical standards of the communities in which we study are deeply entrenched in the discipline's traditions. Many anthropologists return year after year to the same communities for research, having established trusting relationships with people in those communities – relationships based on transparency and an ongoing consent process.

#### **What is participant-observation?**

Participant observation involves living explicitly as a researcher among the people whose circumstances we seek to understand, and interacting with them by conversing with them in their own languages, fitting in with their rhythms of life, participating with them in those activities to which we are invited, and abiding by our hosts' preferences with regard to note-taking and other forms of recording. Participant observation contrasts with interviewing and conventional experimental procedures insofar as it does not involve extracting participants from their normal social settings. (Dobrin and Lederman 2011:5)

Participant-observation is anthropology's signature research method and has historically distinguished the discipline from others, such as sociology and psychology. Participant observation requires that the researcher immerse himself or herself in a particular context for an extended period of time so that she/he might participate in and observe people's lives, and thus develop insights on how sociocultural processes emerge and change. This may involve living and/or spending time in a rural village in Papua New Guinea, an urban neighbourhood in Buenos Aires, a refugee camp in Jordan, or a community-based project here in London. One of our purposes is to acquire an understanding of the actor's point of view in the natural contexts and situations of everyday life.

To do this anthropologists have to adapt to the cultural milieu of the people we study, follow their life rhythm, understand how they see the world and themselves within it, and engage in social relationships with them – often as a prerequisite for carrying out research among them. Engaging with people in these ways enables us to gain insights into their perceptions of themselves and others, and of the meanings that they attach to their thoughts and behaviours. (see TCPS2, p.140) The individuals and communities who agree to host us are not taken out of their daily lives to respond to our questions. Instead, we try to participate in *their* lives and learn how they do things, their worldviews, histories, experiences, and so on while being there; in a manner of speaking, we become *their* students. An important corollary of this is that the

framework of discovery is not completely controlled by the researcher and is in important ways guided directly or indirectly by our hosts (Lederman 2016:53-54).<sup>8</sup>

It follows from this that such research is exploratory and follows a logic of emergent design: new lines of investigation take shape in response to what is learned.

...emergent design involves data collection and analysis that can evolve over the course of a research project in response to what is learned in earlier parts of the study. Specific questions or other elements of data collection may be difficult to anticipate, identify and articulate fully in the research proposal in advance of the project's implementation. (TCPS2:148)<sup>9</sup>

Although the researcher's presence is overt and acknowledged, such research *typically involves a minimal disturbance of everyday routines* (which are themselves a focus of study).

Anthropologists engaging in participant observation seek to understand how a specific social and cultural aspect relates to the larger processes and contexts unfolding in a particular community. Thus, they generally participate in the usual activities of the population: visiting, going to the market, participating in hunting or farming activities, eating meals, drinking tea, 'hanging out', participating in rituals, celebrations and commemorations, attending public meetings, and so on. Participant observation allows us to gain knowledge which: "at both an individual and a cultural level is treated as socially constructed. This implies that all knowledge is, at least to some degree, interpretive, and hence, dependent on social context." (TCPS2, p. 140).

While **participating** in daily life, researchers **concurrently are listening, conversing and observing**, meaning paying attention to who is who in the population, how livelihood is secured, differences in political, social and economic power, and social relationships, understanding the histories and meanings of rituals or celebrations, gender and generational relationships, spatial practices, expressions of popular art, and so on. Participant observation is a process, and usually implies regular note taking.

Thus, the differences between 'interview' and 'observation on the one hand, and anthropology's definition of participant-observation may be summarized as follows:

**An interview** is a particular kind of exchange in which the researcher maintains a clear distinction between "interviewer" and "respondent": the former asks questions and the respondent responds. The researcher defines and maintains a topical frame as a basic condition for the validity of this research instrument.

**Observation** is a non-interactive activity performed by the researcher, with or without the explicit knowledge of the observed.

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to recognize that while ethnography may include interviews or focus groups as part of a suite of methods, these are not participant observation per se, and differ importantly in the degree of control the researcher exercises over the context of questioning and discussions

<sup>9</sup> "...adjustments to the research are to be expected and need not be reported to the REB, unless they alter the level of risk or have other ethical implications for participants (see Article 6.16)." (TCPS2:84)

**Participant-observation** involves social and verbal interaction between researcher and people in whom the researcher is interested; as such the researcher/researched distinction might be blurred for reviewers, but *anthropological* participant observers are professional researchers, who adopt a distinctive method, and obtain consent from the community to learn about them from members of the community.

References:

Dobrin, Lise and Rena Lederman (2011). Comments on proposed changes to the Common Rule. Report to the National Science Foundation on behalf of the Ethics Committee of the American Anthropological Association.

Lederman, Rena (2016). Fieldwork double-bound in human ethics reviews. In: W.C. van Hoonard and Ann Hamilton, eds., pp. 43-72, *The Ethics Rupture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

TCPS2 (2014). *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. Ottawa: CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRCC.

## Ethics Clearance



**Date:** 2 July 2019

**To:** Dr. Andrew Walsh

**Project ID:** 111445

**Study Title:** The Ethics of Research Ethics: an ethnographic study of academic research in practice

**Application Type:** Continuing Ethics Review (CER) Form

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Meeting Date:** 07/Jul/2019

**Date Approval Issued:** 02/Jul/2019

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 28/Jun/2020

**Lapse in Approval:** June 29, 2019 to July 2, 2019

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Dear Dr. Andrew Walsh,

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board has reviewed this application. This study, including all currently approved documents, has been re- approved until the expiry date noted above.

REB members involved in the research project do not participate in the review, discussion or decision.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Daniel Wyzynski, Research Ethics Coordinator, on behalf of Prof. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

## Curriculum Vitae

# Marie-Pier Cantin

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### Education

Bachelor of Arts, University of Western Ontario 2016  
(Major in Anthropology, Minor in English Literature)

Master's Candidate, *Department of Anthropology, University of Western Ontario* 2017  
(Thesis title: *Negotiating Ethics in Contemporary Anthropology*)

### Awards and Distinctions

- Dean's Honor List 2014-2016
- Recipient of the Faculty of Social Science Alumni Scholarship 2016
- SSHRC (Social-Science and Humanities Research Council) Grant 2017-2018
- OGS (Ontario Graduate Scholarship) Grant (deferred) 2017-2018
- Western Graduate Research Scholarship 2017-2018
- OGS (Ontario Graduate Scholarship) Grant 2018-2019

### Teaching

Workshop Co-Ordinator

*Do Anthropologists Really Do That?* (Nov 23), for the SPARK! Gifted and Enriched Programme,  
Thames Valley District School Board  
2017

- Duties: co-ordinated with fellow students to organize a half-day series of workshops. Presented socio-cultural anthropology through a series of fun and interactive skits, hands-on games, and video clips. Set-up and organized presentation slides alongside fellow presenters

*Workshop* (Oct 24) for *Stratford Northwestern High School* 2018

- Duties: structured and organized a half-day series of workshops introducing anthropology to high school students. Recruited, and co-ordinated with, fellow presenters to create three hands-on workshops, and presented the "Socio-Cultural Workshop"

*Take Your Kids to Work Day "Garbology" Activity* (Nov 14) 2018

- Duties: organized a one-hour activity for students visiting their parents for "Take Your Kid to Work," and helped facilitate the activity along with fellow graduate students

*CAGIS Outreach Day* (May 10) for the *Canadian Association for Girls in Science* 2019



- Duties: structured and organized a half-day series of workshops introducing primatology and archaeology to young girls aged 6-13. Recruited, and co-ordinated with, fellow presenters to create two workshops, and helped facilitate activities

Teaching Assistant, *University of Western Ontario*

2017-2018

*Anthropology of the Life Course: 13-week module for 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate students*

- Duties: contributed to questions for quizzes and other assessments, and marked those questions. Compiled resources for students' final assessment. Co-ordinated with the instructor to implement the course's Community Engaged Learning component, aiding in reaching out to community partners and facilitating communication between partners and the instructor. Reviewed final assessment for clarity and to ensure it reflected the learning outcomes of the class.

*Anthropology of the Caribbean: 13-week online module for 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate students*

- Duties: assessed forum posts and facilitated discussion between students through online forum posts. Worked with the instructor to provide clear instructions to students regarding course content and course assessments. Graded final essays.

*Zombies in Cultural and Historical Perspectives: 13-week module for 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate students*

- Duties: Taught two lessons on close reading and essay writing skills and provided detailed feedback to students both through comments on their papers and in person during office hours. Graded weekly quizzes, mid-term exams and final essays, co-ordinating with the instructor to ensure consistent feedback and ensuring that students received their assessments on time.

## **Professional Development**

TA Day: Graduate Student Conference on Teaching

2017

*University of Western Ontario*

## **Conference Paper**

"Embracing the Unknown: Anxiety and Possibility as an Incoming Graduate Student"

*(University of Western Ontario)*

2017

- Western Anthropology Graduate Conference, *University of Western Ontario*
- Winner of best paper for undergraduate panel

## **Research**

Research Report for LMLIP (London-Middlesex Immigration Partnership)

2016

*University of Western Ontario, London, ON*

- Conducted original research, to consider leadership from a cross-cultural perspective for the LMLIP, producing an annotated resource list to be used in future collaborative work between

Western Serves and the LMLIP. Collaborated with team members, ensuring that we stayed on task and met the goals set out by the LMLIP in a timely fashion. Established and followed through with systems for effective collaboration in research and writing, working with international and Western students to effectively tackle questions of leadership and immigrant integration from a cross-cultural perspective.

- Research Report for CCLC (Cross-Cultural Learner’s Center) 2018
- Conducted research on the efficacy of the CCLC “Match Program” by interviewing newcomers to Canada and their “Match Program” Canadian mentors, as part of a larger report for the CCLC providing feedback on a number of programs offered to newcomers in London. Conducted six sets of interviews in co-ordination with two research partners, and helped compile, organize and analyze data. In collaboration with a research team, wrote part of, and did final edit for, the research report presented to CCLC administration.
- Research Assistant for Franz Boas Papers 2019-2020
- Provided support to members of the Franz Boas Papers research team
- Research Assistant for Dr. Gregory Beckett 2019-2020
- Provided editing assistance, include copy editing, transcribing, formatting and citation work, for a collection of essays by Dr. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, to be published in late 2019 by the University of Chicago Press

## Service

- Graduate Department Representative 2017
- *Faculty of Anthropology, University of Western Ontario*
- Peer Writing Councillor 2017-2019
- *Writing Support Center, University of Western Ontario*
- Organizer, conference “Land, Language, Locatives” 2018
- *University of Western Ontario*
- VP Outreach of Western Anthropology Graduate Student Association 2018-2019
- *Faculty of Anthropology, University of Western Ontario*
- Organizer, graduate conference “WAGS 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Graduate Conference: Negotiating Multiplicities and Polyvocalities” 2019
- *Western Anthropology Graduate Society, University of Western Ontario*
- Peer Advisor on Academic Matters 2019
- *Society of Graduate Students, University of Western Ontario*

## Foreign Language Abilities

### Spoken

- Native speaker of French; fluent in English and Spanish

### Written

- French, English, and Spanish