

# **The Professor's Dilemma:**

**When Japanese University Research Ethics  
Committee Guidance Hinders Qualitative  
Inquiry in Partnership with People**

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# Goals

- **To share my experiences as a teacher of qualitative inquiry and describe my difficulties with my own university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).**
- **To promote discussion on whether or not professors should tell their students to submit their proposal to their IRB.**

# Contents

- **Literature review**
  - **IRBs and qualitative inquiry**
- **My experience**
  - **As a supervisor of graduate students**
  - **As a consultant of a self-help group**
- **Three discussions**
  - **Power**
  - **Participation**
  - **Culture**
- **Conclusion: IRBs: To submit or not?**

# IRBs and qualitative research

“Qualitative methodologists find that many IRBs are not competent to judge qualitative research.”

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 499.

# IRBs and qualitative research

“Qualitative research is being treated unfairly and disadvantaged by ethics committees.”

Ramcharan, P., and J. R. Cutcliffe (2001). Judging the ethics of qualitative research: Considering the ‘ethics as process’ model. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 9(6) at 358.

# IRBs and qualitative research

“Too many researchers are choosing not to conduct research with human subjects because of the difficulties in some universities with the IRB. The board has been hotly criticized because it uses a bioscientific model that too often works against the kind of ethical concerns in the social sciences and humanities.”

Madison, D. S. (2005). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 119.

# IRBs and qualitative research

“The framework typically used by an IRB for monitoring research ethics is predicated on postpositivist epistemological assumptions of a distanced objectivist research stance. As such, qualitative and participatory researchers argue that framework is ill suited for examining the ethics of participatory research approaches.”

Boser, S. (2007). Power, ethics, and the IRB: Dissonance over human participant review of participatory research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(8), at 1060.

# IRBs and qualitative research

“Some qualitative inquirers have experienced having their research blocked by ethics committees, or even dismissed out of hand, on the basis that it is not the experimental, deductively based research that some members of the committee believe that all research should be. The research is thus deemed unethical on the basis of research paradigm.”

Cheek, J. (2011). The politics and practices of funding qualitative inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 261.

# My experience as a supervisor

- Supervisee: A graduate student of social work
- Research participants: Social activists with dementia.
- IRB's perception: Participants were very vulnerable.

## Image held by IRB



1. Family
2. Anonymity
3. Contribution

## Image held by us



# My experience as a consultant

- A self-help group leader asked me for advice.
- A researcher approached her group with the IRB's approval, and the leader felt uncomfortable.



# Discussion 1: Power

“In [its] worldview, the IRB has ‘power over’ the researcher. . . . Furthermore, the IRB worldview assumes that the researcher operates from the same ‘power over’ perspective with the human participants.”

Boser, S. (2007). Power, ethics, and the IRB: Dissonance over human participant review of participatory research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(8), at 1063.

# Discussion 2: Participation

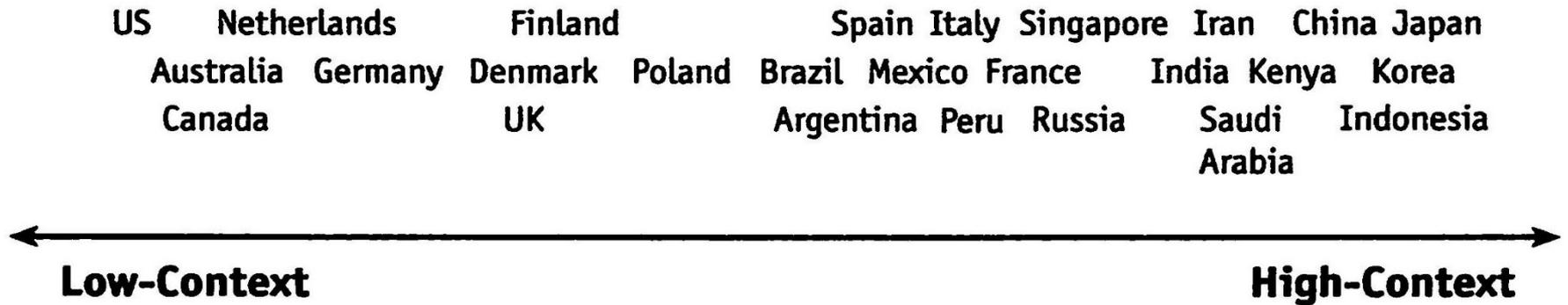
“One key element of most participatory inquiry approaches is that they profoundly reduce the ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ distinction . . .

Because of this, participatory research brings a different set of social relations than those assumed by IRB review processes.”

Boser, S. (2007). Power, ethics, and the IRB: Dissonance over human participant review of participatory research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(8), at 1064.

# Discussion 3: Culture

**FIGURE 1.1. COMMUNICATING**



**Low-Context** Good communication is precise, simple, and clear. Messages are expressed and understood at face value. Repetition is appreciated if it helps clarify the communication.

**High-Context** Good communication is sophisticated, nuanced, and layered. Messages are both spoken and read between the lines. Messages are often implied but not plainly expressed.

Meyer, E. (2014). *The culture map: Breaking through the invisible boundaries of global business*. New York, NY: Public Affairs, p. 39.

# IRBs: To submit or not?



**YES! Then,**

- *How can I assist my students in dealing with the IRB?*
- *Will my assistance result in confusion?*



**NO! Then,**

- *How can I encourage my students in their work despite a higher possibility of rejection by peer-reviewed journals?*

# Conclusion

“Our guidelines oppose standard IRB principles. We have our own concepts of justice, respect, help, harm and benefit. They are grounded in human rights, and social justice considerations.”

From “An ethical code for qualitative researchers” in Denzin, N. K. (2010). *The qualitative manifesto: A call to arms*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

