Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Organizational Tension of Othering

Betsy Wackernagel Bach

In this paper narratives submitted to this issue are reviewed and critiqued using the feminist lenses of othering and organizational irrationality. Four emergent themes in the narratives are identified and discussed, with the themes and the feminist critique of them used to provide a set of recommendations for developing researcher-IRB working relationships.

Keywords: Institutional Review Board; Othering; Feminist Critique

I have been a full professor of communication studies for ten years; for five of those years I have served in an administrative role. In these roles I have both battled with institutional review boards (IRBs) and come to appreciate the role that they play in preserving institutional integrity.

While on the faculty, I had to obtain yearly permission for graduate students in my qualitative methods class to gather data in locations ranging from local support meetings at Alcoholics Anonymous and a battered women's shelter to an elementary school playground and the 911 call response center. I also had to obtain IRB approval to conduct interview research with graduate students at three different institutions. IRB objection to these projects often seemed arbitrary, capricious, and uninformed with regard to the special circumstances often necessary to gather naturalistic and interview data.

As an administrator I worked closely with the IRB to gather national survey data and collaborated with the IRB to develop and distribute local surveys on student withdrawal patterns and the academic perceptions and intentions of first year students (many of whom were minors at the time of the survey). Hence, I have collaborated

Betsy Wackernagel Bach (Ph.D., University of Washington) is Professor of Communication Studies and Interim Dean of the Davidson Honors College at The University of Montana-Missoula. Correspondence to: Department of Communication Studies, University of Montana, Missoula, MT, 59812, USA. Tel: 406 243 2580; Email: betsy.bach@umontana.edu

with our IRB to gather both qualitative and quantitative data as both a faculty member and an administrator. Given my varied experience, I must admit to having many different reactions to the 57 narratives submitted. As a faculty member, I empathize with those who wrote about the erratic and subjective decisions made by their institutional IRBs; as an administrator I am struck by the haughtiness (smugness?) of those (albeit few) narrators who, for whatever reason, make unrealistic demands of their IRBs.

In this essay, it is my goal to offer a feminist critique of the narratives offered in this issue. I will first introduce the two feminist perspectives which serve as my grounding and framework for responding to the narratives. I then highlight the emergent themes in the narratives, and use the themes and the feminist critique of them to provide a set of recommendations for developing researcher-IRB working relationships.

Conceptual Framework

Tension is evident in every narrative, and reflects both the feminist notion of the *other*, and organizational irrationality (Ashcraft, 2001; see also Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). The narratives are replete with language indicating that researchers feel marginalized, put-down, and otherwise disregarded by their IRBs. Similarly, the researcher/narrators frequently comment upon the arbitrary and often contradictory nature of their communication with IRBs. Both othering and organizational irrationality are feminist concerns, and serve as the framework for my critique of the narratives.

Othering

Resigning someone or something to the status of *other* is a form of disenfranchising, discounting, or marginalizing that person or process. Specifically, the other is a person or group who is objectified by the dominant culture and treated as a cipher, or non-person (Bullis & Bach, 1996). Stewart and Logan (1993) identify the ways in which othering and objectifying can occur. They note that those being objectified are treated as if they: (a) are interchangeable parts (rather than unique human beings); (b) have no feelings or emotions; (c) are incapable of reflective thought; and (d) are passive and unable to make choices (see Bullis & Bach, 1996). Objectifying can lead to generalization and stereotypical thought. The impersonal nature of academic (or any) bureaucracy in general, and researcher-IRB relationships in particular, sets the stage for othering to occur.

In any bureaucratic system, the more powerful are in a position to other those who are either in the minority or the most vulnerable, connected to or dependent upon the bureaucracy for their organizational survival. Furthermore, othering takes on several different organizational forms. Researchers are dependent upon, yet subsequently other IRBs; IRBs rely upon researchers to give purpose to their existence, yet other them. IRBs add an additional layer of othering when they identify certain (and often marginalized) groups as at-risk. While not always intentional, othering is both

a process and product of relational and bureaucratic tensions. Evidence of othering will be exemplified in the narratives discussed below.

Organizational Irrationality

Recently, organizational scholars have invoked hybrid feminist forms which are "marked by the merger of hierarchical and egalitarian modes of power" (Ashcraft, 2001, p. 3). These hybrid forms offer an alternative to the contradictory and often difficult task of putting the ideals of feminist empowerment into organizational practice. The marriage between hierarchical and egalitarian modes of power evokes a certain irony as it recognizes that some individuals can exercise power over others to achieve the feminist principle of promoting equality (see Ashcraft, 2001). Accepting and recognizing irony provides a framework for viewing the irrationality, paradox, and contradictions that comprise daily organizational life. Simply put, irony, paradox, and contradiction are routine features of organizational life that attest to the fundamental irrationality of organizing (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004).

Organizational irrationality provides a second lens to understand the tensions evidenced in researcher-IRB relationships. Accepting that irrationality exists allows for discussion of how to manage and live with it, rather than attempting to eliminate it. Managing organizational irrationality allows for self-reflection, introspection, and understanding—processes which may allow organizational entities to move beyond the other.

The Tension of Othering

Upon reading and reviewing the narratives, four central themes emerge—each indicative of some form of othering. Although many narrators recognize and even appreciate the need for IRBs, they frequently cast IRB members as nameless faceless individuals intent on blocking the advancement of science. On the other hand, some narrators who are IRB members write of othering the researchers who submit proposals to them, casting them as lazy, unwilling to adapt to institutional requirements, or uneducated about the research process. Both are co-dependent, yet engage in othering to make sense of the IRB review process.

Reflected in the presentations of othering are the tensions inherent in: bureaucratic control, disagreements over definitions of *at risk*, notions that winning the battle or overcoming the IRB is a high stakes endeavor, and notions that researchers must cope with the disciplinary and methodological bias displayed in IRB decisions. Tension over both the process and product of othering is evidenced in each of these themes.

The Tension of Bureaucratic Control

Bureaucratic control is by far the largest theme emerging from the narratives, and almost every story mentions difficulties associated with either federal or local control.

While control is often necessary to ensure proper checks and balances, it takes the form of othering, as uniformly applied control fails to account for individual and organizational differences. Narrators articulate different forms of control and develop responses to the othering inherent in bureaucratic control. Some actively fight against it or try to work around it; others manage bureaucratic control by finding ways to work within the confines it presents.

Forms of control

Some form of bureaucratic control is evidenced in every story of an IRB-researcher relationship. Narrators tell stories of rigid federal regulations or the difficulty with IRB processes on their local campuses, particularly when local IRBs attempt to interpret the federal laws. Laments of bureaucratic red tape, for even the simplest projects, are common. Hamilton (this issue) reinforces this point, suggesting that researchers face a daunting task as they try to interpret federal regulations to determine which regulations to follow and enforce. Even local IRBs find it difficult to interpret the federal regulations.

Several researchers experienced excessive bureaucratic control when collaborating with colleagues at other institutions, pointing out that approval by one campus IRB was often not enough to begin data collection across several campuses. The IRBs on each campus involved had to approve the project; some researchers were required to participate in the human subjects training at both their own and other campuses (#13).

The review process at the local level is maddening to many narrators. Frustrations range from the apparent role and function of local IRBs to shifting and changing priorities depending upon the composition of the board. Dougherty and Kramer (introductory essay, this issue) speculate that many IRBs deviate from their narrow mission focus of protecting human subjects and create barriers for even low-risk projects.

Narrators argue that the perceived role and function of the IRB is often broadly defined. Narrators suggest that a board's span of control ranges from its members believing their role is to critique the theory and methods of projects under review, rather than ascertain the risks to the subjects involved, to taking an inordinate amount of time to review proposals. Of particular note is Narrator 14, who reports that the approval process involved nine applications to the board, approximately 500 pages of emails to board members, and 11 months from submission to ultimate approval of the project. Other narrators lament that it is almost impossible for students enrolled in research methods courses to gather data since the review process takes longer than one semester. A graduate student narrator bemoans the fact that although the issues raised by the IRB were worth considering, they were

> of such a superficial, hypercritical nature that the effort needed on my part to make the recommended modifications and resubmit my materials hardly substantiated the amount of time that I spent waiting as the IRB deliberated upon my proposed methodology. (#22)

Seasoned researchers found that often the IRB has shifting and changing priorities based largely upon board membership. Narrator 10 writes that an informed consent form identical to one that had been approved in a previous year was included in a proposal, only to be rejected by a different board; other narrators talked of having their proposals moved from low to immediate risk with little or no explanation provided.

Rejection of control

It is no surprise that some researchers respond to control and the othering it produces by wholly rejecting control and circumventing the review process altogether. Narrator 9 provides an excellent example by offering how one might cooperate with the IRB without really following the rules, by arguing that research subjects can still be protected without following the minutiae of IRB policy and procedures. Unfortunately, this researcher/narrator runs the risk of getting caught and facing university sanctions.

Management of control

Some narrators express relief and gratitude for work done by board members, and, in doing so, may have managed tensions by personifying (see Stewart & Logan, 1993), rather than objectifying, their institutional review boards. Some narrator/researchers are appreciative of their boards for catching an important oversight in a proposed questionnaire; others note that the unethical acts of medical researchers in the Tuskegee experiments (see Jones, 1993) forced the establishment of IRBs to provide necessary safeguards for research with human subjects. Still other narrators, themselves IRB members, cast a more personal face on IRBs. They argue that IRB members are not malicious and rigid, despite frequently being alleged as such, and suggest that IRB members are only doing what is required: giving careful attention to the proposals coming to them for review (#23). According to Narrator 23 no IRB member believes that "researchers submitting proposals were either ethically deficient or professionally inept."

Tensions of At Risk

Although they struggle in their mission to protect human subjects and their universities, uphold the bureaucratic process, and remain neutral throughout the review process, IRBs frequently and often depersonalize (or objectify) researchers by failing to recognize their contributions to the advancement of knowledge. This tension is particularly evident as boards and researchers struggle over definitions of at-risk populations. Here tensions and examples of objectifying occur on multiple levels. Boards often objectify both researchers and the human subjects involved. As Narrator 15 notes, "the two audiences with the most to gain from the research, the scholar and the subjects, are those with the least voice in the institutional motives for IRB approval." Narrators and board members have very different viewpoints on this particular issue.

Narrators often lament the position taken by boards that every possible risk be articulated, and resent any board implication that they did not have the insight or understanding adequately to protect their subjects from undue harm. While narrators understand (for the most part) that the rights of their human subjects have to be protected, they are frustrated by their IRBs' request to anticipate every conceivable risk, however unlikely. Articulating every risk is perceived as intrusive and as a roadblock to gathering data, as it could scare off potential participants or create the very distress that it seeks to avoid. Several respondents, such as Narrator 7, suggest that the board took on too much responsibility when it initially rejected a proposal investigating the recall of messages about a traumatic event. Here, the board had a problem with the proposed research, and assumed that it would cause anxiety for the subjects involved. Narrator 7 wondered how the board could determine what would actually cause anxiety or distress in the first place. As Dougherty and Kramer (introductory essay, this issue) suggest, "if the IRB itself creates greater risk than the research it is overseeing, the process is somehow defective" (p. 5).

Boards are also guilty of objectifying human subjects by enforcing overly rigid interpretations of at-risk populations. Many proposals involving at-risk populations may be too quickly turned down because they involve extra work or care when they are studied. At-risk populations are too often marginalized by society. Narrator 29 talks of attempts to gather data from manufacturing workers and having problems with the IRB over language in the consent form. Although an easy-to-read consent form was prepared and submitted to the IRB, the proposal was initially denied because IRB members assumed that some workers would be illiterate and unable to read the consent form that was prepared. In an ironic twist, the IRB provided their own form, written in academese, and approved the proposal.

Tensions of Importance

Narrators perceive IRBs to be a major hurdle to tenure, promotion, or obtaining the Ph.D. IRB decisions have the potential to be career-breakers, and can have a devastating effect on young scholars. Proposals which are initially rejected, delayed, or otherwise put off by an IRB can cause a great deal of angst, particularly if the researcher is under a timeline to gather data. Several narratives written by doctoral students note significant delays in their march towards the Ph.D. when their proposals did not pass IRB review in their first attempt (see #14, #16). In many cases, researchers working under a deadline feel trapped by an IRB's decision and feel they have no immediate recourse for questioning the decision. Dougherty and Kramer (introductory essay, this issue) note the following catch-22 that many researchers encounter. They argue that there is no alternative for a researcher who disagrees with an IRB decision, other than appealing to the same IRB that made the decision to deny in the first place. Several narrators note that as nontenured assistant professors they felt compelled to abide by IRB rules even when they dictated how research should be conducted. The supposed power that IRBs have over researchers is perhaps best articulated by Narrator 15, who believes that the threat of rejection by the IRB is very

intimidating. Certainly many narrators believe that IRBs put up unnecessary road blocks and obstruct progress toward promotion, tenure, or degree completion.

Interestingly, some frustrated researcher/narrators may other IRBs by holding them responsible for a problematic proposal. Some may use the IRB, and subsequent denial of their proposed projects, to construct a sense of self, and as a face-saving measure to present to their colleagues. In this sense, the board serves as an excellent scapegoat when poorly conceptualized proposals are turned down or projects with rigid timelines are delayed. Here, the sense of self is protected by objectifying the other, and the locus of control is shifted externally.

Tensions of Discipline and Method

Narrators were concerned by both the review procedures used by IRBs and the fact that boards were unfamiliar with much of the research commonly done in the field of communication studies. Of major concern was the fact that many believed IRBs to be operating under a model that was most suited for medical research, believing that the primary concern of IRB reviewers was bioethics. Narrator 29 states that, "IRBs inappropriately view social science research through perceptual lenses and priorities shaped by experimental biomedical research, where real physical harm is a possibility." Unfortunately, that bias translates to one narrator's research, where an IRB balked at an online survey asking participants to recall memorable moments surrounding the death of a family member. The board requested that all participants have access to a psychologist for debriefing, a request that had major methodological implications for the proposed research (#18). Similarly, other narrators note incidents where their research was lumped together with other social science projects, all of which were initially rejected by a board comprised of members who were allegedly unfamiliar with the scope and range of social science research. Here boards engage in othering by failing both to learn about a discipline and to see what makes different disciplines unique.

Researchers using qualitative methods share a concern regarding the positivistic experimental psychology bias that they encounter from IRBs. Many narrators discuss problems with getting approval for journalistic interviews, participant observation, unobtrusive observation, classroom observation, and applied research conducted under the auspices of a specific organization. While research involving observation of public behavior is exempt from review, many IRBs either (a) are uncertain about how to evaluate proposals for gathering qualitative data within a specific organization which require observation, or (b) have no guidelines or consent provisions for research using these methods.

As noted above, IRBs have difficulty evaluating proposals that use technology, particularly when it is used to gather online data. In addition to Narrator 18's tale of having to change methods for online data collection, other narrators noted that, in particular, online research poses a significant challenge to the idea of informed consent, particularly with regard to the sending and receiving of email messages from research participants. Simply put, federal policy has not kept up with technology.

Objectifying review boards, researchers, and research subjects appears in many of the narratives submitted for this edition of *JACR*. Boards may be used as scapegoats, researchers seen as unethical, and at-risk research participants seen as wholly untouchable. What follows is a discussion—using feminist principles—of how researchers and IRBs can work together to accomplish their goals.

Practical Applications

The narratives included in this volume of *JACR*, the themes which emerge from them, and the feminist critique of both narratives and themes, would not be complete without an offering of suggestions for enhancing the working relationship between researchers, their IRBs, and their research subjects. Researchers are encouraged to communicate with boards, educate themselves, and educate IRBs about the nature of social science research in general and our discipline in particular. Similarly, IRB members are encouraged to learn about the disciplines from which proposals are submitted, become familiar with multiple methods of research, and come to determine how underrepresented populations can be studied so that their voices can be included in our knowledge base. Although these recommendations add time and effort to the research process, they are offered in the spirit of rectifying the practice of othering.

Recommendations for Researchers

It seems only natural that, in the discipline of communication studies, we would think of working proactively, communicating with our IRBs to keep on top of the submission and decision process. With that in mind, researchers are encouraged to do the following.

1. Meet with the board, or the IRB chair, prior to submitting your proposal for review
Meeting with the chair or the board would allow you to discuss your research, and determine whether any problems are anticipated. Ask about problems the board has encountered with other proposals and discuss how you might avoid them. A discussion of timelines regarding proposal submission, review, and decision would clarify the process, and provide opportunity for you to articulate your deadlines. Ask who will be notified about the status of your proposal, and how it will be communicated once a decision is made. Some IRBs send notification to PIs only, while others notify everyone listed on the proposal. Moreover, notifications can be emailed or sent on hard copy.

Learning about the members who sit on IRBs may also assist with your understanding of both the review process and the individual idiosyncrasies of each member. Board members perform an important and necessary service for our universities, and spend hours reviewing proposals, offering suggestions, and sitting in meetings. As such, it seems sensible to understand the individuals involved, the

disciplines they represent, and what they know about our particular project and the discipline of communication studies before we submit a proposal for their review.

2. Keep in touch with the IRB throughout the review and decision process

For the reasons outlined above, it is essential to keep in touch with the IRB, particularly around the decision date. Call the IRB chair, inquire about the status of your proposal, and ask if there are any questions that you can answer.

3. If your proposal is rejected, ask to speak with the chair or IRB to discuss their concerns

The IRB chair should be willing to articulate the reasons for rejection. If you do not get satisfaction from the chair, particularly if the rejection seems irrational or ill-informed, ask to argue your case before the entire board. Request that they provide evidence to justify the decision to reject. Even if you have not met with the chair or the board prior to submitting your proposal, they should be able to provide specific reasons for rejection. Narrators 6 and 7 provide excellent examples of how they argued their cases and got the board to recant their initial decision.

4. Educate yourself

While training can be lengthy, attend IRB training sessions. Be inquisitive. Ask the trainer to discuss social science proposals in particular. Learn all you can about board members. Review the IRB website and become familiar with policies and procedures. Become familiar with Title 45 § 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (1991) (also known as the Common Rule; see Marshall, 2003). This document outlines criteria for IRB approval for research, general requirements for informed consent and documentation of informed consent, and other guidelines for the use and treatment of human subjects. Familiarize yourself with the proposed changes to the Common Rule to provide stronger protections to human subjects, and with social scientists' critiques of the revisions (Citro, Ilgen, & Marrett, 2003; Gordon, 2003).

5. Anticipate snafus

Understand that your faculty colleagues comprise your IRB, many of whom serve on the board without release time or compensation (although, admittedly, some IRB chairs at Big Ten and other schools are paid handsomely for their work). Realize that they review a number of proposals every year, and that there is a chance that paperwork might get lost (which is even more reason to be proactive with your board). Know that if you are gathering data with colleagues on other campuses, your proposal will most likely be reviewed on their campuses as well. Accept the fact that both the review process and outcome may be different on each campus, and build extra time into your proposal to account for these differences.

6. Educate your IRB

Invite IRB members (or at least the chair) to a faculty meeting. Talk with them about our discipline and the kinds of research done by faculty in the department. Ask about submitting proposals and find out what information they need about our discipline to make the review process as smooth as possible. Encourage your IRB to post information about their policies and procedures on a website. Ask about serving on your campus IRB to ensure proper representation for both communication studies and the social sciences (in addition to the likelihood that you will write better research proposals). Many narrators lamented that the communication discipline was uniformly underrepresented in IRB membership.

Recommendations for IRB Members

To keep othering to a minimum, IRB members must also take an active role in depersonalizing the researchers who submit proposals and the disciplines that they represent. With that in mind, IRB members are encouraged to do the following.

1. Learn how disciplines in the social sciences are different, yet distinct, and what kinds of research questions are asked in each discipline

Become familiar with the social sciences, and understand how the disciplines are different. Learn what kinds of research questions are typically asked in each discipline.

2. Become familiar with multiple methods

Learn what you can about interpretive, ethnographic, critical and cultural research, and rhetorical methods.

3. Do what you can to ensure that underrepresented populations can be studied

If we are truly to understand all aspects of society, help researchers in their attempts to study underrepresented and at-risk populations. If a researcher presents a proposal to study these groups of people, work with them to help make that possible.

The tensions inherent in organizing and the irrationalities and ironies that surround researcher-IRB relationships may be avoided if the above suggestions are incorporated. Both IRBs and researchers could learn to personify rather than objectify each other. Then, perhaps, battles negotiating IRB-researcher relationships will be more of a single skirmish than all-out war.

References

Ashcraft, K. L. (2001). Organized dissonance: Feminist bureaucracy as hybrid form. *Academy of Management Journal*, *44*, 1301–1322.

Ashcraft, K. L., & Trethewey, A. (2004). Developing tension: An agenda for applied research on the organization of irrationality. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *32*, 171–181.

Bullis, C., & Bach, B. W. (1996). Feminism and the disenfranchised: Listening beyond the "other."
In E. B. Ray (Ed.), *Communication and disenfranchisement: Social health issues and implications*
(pp. 3–28). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Citro, C. F., Ilgen, D. R., & Marrett, C. B. (Eds.). (2003). *Protecting participants and facilitating social
and behavioral sciences research: Executive summary* [Electronic version]. Retrieved June 30,
2004, from http://www.nap.edu/books/0309088526/html/1.html

Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects [Electronic version], 45 C.F.R. § 46 (1991, June
18). Retrieved June 30, 2004, from http://www.med.umich.edu/irbmed/federaldocuments/
hhs/hhs45cfr46.html

Gordon, E. J. (2003). Trials and tribulations of navigating IRBs: Anthropological and biomedical
perspectives of "risk" in conducting human subjects research. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *76*,
299–320.

Jones, J. H. (1993). *Bad blood: The Tuskegee syphilis experiment*. New York: Free Press.

Marshall, P. A. (2003). Human subjects protections, institutional review boards, and cultural
anthropological research. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *76*, 269–285.

Stewart, J., & Logan, C. (1993). *Together: Communicating interpersonally* (4th ed.). New York:
McGraw-Hill.

Trethewey, A., & Ashcraft, K. L. (2004). Practicing disorganization: The development of applied
perspectives on living with tension. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *32*, 81–88.