المجلس العربي للعلوم الاجتماعية
Arab Council for the Social Sciences
Conseil Arabe pour les Sciences Sociales

إعادة النظر في لجان أخلاقيات البحث: من الأخلاقيات الدقيقة إلى (اللا)عدالة المعرفية

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أيار/مايو 2026

ملخص

تتناول هذه الورقة، من منظور نقدي، الدور الذي تضطلع به لجان أخلاقيات البحوث المؤسسية باعتبارها الجهة المنوط بها الإشراف على أخلاقيات البحث في سياق بحوث العلوم الاجتماعية الجامعية المعاصرة. ورغم أنّ هذه اللجان تُكلَّف، من حيث المبدأ، بضمان الالتزام بالمعايير الأخلاقية وصون رفاه المشاركين في البحوث، إلّا أنّني أرى أنها غالبًا ما تختزل الأخلاقيات إلى إجراء شكلي روتيني يُستخدَم بوصفه مخرَجًا للتنصّل من المسؤولية الأخلاقية، في الوقت الذي تُسهم فيه في استمرار الممارسات الاستعمارية وأشكال اللاعدالة المعرفية. وانطلاقًا من الأدبيات النقدية، وبالاستناد إلى تأملات إثنوغرافية ذاتية مُستمَدَّة من مشروع بحثي محدّد، أقترح إعادة صياغة التصوّر النظري للجان أخلاقيات البحوث، باعتبارها في الوقت نفسه نتاجًا لاستعمارية إنتاج المعرفة الحديثة وأداة تُسهم في ترسيخها. ومن هذا المنطلق، أدعو إلى إعادة تصوُّر البحث الأخلاقي بما يتجاوز النماذج المعرفية المتمركزة حول أوروبا، مع التشديد على أهمية إدماج المنعطف الديكولونيالي بصورة نقدية في حقل أخلاقيات البحث بوجه عام، وإعادة النظر، على وجه الخصوص، في الأطُر المؤسسية التي تنظّم أخلاقيات البحث داخل الجامعات.

RETHINKING RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW BOARDS: FROM MICRO-ETHICS TO EPISTEMIC (IN)JUSTICES

Standardly, today, Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are responsible for upholding ethical standards designed to protect participants and ensure the integrity (and legality) of research – a central constituent of any academic research project. This paper argues that while crucial, such boards – especially in the case of research with subalternized communities – can reduce ethics to a performative, discreet exercise and constitute *moves to innocence* that exonerate, enable, and protect research that could very well be colonizing and erasing. Accordingly, and based on auto-ethnographic reflections, I suggest that IRBs can be implicated in the coloniality of modern 'knowledge production', and emphasize the need to delink toward a re-conceptualization of 'ethical research'.

Coloniality, the Westernized University, and Ethics Review Boards

This paper is informed by the argument that the 'modern' world is a world of coloniality (Mignolo 2011; Quijano and Ennis 2000). Coloniality is here understood as the darker side of Western modernity and as the movement towards the affirmation of the Eurocentric model across the spheres of knowledge, power, and being (Mignolo 2007; Dussel 2000). In this sense, coloniality designates the epistemic and material denial, disavowal, ruination, and erasure of all that is deemed to belong to the outside of the west's self-proclaimed 'reality' (Vázquez 2012).

While the social sciences have long had their "focus on objects (culture, society, economy, politics)", anti/post/decolonial scholars have sought to conceptualise a shifting of "the politics of knowledge toward problems and questions that are hidden by the rhetoric of modernity" (Mignolo 2012, 20). In this sense, the decolonial turn calls for a different research agenda where making "visible the invisible" and analysing "the mechanisms that produce such invisibility or distorted visibility" is centred (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 262). To do this, knowledge and theorisations beyond those produced by the Eurocentric knowing subject occupying the hubris of the 'god-eye' are needed (Mignolo 2011). Crucially, this is an ethical pursuit and project (Vazquez 2020; Dunford 2017).

The critical knowledge pursued by the decolonial turn is therefore that of an *external critique*. Exteriority here means that which is situated in a different locus of enunciation than that of the Eurocentric coloniser – a critique which breaks with the 'Imperial being' and his (as it is regularly that of 'white man') binaries, categorical logic, racism, sexism, and unpositioned self-generated uni-versality (Vázquez 2012). It is important here to stress that this external critique does not mean a pure external that is romanticised or ideologized under either a relativism of "everything goes," nor an epistemic populism where everything said or done by a "subalternized" subject is already equivalent to "critical thinking" and liberation (Grosfoguel 2012, 101). This external is further touched by coloniality and is therefore not pure nor absolute, as it holds the "geopolitics and bodypolitics of knowledge of this exteriority or relative marginality" from which decolonial thinking can emerge (Grosfoguel 2012, 97).

The western/westernized university has long been a powerful institution of coloniality's establishment and erasures – a site of making external critique impossible. This is no less true today, where the university holds on to its Uni-versality as an institution that "operates as part and parcel of the historical and contemporary colonizing power/knowledge nexus" (Al-Hardan 2014, 62). This is not a denial of the critical traditions that have long flourished in academic

settings, the liberatory contributions research has enabled and advanced, or the possibilities of a university as a site of critical knowledge and social transformation. Yet, it is to recognize coloniality and its stealthy functioning and make visible the need to 'decolonise' (Bhambra et al. 2018). In this respect, a burgeoning literature breaking with western epistemology, as well as the academic canons of the social sciences, has developed (Alatas and Sinha 2017; Bhambra 2021; Connell 2007).[1] Alongside this epistemic delinking, the effort to decolonise has advanced "the epistemological alliance with, as well as learning from, critical decolonial thinkers and activists from the Global South" (Al-Hardan 2014, 69; Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith 2008). Here, the need for an alternative research agenda committed to decolonisation, where an 'existential raison d'etre' of the research must be the anti-imperial and anti-colonial emerges as foundational (Al-Hardan 2014).

Research, meanwhile, remains 'one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary' as it is 'inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism' (Smith 2012). As a process which started, grew, and continues to play a role in the subjugation and erasure of the world's diversity for the claimed European universal, empirical social research, always 'within a set of historical, political, and social relations of power', is a key constitutive of contemporary coloniality (Al-Hardan 2014, 63; Darder 2018). While some authors have accordingly rejected research as an imperialist endeavour that must be abolished, others have been exploring the decolonisation of research methodologies reflecting around 'delinking' for the academy's research practices (Chilisa 2011; Kovach 2009; Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith, 2008; Seehawer 2018; Zavala 2013). In large part, this revolves around an intellectual engagement with the meaning of research as a practice on the one hand and a re-imagining of some specific research methods on the other. This has involved re-imagining techniques including photovoice, storytelling, and visual methods, as well as multiple participatory, action research, and quantitative methods (Adams 2014; Miguel 2013; Walter and Suina 2019). In this emerging corpus of inquiry, both the exercise and the use of such methods are (re)framed for a new paradigm: decolonisation seeking to 'unlearn Western ways of knowing to contribute to the decolonization of knowledge itself' (Rice 2018; Datta 2018). Often, this work advances methods for emancipatory agendas, engagement with those erased by modernity, and a challenging of current hegemonies (Sonn, Stevens, and Duncan 2013; Zavala 2013). Research ethics received relatively less attention within this literature, and ethics review boards have not been significantly engaged as sites of making such research (im)possible.

Reframing Ethics Review Boards

Ethics review boards are hegemonic institutions within the contemporary westernised university – the ones perceived to uphold, apply, and ensure research is ethical, holding significant power in shaping (or making impossible) specific research and knowledge-making. Before they can commence, researchers are typically expected to develop a comprehensive research proposal that outlines the study's objectives, methodology, and potential risks and benefits to participants. This proposal is then submitted for review. The review process involves assessing whether the proposed research adheres to established ethical guidelines, standardly focusing on obtaining informed consent and ensuring participant confidentiality. Researchers are often required to provide additional documentation, such as participant

[1] Here, I am referring to movements such as *Rhodes must fall* and *Why is my curriculum white*, among many others.

information sheets and consent forms, to facilitate informed decision-making by participants. Following submission, the ethics committee evaluates the application and often requests revisions or clarifications towards the lengthy process of gaining approval. Once approved, researchers are asked to adhere to the ethical standards throughout the study and report any significant changes or adverse events to the ethics committee. Today, the aims of these processes include legally protecting the university as well as the researcher.

Overall, the main focus and purview of ethics review boards can be conceptualised as micro-ethics centred around four key principles that guide the ethical conduct of individual studies: non-maleficence, beneficence, self-determination, and justice (Hammersley and Traianou 2012; Potthoff et al. 2023). Non-maleficence is the foundational obligation to do no harm, ensuring that research does not inflict physical, psychological, or social harm on participants. This principle extends beyond avoiding direct harm, encompassing the responsibility to prevent foreseeable harm in any form throughout the research process. Beneficence complements this by requiring researchers to actively *do good*, aiming to provide tangible benefits to participants and society. It emphasizes the duty of care, where researchers must prioritize the well-being of participants and contribute positively to communities. Self-determination underlines the importance of respecting participants' autonomy by ensuring that they voluntarily decide whether to engage in a study, the extent of their participation, and the ability to terminate this participation. This principle requires that potential participants are fully informed (including, for example, participation duration, expectations, rights, objectives, funding, research teams, and anticipated outputs), free from coercion, and assured that their decision to participate or withdraw will not lead to harm or unfair treatment. Lastly, justice serves as an overarching ethical principle, demanding a fair distribution of both the risks and benefits associated with research. Justice requires that no group is unduly burdened or disproportionately favoured, ensuring equity across the research process. In doing this, micro-ethics emphasizes ensuring that the benefits of research outweigh its risks.[2]

Ethics boards that uphold this and their review processes do not emerge *sui generis* within the westernized university. Here, informed by a historical sociology approach (Bhambra 2011), I want to briefly (re)sketch the emergence of these boards to begin their reframing and analysis from a critical decolonial perspective. In many ways, it was the aftermath of the Nuremberg trials of 1946-1947 – in the context of war, violence, and an emerging new world order post-'World War II' – that marked the beginning of a significant shift from reliance solely on researcher integrity to institutional and, by extension, governmental oversight mechanisms in research ethics. The trials resulted in the creation of the Nuremberg Code in 1947, which is widely regarded as the first international document to outline ethical principles for so-called "human subjects" research. This code, which is non-legally binding and emphasises voluntary informed consent and the protection of research participants, served as a foundation for subsequent ethical guidelines, including the Declaration of Helsinki and various national and international regulations that consequently developed (Iphofen 2017; Klitzman 2015).

Alongside this bourgeoning of an institutionalized ethics, the second half of the 20th century continued to see several major scandals, especially in psychological and public health research, with a significant impact on the development of research ethics both as a literature and as an institutionalized framework. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, controversial studies like Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments and Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment – both projects themselves deeply shaped by WW2 – raised serious ethical

[2] Surely, this calculus often raises critical questions: Benefits to whom? What kinds of benefits are prioritized, and which risks are considered acceptable? Risks to whom? Exploring this, nevertheless, is beyond the scope of this paper.

concerns about potential psychological harm to participants that included extensive public and academic debates. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which withheld treatment from African American men from 1932 to 1972, came to light in 1972, sparking public outrage and a consequent intellectual as well as legal debate around rights, self-determination, and social good. These scandals, among others, including many relating to experiments conducted on indigenous communities and racialized peoples in North America, were key in the increased scrutiny of research practices and the hardening of formal legal ethical guidelines, as well as the growing public legitimacy of such scrutiny and control. In the U.S., for example, the federal government passed the National Research Act in 1974, which created the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (Faden et al. 1986; Stark 2011). This commission produced the Belmont Report in 1979, outlining core ethical principles for human subjects' research (National Commission, 1979). Subsequently, various IRBs across specific universities – as well as non-academic research institutions and funders – were established to review and monitor research involving human subjects, aiming to prevent unethical practices and protect participants' rights and welfare as well as researchers and their institutions. Through this, ethics became a legal question governed by the nation-state, and the State became the body that determined what can and cannot be ethically done (see Stark 2011).

As top-down, universalizing, and decontextualised systems that are largely shaped by the natural and health sciences, the relevance of these institutionalised ethical review boards to the social sciences specifically has garnered significant debate over the past few decades. Dingwall (2008), for instance, contends that the current system, rooted in biomedical models, is inadequate for addressing the unique ethical considerations of social science research, including, for example, certain forms of harm to participants or communities. Schrag (2011) highlights the challenge of applying biomedical ethical frameworks to social science research, which often involves different methodologies and risks. Critics such as Stark (2012) argue that IRBs frequently apply regulations inconsistently, impose burdensome review processes, and potentially impede certain (critical) types of research, particularly qualitative, community-based, and participatory approaches. Additionally, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) expressed frustration with the 'front-loaded' nature of the ethics review process, which attempts to anticipate all potential ethical issues at the outset of a study, rather than acknowledging the dynamic and situated nature of ethical decision-making in the field. Potthoff et al. (2023) delineate the difference between procedural ethics and ethics in practice, highlighting the growing recognition of the need to supplement procedural ethics with enacted ethics in the field. Van den Hoonaard (2011), in a similar vein, proposes streamlined review processes for minimal-risk studies, conceptualizing ethics review as a costly 'industry' embedded in a specific worldview. Iphofen (2017) similarly argues for a 'core ethics' that can accompany research from its conceptualization to its dissemination in ways that are specifically suitable for social science research, including greater involvement of researchers and participants in the review process. Klitzman (2015), examining the 'ethics police', situates IRB within the larger structures and struggles of contemporary science and notes that some institutions have experimented with specialized social science ethics committees to better address discipline-specific concerns (see also Hammersley and Traianou 2012; Tegama and Fox 2023).

Building on this and moving this growing literature *decolonially*, I suggest here that ethics review boards are not linear, straightforward, or neat success stories of the triumph of the ethical and its transformation into a *fait accompli* and human-rights 'bare minimum' of research – as many might suggest or assume. Indeed, IRBs can be reconceptualised away from such narratives. For example, one could argue that rather than dismantling the colonial legacies that underpin extractive, exploitative, and arrogant Eurocentric research practices, ethics review boards were developed to contain and manage the excesses of this colonial violence, prioritizing institutional interests over the rights and dignity of marginalized communities from within a specific Eurocentric epistemic frame (see, for example, Nortje et al. 2019). In other words, and without negating the importance and significance of the development of ethic reviews – including the significant roles played by various racialized and minoritized communities in pressuring for such guidelines and regulations – one could suggest a framing of these boards as an internal mechanism for regulating the undesired and unsuitable of colonial violence and racism rather than some form of "objective" or neutral advancement in ethical standards or "human rights" (see Ghooi 2017). Accordingly, rather than signifying a break from coloniality, this allows us to identify ethics review boards as reinforcing and perpetuating the very systems of oppression they ostensibly seek to regulate and, consequently, maintain the ongoing entanglement of academic research with coloniality, specifically within research and through the 'ethics' of this research. This allows us to build on the extant critique of ethics review boards and move it beyond dominant reductions to engage the imbrication of these boards in the reproduction of a Eurocentric epistemic model. In the following section, I will auto-ethnographically argue for and develop such a reconceptualization as I make visible these working of ethics review boards through a case of the everyday within a specific research project.

Auto-Ethnographic Experiencing of Decolonial Epistemic Justice as Threatened by Ethical Review Boards

In 2018, while based in the UK, I began preparing for fieldwork for a project examining the lived experience of visible Muslimness at the level of the everyday in Lebanon. Working towards the pre-fieldwork arrangements, I needed to submit a (very lengthy and detailed) ethics review. Providing things as varied as my interview topic guide and participant information sheets to a data management plan and recruitment materials, the ethics application was a workload. To prepare for this application, I had multiple consultations scheduled with different university bodies as I went through a multi-stage application process.

Seeking further guidance on best practices and relevant regulations, I was advised to clarify that I would not be conducting interviews in participants' homes. Upon inquiry, I learned that this recommendation stemmed from a semi-official policy adopted by the ethics committee. The rationale behind this centred primarily on the notion that a home is a participant's personal space, which could also pose safety risks for me as the researcher, I was told. I was not overly concerned by this directive and made it clear that all interviews and focus groups would take place in public settings in the application. Although I had some reservations about the practicality of this commitment—especially considering that 'public spaces' are relatively scarce in Lebanon—I remained hopeful that adopting an expanded definition of such spaces and utilizing educational institutions, religious centres, and the workplaces of my interviewees

would provide sufficient options for conducting this research. With some careful planning and effort, I successfully navigated the initial weeks with minimal setbacks, mainly including two participants apologizing for the unsuitability of certain locations and the loss of some data, such as pictures that participants wished to share but could not. Nonetheless, I believed that any inconvenience was a reasonable trade-off to safeguard the ethics of the project.

Once I began conducting fieldwork outside of Beirut, particularly in peri-urban areas, the situation became increasingly complicated. The near-absence of public spaces and the lack of suitable venues such as cafes or restaurants, combined with the prevalence of small (often male-only) mosques that lacked open and accessible halls, left me with limited options. Many women in these areas did not have formal employment outside the home, further constraining my choices. Initially, I was overwhelmed with fieldwork in Beirut and other major cities, which led me to underestimate the seriousness of this issue. It was only late into the fieldwork that I realized that I had very few participants from peri-urban regions.

Throughout fieldwork, my understanding of the public-private dichotomy was gradually transforming, largely influenced by my conversations with participants. For instance, during a discussion with one of my potential interviewees about possible locations where we could hold an interview, she suggested I come to her home. I thanked her for the offer and expressed that the home was their private space, stating my preference to meet elsewhere. She responded by saying she was 'unclear' about what I meant and later added that she regularly hosted religious classes in her home, where she and others would engage in discussions on various 'public' issues, including political and economic topics, for hours after class. Furthermore, she explained that she and her acquaintances frequently exchanged house visits and that my presence would not be an intrusion; on the contrary, it would be welcomed. Gradually, it became evident to me that she did not perceive her home as a 'private' space. Many other interviewees shared similar sentiments, with some finding my restriction amusing while others viewed it as disrespectful. One day, tired while walking in the street with a community member and passing by a home with a 'front yard' that had a seating area (rather than a 'lawn', for instance), I jokingly said that it would be nice to 'sit here and rest'. The community member said that we 'certainly can sit', and they were certain the residents would welcome us with snacks and drinks, and would be happy to receive us. I here stated this would be inappropriate and 'unsuitable', and continued walking, to my interlocuter's surprise and confusion.

As time went on, I began to understand that different definitions of public and private were at play among participants. Although these concepts and categories require further exploration beyond this paper, I soon realized that the public and private were not solely about physical spaces but rather about the people within them. However, such understandings – epistemic and deeply constitutive of forms of dwelling in the world, constituting the social, and shaping relationalities within it – diverged from the Eurocentric definitions of public and private that dominate much theoretical discourse and knowledge production, as well as the divide that has permeated academic institutions and, in this case, ethics review committees.

I decided to apply for an amendment to the ethics committee's decision. In reply to the question 'LOCATION: Where will the project be carried out, e.g., public place, in the researcher's office, in a private office at the organisation?' (note the words 'public place' and 'private' with the options all being outside participants' private homes) I wrote:

> Private offices at different organizations (including higher education institutions in Beirut), as well as public spaces (parks, coffee shops...). In rural areas, interviews will take place in participants' homes. Currently, not doing interviews in homes has caused many problems with people understanding it as a sign of disrespect, rejection

> of hospitality, and mistrust. Further, in rural areas, there are no spaces suitable to conduct interviews besides people's homes. In regard to safety, no safety risk exists, and to ensure this, I will be accompanied by a friend.

This had been after I exchanged emails with the ethics committee explaining the urgency of the matter, including the little time remaining. The application was 'Returned for revision.' The justification was that my argument was 'not strong enough': I needed to explain the need to enter people's private homes as an indispensable requisite constitutive of the research. I also needed to explicitly draw out how my safety was going to be ensured, specifying which 'friend' I was taking with me. Throughout, the fact that I myself was Lebanese did not matter, as I was somehow detached and separated from my community. I was not deemed sufficiently expert to authoritatively claim the legitimacy of a rethinking of public and private categories, and was advised to 'justify further'. I was advised to re-amend and re-submit 'mechanically.' I had little time left, I was overwhelmed with interviews in several cities, and I had the feeling that I had already lost many potential interviewees.

Most importantly, perhaps, I felt that making the argument the way the committee wished would be a betrayal. I was not worried about my safety, and I in no way thought I needed to take a friend. I was no longer convinced the home was such a private space and found the usage of the ethics committee's grammar troubling. Even if approved, I was advised that 'many rules' would need to be applied and many additional 'precautions' would need to be put in place. These included, it was informally suggested, additional forms for participants to sign. My own realization of my errors, and the feeling that the ethics committee represented and upheld them – bureaucratically and institutionally preventing me from moving beyond these conceptions – frustrated me. This 'indigenous' conception of the home, it appeared, could not be used to determine what I, as a researcher in the English academy, can and cannot do. I decided not to resubmit.

Notwithstanding, in the final weeks of fieldwork, I embraced a more liberated understanding of the home and decided to visit participants in their residences to engage in casual conversations, not classifying these interactions as formal interviews. Although time constraints and practical considerations limited my ability to pursue this approach as extensively as I desired, I managed to complete four house visits. This shift was undeniable. Reflecting on my previous experiences entering homes during earlier research projects, I recognized that my behaviour had changed significantly: my levels of anxiety and comfort, my ease of interaction, my demeanour, and the way I presented myself were all different. From making eye contact to navigating feelings of guilt, I became aware that my own concepts and categories were transforming.

The public-private divide was not the only site where a colonizing enforcement by the ethics committee and its requirements unfolded. Another requirement was a list of support centres, including mental health and psychological support, that I would offer participants in case the interview became too emotionally charged. I was advised to contact potential centres or clinics, brief them about the project, and inform them that I might refer participants. When asked, I was hesitant and explained to the ethics committee that such centres and clinics are not common in many parts of Lebanon, especially outside the capital and major cities, and that participants would probably seek support within their own networks and relations should the need arise. This did not matter, I was told, as preparing such a document in advance as a 'backup' was essential, and as participants needed to be 'directed to seek professional help and support' when needed, rather than simply speak to relatives. In this, mental health was to be professionalized, formalized, and reduced as complex alternative and extant forms of care and support in Lebanon were denied and erased. Here, it appeared that I had become an

agent advocating and reproducing a specific model of healthcare as superior, as academically legitimate, transforming fieldwork into a site of Eurocentric capitalist mental healthcare's reproduction and the erasure of its others.

One university body that I was required to hold a consultation with in preparation for my ethics review, as we were discussing 'safety measures' for my return home and formal clearance to travel from the UK to Lebanon as a researcher, asked if I was taking my laptop with me to interviews. I affirmed that I was, and he said I would need to consider how to safeguard it, particularly within my data management plan. The reason, he explicitly stated, was that 'such a nice laptop' was likely to be stolen in Lebanon. This was a consideration that my data management plan – which includes ensuring participant confidentiality – needed to address 'specifically' given 'where' I was doing fieldwork, he explained, somewhat entertained. In this, binary constructions of safety and orientalist imaginaries of the so-called Middle East were being reproduced and enforced – establishing a here and there – through the requirements of ethics themselves. Stealthily, I was 'ethically' being made to view my presence in the field as dangerous – othering participants and constituting my dwelling and relationalities to them and to the spaces in which they reside.

These examples require an extended examination beyond the scope of this piece to develop their political and epistemic stakes and the erasures involved. Yet, I here wish to suggest that, eventually, the Anglo-Saxon ethics committee's regulation of research conducted in Lebanon can be maleficent, non-beneficial, and unjust. Instead, they may be a site for the exertion and reproduction of Eurocentric, racist, and colonial logics and scripts. From this, I suggest that even when a research project meticulously adheres to micro-ethical guidelines, it can still exert colonizing epistemic violence. This violence is often subtle and unrecognized, as it is embedded in the very structures of 'knowledge production'. A research project might be conducted with care and respect, might avoid exploitation, and might ensure participant consent and confidentiality, yet still invalidate or erase non-Eurocentric cosmologies and epistemes or enforce the reproduction of racist (and/or sexist) Eurocentric scripts. This dissonance between ethical conduct and decolonial epistemic justice underscores the complexity of truly ethical research, drawing into question the role of ethics review boards within this. My argument is, accordingly, that research must be epistemically ethical, meaning it must critically engage with and respect the diverse ways of knowing and being in the world, rather than imposing a singular Eurocentric framework of understanding, and that the branding of a project as ethical by an institutional ethics review board far from guarantees this and can, indeed, ruin it.

As Smith (2012, 42) argues,

> Western research is more than just research that is located in a positivist tradition. It is research which brings to bear, on any study of Indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time, space, and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialized forms of language, and structures of power.

Therefore, ethical research must delink and move toward alternative research where ethics is alternatively defined. Our positionality—whether we are insiders or outsiders racially, epistemologically, or culturally—is constitutive of this and its possibilities (see Kassem 2024). Aware that different communities, holding different lived experiences and knowledge, will experience this differently, centralised, institutionalized, and bureaucratized ethics review boards and their workings become increasingly problematic.

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) argue that settlers employ "moves to innocence" as strategies, including superficial gestures or claims of sensitivity, to "relieve the settler of

feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege" (Tuck and Yang 2012, 3). These, they explain, protect the settler rather than address colonial conditions and their injustices. Ethics review boards sometimes function similarly – they exonerate researchers by offering them certificates of absolution and indemnity that create an illusion of ethicality, ridding researchers of the responsibility or burden of epistemic justice. Even when researchers seek to work against it, these boards can form powerful barriers – borders – to such possibilities, functioning as a key apparatus of the reproduction of modernity/coloniality.

Ultimately, in a decolonial framing, ethical research cannot be an extractive, arrogant encounter composed of a one-sided transaction, even if this taking or transaction is consensual and has done no apparent 'harm'. Rather, ethical fieldwork under the condition of modernity/coloniality must centre around a critical decolonial relational encounter that emphasizes reciprocal, respectful relationships where knowledge is critically co-created. By being mindful of laden power, researchers can approach their work with the care, respect, humility, mutuality, and attention required to decolonially learn from and with communities.

Concluding Discussion

Across European empires, scientific research was the justificatory logic for various forms of extraction, ruination, and death. The Nuremberg trials can be suggested to have emerged within that context, not outside of it, to manage it, not abolish it, within the larger structures of war, destruction, and violence that characterise Eurocentric modernity. Since then, research ethics have developed into an institutionalised legal frame, particularly prominent in the context of the westernized university and its knowledge production process. Surely, research ethics today exist at the intersection of these imperial legacies and the various forms of movement that racialized and marginalized communities and their allies have developed to resist, negotiate, and refuse the tyranny of the modern racist and genocidal knowledge-production system, especially as this project emerged as unsustainable and too perilous for its own makers. Yet, notwithstanding, I have here suggested that ethics review boards are embedded in, and productive of, specific epistemic frameworks. Their workings are not neutral nor innocent but rather political and epistemic, often involving erasures and ruination. They hold a darker side and can constitute moves to innocence that foreclose the ethicality of research and knowledge-making and reductively confine it to Eurocentric scripts. Consequently, the pursuit of ethical research cannot restrict itself to these framings and regulations but rather must seek critical decolonial relational encounters that centre epistemic justice.

Ultimately, from a critical and decolonial perspective, research ethics extends far beyond the data collection phase of a project and encompasses every stage of the research process, from the initial choice of topic to the dissemination of findings and beyond. Ethical considerations begin with the very decision of what to study—and just as crucially, what not to study. Moreover, the ethical responsibilities of researchers do not conclude with the completion of the project. Ethical obligations persist into the publication and dissemination of findings, where respect for participants requires ongoing engagement and transparency. This might involve holding discussions with participants about the analysis and findings, ensuring that results are published in languages accessible to those involved, or providing feedback to participants about how their contributions have shaped the research outcomes. Micro-ethics are, accordingly, inadequate, and ethical research is, in many ways, not a question of bureaucratic governance.

In closing, it is important to stress that recognizing that all research decisions are ethics-laden does not reduce ethics to a vague, all-encompassing concept or dilute their significance or workings. Instead, it highlights the profound, complex, and layered responsibility researchers bear in acknowledging and addressing ethical stakes and ambivalences in their work. By understanding that ethics permeate every stage of the research process, research that is ethically and epistemically just becomes possible. Most importantly, this allows us to identify the workings of ethics review boards, their limitations, and their dangers.

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