Association of Social
Anthropologists
of the UK & Commonwealth

EXPERIENCES OF ETHICS REVIEW SURVEY

By Kirsten Bell
on behalf of the Ethics
Guidelines Working Group

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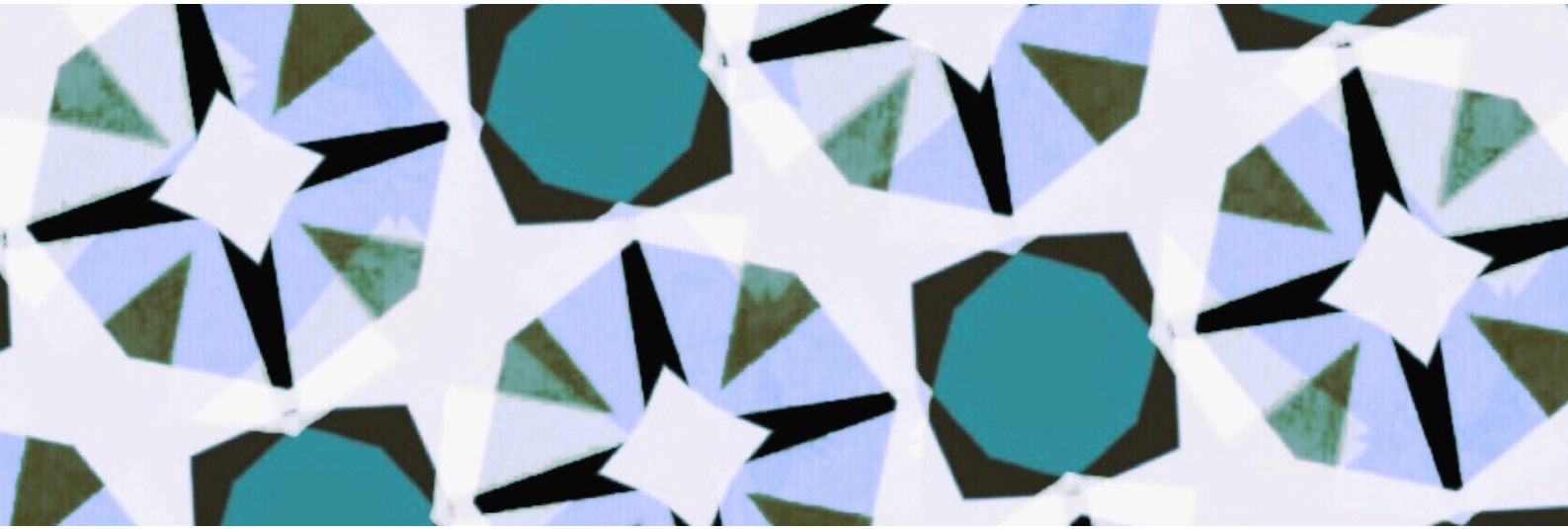# EXPERIENCES OF ETHICS REVIEW SURVEY

By Kirsten Bell
on behalf of the Ethics Guidelines Working Group:

- Jude Robinson, Chair (University of Glasgow)
- Kirsten Bell (University of Roehampton)
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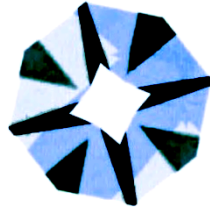
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BACKGROUND

In 2019, a working group was formed to revise the ASA Ethics Guidelines, which were last updated in 2011. To inform the activities of the group, we decided to conduct a survey of members' experiences of research ethics regulation, along with soliciting their input on the existing guidelines and the ASA's work in the area of research ethics.

The survey was developed by Kirsten Bell with input from the working group and is based, in part, on a 2009 international survey designed by Lisa Wynn (Macquarie University, Australia) on ethnographers' experiences of research ethics oversight. However, the content has been updated to reflect both the specificities of the UK context and new legislative developments such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

The survey received ethics approval from the University of Roehampton Research Ethics Committee. A link to the survey was sent out in October 2019 to all current ASA members (571 at the time of the survey) via the ASA Secretariat, along with two reminder emails. A notice about the survey was also distributed on Anthropology Matters, a UK-based listserv administered by the ASA. Although we were particularly interested in the experiences of ASA members, the survey was not restricted to this group.

The survey was conducted anonymously (no IP addresses were recorded) and administered on the platform Survey Monkey. Eighty-seven people completed the survey; of those, 68% (N=59) were current ASA members. Thus, the response rate of ASA members was around 10%, which is quite low for a member survey. Although it is difficult to surmise anything from this, it does suggest that opinions on experiences of institutional ethics review were not strong enough to compel the majority of ASA members to fill out a survey on this topic. The survey itself, although reasonably long, had a completion rate of 79%. The following report summarises the key results of the survey.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

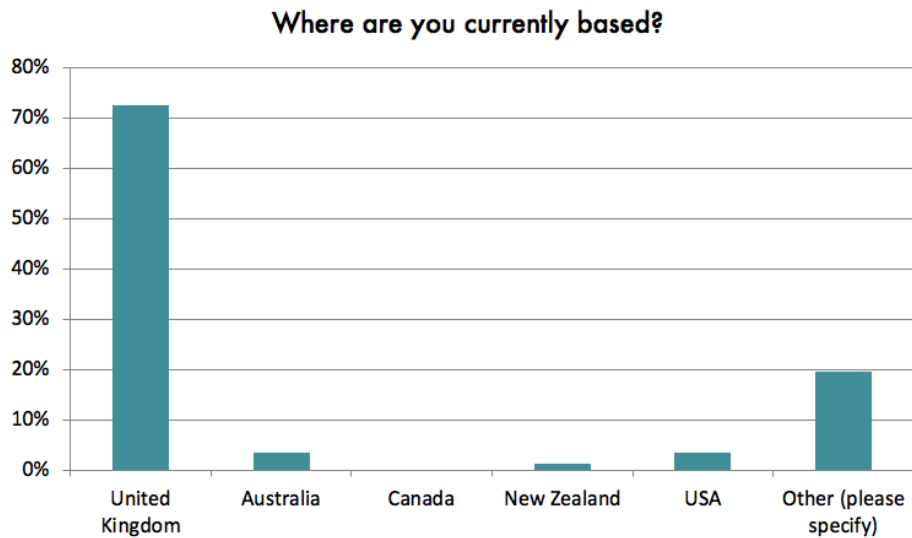### Where are you currently based?

Figure 1.

Almost three quarters of those who participated in the survey were based in the UK (see figure 1). Respondents in the 'other' category were primarily from countries in mainland Europe, although a few were based in India, Ecuador, Japan and Lebanon, respectively. Eighty percent of participants had a doctorate and a similar percentage (78%) identified as social or cultural anthropologists. Respondents were in a range of appointments and roles, although academics in continuing positions predominated (see figure 2).
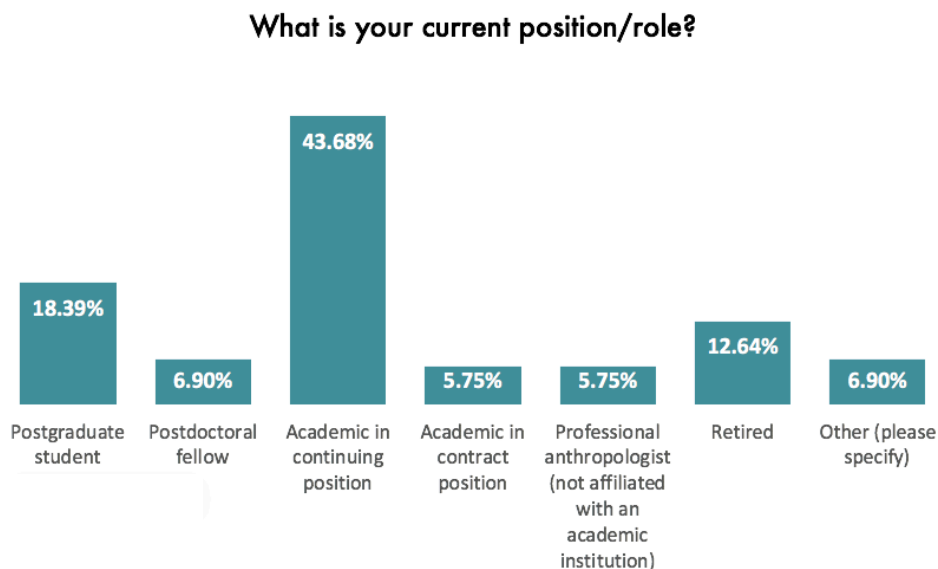
What is your current position/role?

Figure 2.

Thirty-six percent of respondents indicated that they received their training before the year 2000. The remainder (64%) had finished their training after the millennium, or were still completing it. This pattern coincides with the period when respondents first conducted fieldwork; for the majority, this happened after the mid-1990s (see figure 3). This would suggest that the majority of participants were intellectually raised in the era since institutional ethics review of research has been the norm in the UK.

Date of first fieldwork
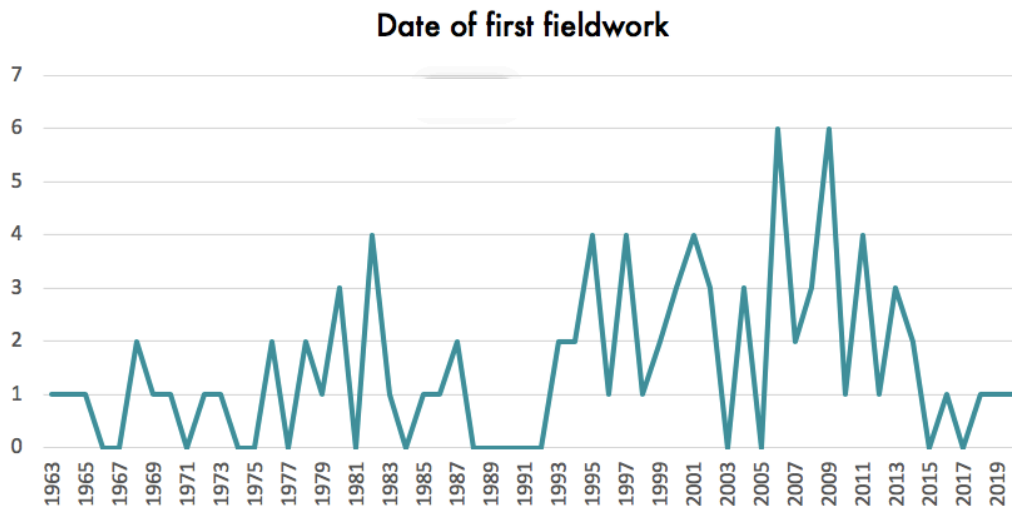

Figure 3.

The UK was the institutional home of 61% of respondents (N=53) when they completed their first fieldwork. Unsurprisingly, in light of the global focus of the discipline of anthropology, the named fieldwork locations where respondents have worked are very diverse and span virtually every continent on the globe (see figure 4).
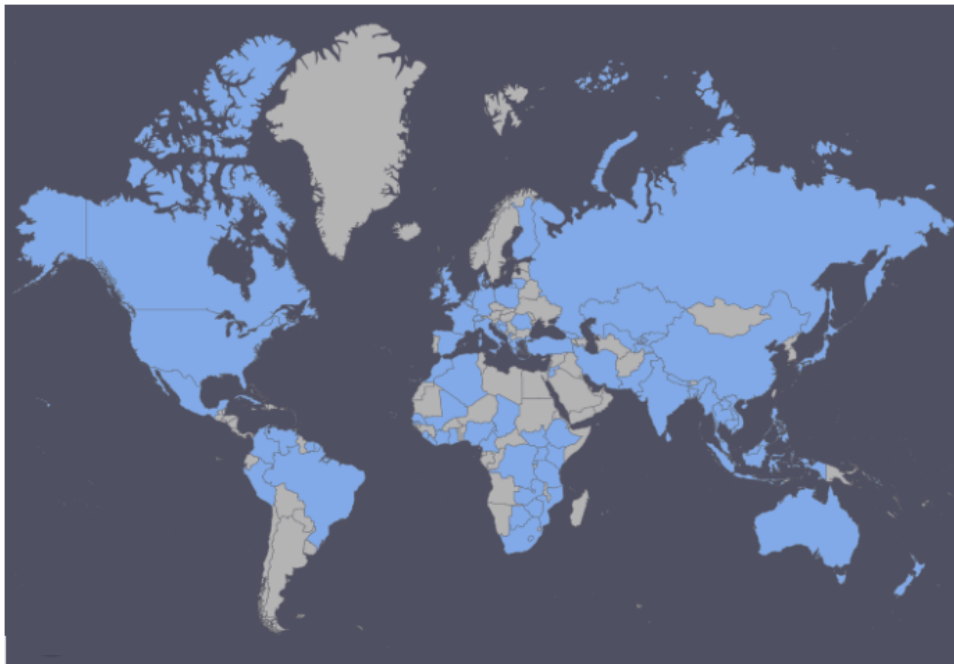

Figure 4. (listed field sites in light blue)

CHARACTERISTICS OF INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS REVIEW

Twelve respondents (14%) indicated that they had never sought institutional ethics approval for their research. In such cases, this was typically because institutional ethics review was not required – either because it was not in place when they conducted their fieldwork (for those who were retired) or because they were based in regions where institutional ethics approval is not required for social science research.

Eighty-nine percent indicated that they have submitted ethics applications to university ethics committees and the majority (68%) noted that these were based in the UK. However, other kinds of institutions were listed as well, including hospital committees, government organisations, and research funders (e.g., the ERC), along with national ethics committees and research bodies in countries where participants had conducted fieldwork.

For which types of work does your University Research Ethics Committee require ethics clearance?
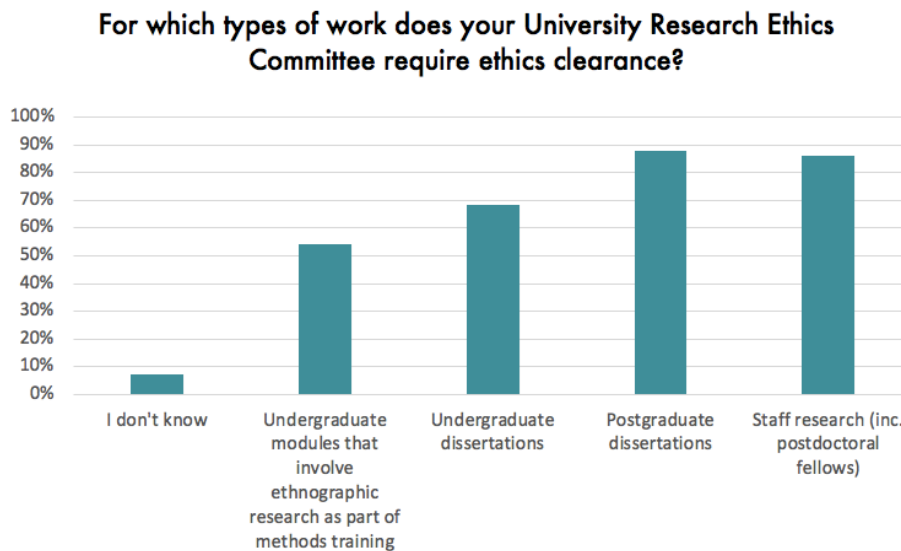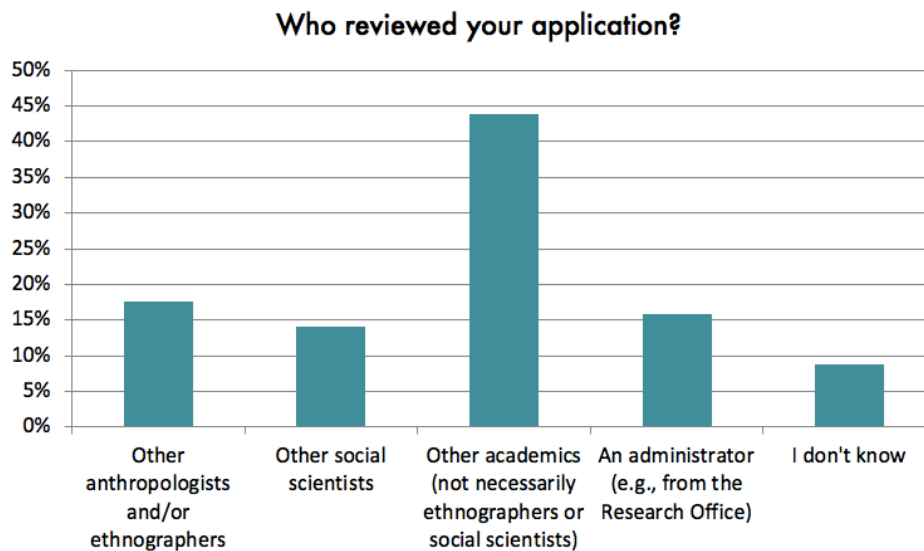
Figure 5.

Institutional ethics approval was typically required for staff and postgraduate research, but processes were more variable for undergraduate students (see figure 5). Many respondents indicated in free-form responses that these processes were devolved to the local level or took the form of block clearances. Interestingly, there was some evidence that changes had recently occurred in relation to undergraduate projects, with a growing institutionalisation of ethics at this level. Such changes were not necessarily positively viewed – according to one participant: 'Overkill! Especially impossible for honours theses, so it unreasonably limits/reframes what is possible research'.

Who reviewed your application?

Figure 6.

In the majority of instances, respondents indicated that their applications had been reviewed by other academics. However, only in a minority of cases (18%) were reviewers identified as having specific expertise in anthropology or ethnographic methods (see figure 6). The problems created by a lack of expertise in ethnographic research were consistently raised in free-form responses – a theme that reoccurred throughout the survey. One respondent who had experience with both discipline-specific and generalist reviews reflected the general tenor of views on the latter in the following observation:

> In 2018, my ethics application went through the anthropology department. I knew who the reviewers were, so felt comfortable discussing real risks and challenges to my research, knowing that they would take them seriously and discuss them. They came back with very practical reasonable questions, which I answered and was approved. In 2019, the system was changed so ethics applications have to go through the university wide body, which is composed of administrators and doctors etc. The process was far more legalistic, and asked for all sorts of completely impractical consent forms that none of my interlocutors would ever read. As a result, I treated the whole thing as a box ticking exercise and did not really put any of my genuine concerns down, or create consent forms that would actually be read by my interlocutors.

Does your institution require any formal training in human research ethics for fieldwork-based research?
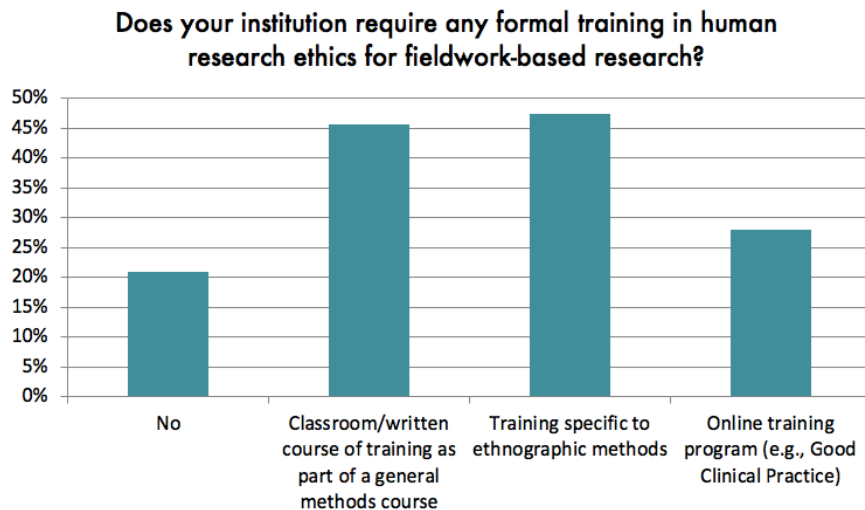
Figure 7.

Participants' responses suggest that required formal training in research ethics is highly variable across institutions (see figure 7). According to free-form responses, evidence of ethics training (if any) requested in ethics applications was typically oriented towards biomedical research or legislative requirements (e.g., GDPR). To quote one respondent: 'Training, degrees, or prior training/experience are not taken into account, which is ludicrous. The only mention of training is training in "ethics" which is either a brief online introduction or non-existent. I teach ethics to advanced level, but again there is no space to put this on the form'.

However, other free-form responses suggest that disciplinary-specific training was also quite variable and was typically left to the discretion of the individual lecturer (for research methods modules) or supervisor (for doctoral research). Discussing the former context, one respondent observed, 'They allude to it on some esoteric level and point to some scant readings that the student might (but likely won't) do, there is little classroom discussion. And what discussion exists is under powered'. Another respondent expressed their surprise at the lack of ethics training at their British institution in comparison to their prior training at a European university.

IMPACTS OF RESEARCH ETHICS REGULATION
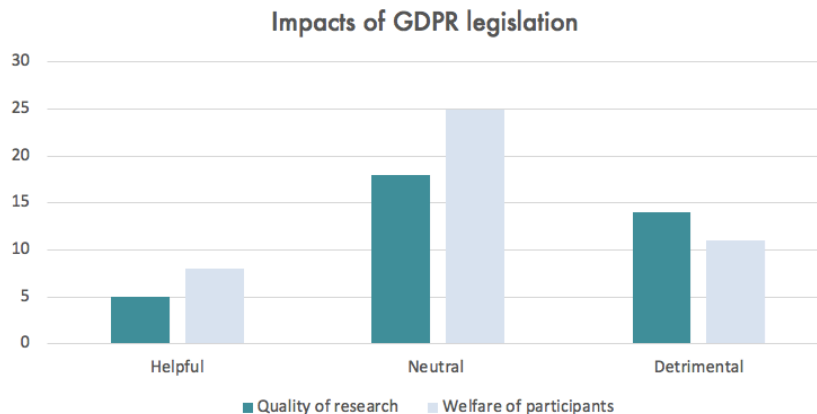
Impacts of GDPR legislation

Figure 8.

Forty-six percent of respondents indicated that they had submitted an ethics application since the General Data Protection Regulation had been introduced. Those who had experience with GDPR were relatively evenly divided about whether they had found the requirements easy to meet ('yes': 51%; 'no': 49%). They were also reasonably divided on the impacts of the legislation on the quality of research and the welfare of participants (see figure 8). While the majority indicated that the effects were neutral, a significant minority highlighted its negative consequences on the quality of the research and, to a lesser extent, the welfare of participants (although it's clear that a number of respondents did not make any distinction between the two categories). The following quotes represent the kinds of concerns raised:

- 'Anonymising of data is not always easy or possible; managing data and keeping data separate from personal identifiers is not always easy (or even necessary in my view)'.
- 'Just more barriers for people willing to participate in research but either mistrustful of lots of forms and signatures, or unable to read and write, and so feel humiliated by the process'.
- 'The restrictions are cumbersome and often impractical, especially in doing research overseas and in ethnographic mode'.

However, even those who were neutral about the effects of the legislation often expressed a degree of ambivalence in their free-form responses. For example, one respondent noted, 'Given the digitalisation of data there are good reasons to provide protections and assurance to participants but the way we have gone about this does not inspire confidence that it is having the desired effect, rather it is stymying the possibility of ethnographic research in the first place'. Moreover, it's not clear that all respondents had an accurate understanding of the implications of GDPR. For example, some UK-based respondents seemed to assume that the GDPR didn't apply to them because they conducted their fieldwork in countries outside of the EU; others seemed to assume that the legislation only applied to data collected online. It's also unclear whether institutions are applying the GDPR guidelines consistently. For example, one respondent indicated that they had been banned from using Survey Monkey, but no concerns were raised about this platform by the author's institution.

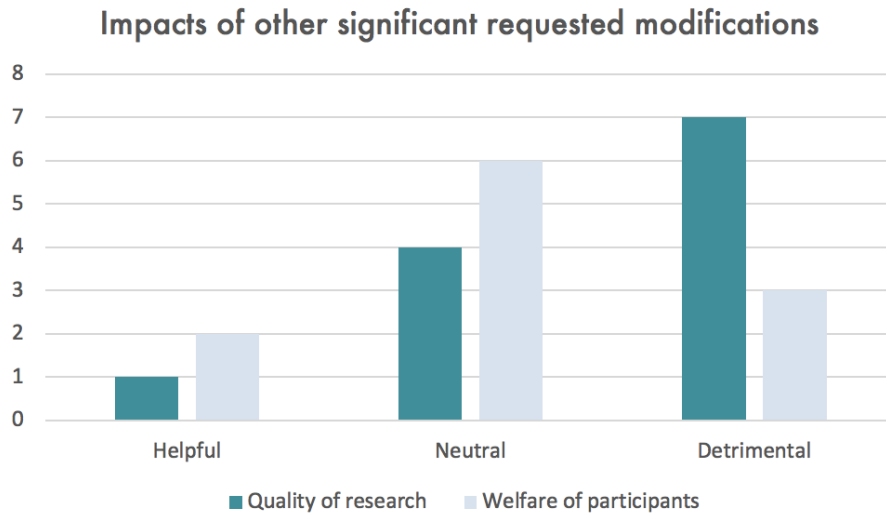**Impacts of other significant requested modifications**

Figure 9.

Twelve percent of respondents indicated that significant changes were required outside of GDPR requirements. When further prompted about the impact of those changes on the quality of the research and the welfare of participants, responses were mixed, although the majority indicated that the impacts had been detrimental in relation to the former (once again, respondents didn't make a clear intellectual distinction between the two categories). The following are representative of the kinds of feedback provided:

- 'The committee is extremely risk averse and makes doing any sort of meaningful ethnographic fieldwork virtually impossible'.
- 'Overly academic and not understanding of the realities of the field context'.
- 'For example expecting forms of consent that would make participants less likely to participate in research or more suspicious of it. Also in forcing researchers to be concerned with formal ethics requirements to the detrimental of concern with participants actual welfare'.
- 'Most of our committee are from disciplines which work integrally with "vulnerable participants" and apply unreasonable safeguarding standards to any activity that might be slightly distressing, e.g. asking participants to remember complex times in the past'.
- 'Participants have been known to find the university's requirements so overbearing that they stop wanting to take part'.

A degree of ambivalence was evident on the part of those who were formally neutral about the impacts of the requested changes. For example, some noted that the requested changes had been inappropriate, but their committee had been open to education; or that the process had been helpful in some respects, but unhelpful in others; or that the process was procedural, but that the process of filling out the paperwork does require a degree of ethical reflexivity on the part of researchers. However, participants clearly differed in their capacity to challenge the feedback they received. While some indicated that their committee was open to back and forth, for others there was no mechanism available to challenge the feedback, which was imposed without the right of response. However, even those who noted that their committee was willing to engage in dialogue observed that the amount of time this process took meant that it wasn't always worth the effort.

GENERAL VIEWS ON INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS REVIEW

Do you always seek Ethics Review Committee approval for your own ethnographic research?
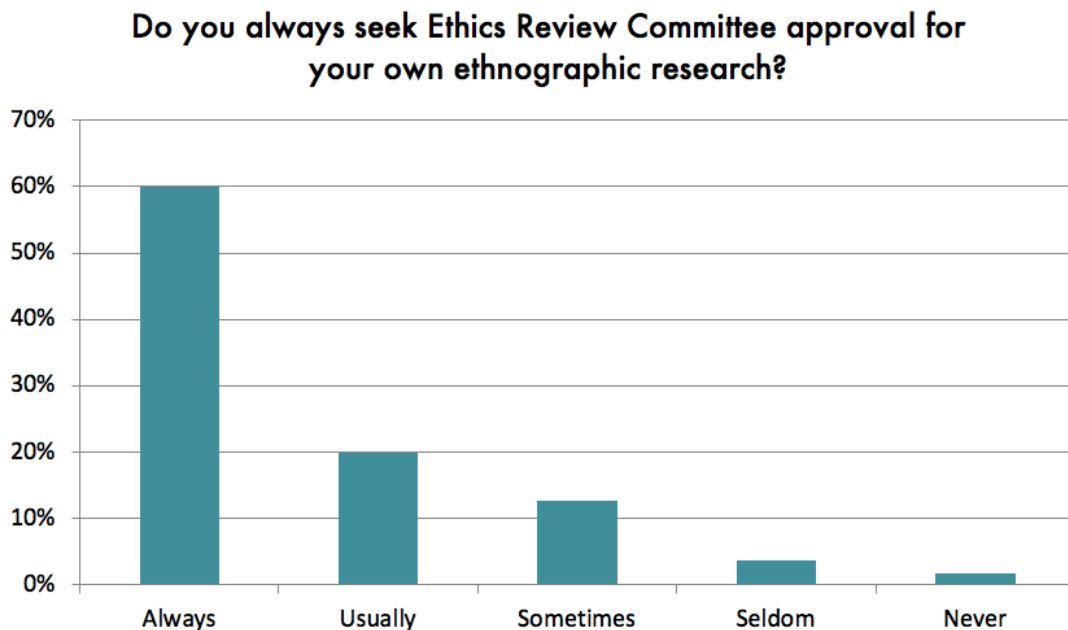

Figure 10.

The majority of respondents indicated that they always seek institutional ethics approval for their research (see figure 10). Free-form comments suggest that many did not consider non-compliance to be a possibility – variants of 'it's mandatory' and 'it is a requirement' were common. However, a minority of respondents indicated that they did not uniformly obtain ethical clearance, and there were clear patterns in their explanations for this.

Those who seldom or never seek approval typically noted that they were retired or worked in national contexts where ethics committees did not operate. Respondents who usually or sometimes sought clearance indicated that this was determined by whether the research was funded. The following response is typical of the sentiments expressed: 'If this is required by funding agencies. Otherwise, I adhere by the code of ethics of the various professional associations I am a member of, and use my own common sense in relation to the specific national, social, cultural, & political contexts I conduct research in'.

Several respondents also highlighted the ways in which the informal and contingent nature of ethnographic research often clashed with up-front review requirements. For example, a participant observed: 'The grey area here is what *is* ethnographic research - if I walk past a protest when "off duty" and a situation develops that I could comment on in a piece of research, do I have to go back and trace every participant to get their consent before I can write about them now?'

This general ambivalence towards procedural oversight comes across clearly in participants' responses to a series of positively and negatively framed questions about institutional ethics review (see figures 11 and 12). While respondents generally endorsed the theoretical value of institutional ethics review, did not see it as an unwarranted intrusion on their autonomy, and indicated that researchers were treated fairly and efficiently, they were less convinced that the process accomplishes what it aims to. In particular, a substantial minority (30%) indicated that their committee was not qualified to review ethnographic research, reduced the quality of such research and provided unhelpful feedback. They were therefore relatively divided on the question of whether the benefits of the review process outweigh its limitations.
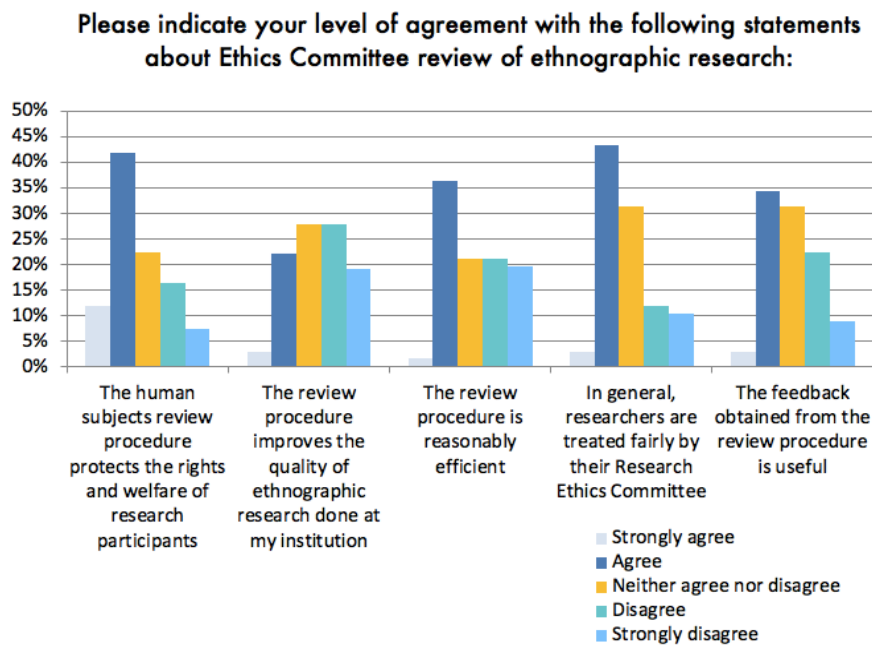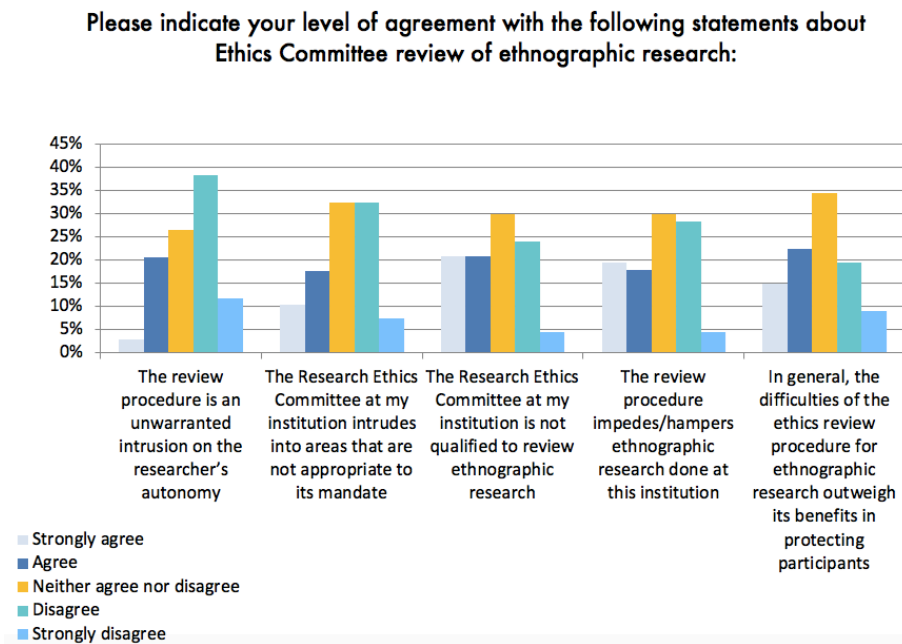

Figure 11.

Figure 12.

Recurring comments in participants' free-form responses related to the biomedical orientation of the review process, committees' failures to understand ethnographic research and the inappropriate feedback that results, and their focus on legal risk, compliance and protecting the university's reputation. Participants repeatedly stressed the need for appropriate disciplinary expertise on the part of reviewers, with the following quote indicative of the sentiments expressed:

- 'It could work – if ethics committees were properly constituted, understood research and legal risk and compliance was dealt with elsewhere. I don't mind being required to demonstrate the ethical value of my work, but the ways in which I am asked to do it are onerous and non-productive'.

When asked about whether any particular incidents had changed their view of ethics committees for the better or worse, the vast majority of respondents recounted experiences in the latter category. In most instances, they reiterated sentiments regarding the lack of disciplinary expertise to review their research, and the inappropriate requirements that resulted. However, several respondents also highlighted the negative impacts of ethics review on participants – either because the research was taking place in the global south and the ethics committee prioritised their own processes over local ones, or because of erroneous assumptions made about the vulnerability of participants. Two also emphasised issues of researcher safety, with one pointing to the disciplinary tendency to underplay the mental and physical issues that fieldworkers (especially women) experience in the field, and another observing that health and safety requirements made much ethnographic research virtually impossible.
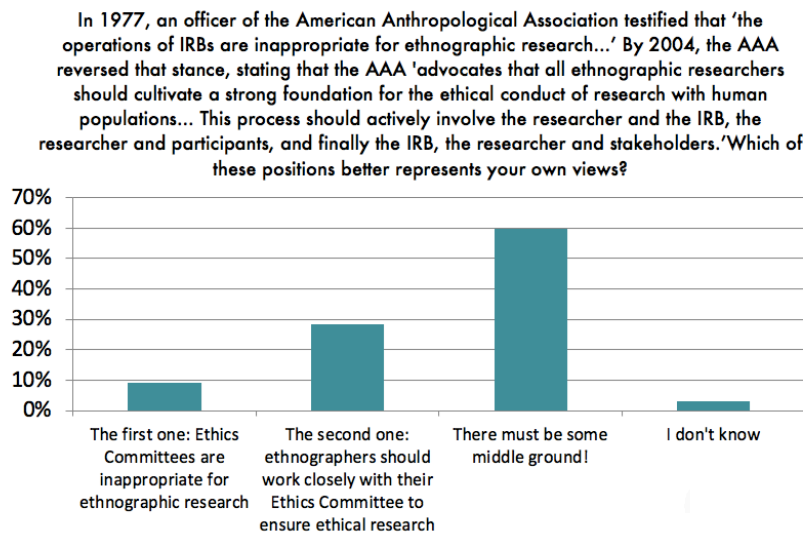

Figure 13.

The concerns participants expressed regarding the review process were also evident in their response to a question about how anthropologists should engage with institutional ethics review, with 60% indicating that there needed to be some middle ground between blanket rejection of institutional ethics review and wholesale acquiescence to the current regime (see figure 13).

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VIEWS ON THE ASA ETHICS GUIDELINES AND ACTIVITIES

Of those who responded to the question on whether the ASA guidelines are useful in preparing ethics applications, 92% indicated that they were (N=54). Of the four who disagreed, two were non-ASA members who noted that they were unfamiliar with the guidelines; a third person indicated that the guidelines were not 'unhelpful', but they didn't actively make use of them. Twenty-three respondents elaborated on their responses in free-form comments and the most frequent feedback was that the guidelines were useful in educating ethics committees and justifying anthropological methods and approaches. Some respondents also noted that they found the guidelines useful in training students and as a guide for their own work. A minority, however, indicated that the guidelines are too broad and generic to be useful in guiding ethical practice (N=3). One respondent also indicated that the guidelines were more useful for 'pure' research than for applied or consultancy work.

When asked about their views on the ASA's work in representing respondents' interests in the area of research ethics, 52% of those who responded indicated that they were happy with the work the organisation is doing. However, some qualified their responses by noting the need for further guidance for ethics committees, research councils, journal editors and other stakeholders. Several respondents indicated that the ASA could be taking on more of an advocacy role in this respect – especially as the current regulatory and legislative environment is likely to intensify challenges to the legitimacy of ethnographic research. Others wanted further materials that would help them lobby their local ethics committees in pushing for greater sensitivity to ethnographic research. Finally, various respondents noted they would also like to see more of an emphasis on ASA-led workshops to exchange opinions and views and a casebook of ethical dilemmas and solutions along the lines of those presented in the AAA *Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology*.

In interpreting this feedback, it is worth noting that few respondents indicated any awareness of ASA's EthNav: an ethics navigation tool created by Bob Simpson and Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner. This suggests that the ASA could be publicising more widely to the current membership its existing activities in the area of research ethics. (NB: in hindsight, it would have been useful to include a specific question on EthNav as part of the survey in order to directly assess if and how it is being used).

Finally, several respondents reflected on the broader state of disciplinary conversations about research ethics, although they were not always in agreement regarding the extent to which the discipline has grappled this topic:
- 'I think there needs to be a more critical debate, to be honest. It seems to me that people criticizing the ethics committees due to the amount of paper work/their rules not fitting with anthropological practice, might be people who already are socialized into the academic system. I think we should have a more fundamental discussion about the unethicalness/ethicalness of fieldwork. Also, on the 'harm' that this research method can do, often does, to the researcher. However this seems kind of taboo/silenced in academia'.

- 'ASA should take seriously the idea that most ethnographers discuss ethics all the time, but when it comes to universities, they have to get signed off, so they will just say whatever they think people want to hear'.

In the request for final comments, most respondents reiterated their previously-expressed views. However, additional suggestions were made in the following areas:
- Further cooperation and connection between the ASA and anthropologists from the global South;
- Tackling ethics from a people-centric rather than ethnography-centric perspective;
- More explicitly considering the well-being of anthropologists themselves as well as those they work with;
- More explicitly considering academic precarity, the exploitation of early career researchers, and the ethics of co-publication and co-authorship
- Refreshing and reviewing ethical guidance every few years;
- Advocacy for devolved ethical review processes for ethnographic research;
- Commissioning a major piece of research into the evidence of harms caused by ethnographic research and whether they could have been avoided by more stringent prior review.

SUMMARY

Although the number of responses to the survey was relatively low, the results do nevertheless provide a snapshot of ASA members' (and interested others') views on institutional ethics review. They suggest that longstanding criticisms of institutional ethics review by anthropologists regarding its lack of 'fit' with the epistemology and methodology of ethnographic research[1] have not abated. Respondents consistently highlighted the importance of reviewers with expertise in ethnographic research; yet, it's clear that this happens only in a minority of UK institutions. The result was a strong degree of ambivalence regarding institutional ethical oversight; few respondents were opposed to it in principle, but a substantial minority were cynical about whether it actually encouraged its stated aim of facilitating more ethical research.

There are some indications that these issues are being exacerbated in the current regulatory environment – especially via the GDPR, but also growing moves to bring more kinds of research into the scope of institutional review (e.g., undergraduate research). For some, the legitimacy of ethnography is increasingly under threat – a theme echoed in various publications and recent symposia.[2] Anthropologists clearly see an important role for the ASA moving forward in advocating for more disciplinarily sensitive and sympathetic approaches to research regulation – not just in relation to ethics committees themselves, but other gatekeeping bodies such as research councils and journal editors.

Although many respondents reflected positively on the ASA ethics guidelines, this related primarily to their utility in educating external bodies about the nature of anthropological research. Unfortunately, the value of the guidelines for anthropologists' *own* ethical practice was less clear. This raises a number of questions about who the intended audience of the guidelines is perceived to be; in future iterations, this may be something worth paying further attention to.

Another 'take-home' message from the survey is that disciplinary-specific training in anthropological research ethics in the UK appears to be highly variable. While some anthropologists receive intensive training in this area, it often seems to come down to the personal inclinations of module convenors and research supervisors themselves. It may therefore be worthwhile developing specific teaching resources that can be incorporated into undergraduate and postgraduate modules, or making more explicit use of those developed in other national settings (e.g., the online Social Sciences Ethics Training course at Macquarie University).

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[1] See, for example, Wynn, Lisa. 2011. Ethnographers' experiences of institutional ethics oversight: Results from a quantitative and qualitative survey. *Journal of Policy History*, 23(1): 94-114.

[2] See, for example, Simpson, Edward. 2016. Is anthropology legal? Earthquakes, blitzkrieg, and ethical futures. *Focaal*, 74: 113-128 and the forthcoming RAI 'Endangered fieldwork' symposium.