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Commentary

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## Comment on Kevin D. Haggerty, “Ethics Creep: Governing Social Science Research in the Name of Ethics”

Howard S. Becker

Kevin Haggerty set out to scare us. Well, OK, not scare us, but warn us, about the likelihood that we are all going to find ourselves operating in the kind of coercive situation he describes as now characteristic of the Canadian research university. He succeeded in scaring me and I suspect he will succeed with many others as well. And we should be scared. If restrictions of the kind he documents become even more common than they are now in universities in the United States, we can say goodbye to sociological research as we know it today.

It would be easy to dismiss that as a north-of-the-border aberration if we didn't all know about similar cases and problems arising everywhere you look in universities in the U.S. What began years ago as a sort of safeguard against doctors injecting cancer cells into research patients without first asking them if that was OK has turned into a serious, ambitious bureaucracy with interests to protect, a mission to promote, and a self-righteous and self-protective ideology to explain why it's all necessary.

Maybe this mission will not continue to creep in the way Haggerty describes it is doing in Canada. But it would be foolish and reckless to assume that it can't happen here. It's a good working principle that anything that has happened can happen again. Canada is different but not that different. Bureaucracies have characteristics that social scientists have explored for a long time, one of them being their self-protective and insulated relation to the rest of the world. So U.S. universities will probably continue to drift in this direction. I haven't heard any stories about Institutional Review Boards lightening up on their requirements. Quite the opposite. As some of us have tried new dodges to skirt the requirements, the IRBs have wised up and closed loopholes. I never had occasion to try out the idea I suggested to the reporter from *Lingua Franca*, of describing my work as conceptual art or performance art (art departments having been mostly exempt from this foolishness until now but, as Haggerty warns, probably not forever).

But, if I did, I suspect that the response would be to change the rules to include art projects. (What would happen to documentary photography as currently practiced in many university art departments, if that happened?)

Is it a sure thing that all these dire things are going to happen? Of course not. But prudent people know that they have to act on predictions that are not sure things. Would the consequences be terrible? Take a minute and review your own research. Could you have done the work you did—for your dissertation, for your other research—if you had to have it approved by the kind of outfit Haggerty describes? Could you teach the classes you have taught—in methods, for sure, but other classes as well—if you had to have everything the students did approved in this way? I know what the answers to those questions would be for me. I could probably have done my dissertation on schoolteachers' careers and my research on marijuana, after giving the appropriate answers to questions about research protocols, because they mainly involved interviews. But I could not have studied musicians or medical students or college students and arrived at anything like the same conclusions with the same evidentiary base—because all that work involved me and my colleagues just hanging around with a lot of people to whom we could never have introduced ourselves and recited the proper warnings. And the suggestion of one Research Ethics Board—that the researcher, who was working in similar conditions, avert her glance when she came into contact with people she had not been able to make the proper arrangements with—would surely only have earned us a reputation for being loonies.

The most frightening suggestion of things to come is the idea that people whose work in fact has nothing to do with the university—emeritus professors, for example, or professors who also have private research companies—would be subject to the same restrictions as the people the university pays a salary to. I thank my lucky stars that I retired before it got this far and that I never accepted emeritus status anywhere.

I know that all is not lost—a lot of people are trying to find ways to get a rope around this dangerous animal now running around loose—but I think we would all do well to take Haggerty absolutely seriously and start fighting this full time and not give an inch we don't have to. These folks will creep us right out of business if we don't watch out.