FORUM

The Triadic Contours of Ethics in Practice-Based and Interdisciplinary Research

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As I launch a new research program, titled "Strengths-Based Dramaturgies of Accessibility in the Performing Arts," questions about ethics are at the forefront of my mind.[1]

The thoughts on ethics I share here contribute to what I understand as a large and complex topic, much of which remains beyond my reach. My aim here is, nevertheless, to begin contouring the triad of partly overlapping ethical spheres that I operate within and suggest a few approaches that may help me and others navigate them. These spheres are (1) situational and relational ethics; (2) equity, diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility (EDIA); and (3) institutional ethics procedures. Yes, it is a lot; that feeling partakes in the possibilities and complications I wish to consider.

I am implicated as a physically disabled dance dramaturg, a female professor with English as my second language, and a white settler in Canada. My research is in the interdisciplinary field of performing arts psychology and tends to articulate, develop, and examine strategies of creation, learning, and community engagement within the performing arts through practice-based and empirical research. The new research program named above aims to do so with a focus on the strengths of access-deserving groups that face creation methods, industry norms, and educational systems that are not built for or with us. The ethics of this research program are therefore further complicated by differences (or barriers) between intersecting abilities (cross-disability) and between artistic and empirical research methodology.

The broad field of practice-based research (PBR), which this journal issue spotlights, can be more adaptable and responsive to socio-environmental changes than fields with standardized methodologies or dominating theoretical paradigms. The changes encountered at this time[2] motivate PBR researchers to reconsider research ethics. Recent publications on ethics in artistic research, applied theatre, research-based theatre, and dance research methodologies indicate that overlapping communities of knowledge are responding to this call (e.g., Candelero and Henley 2023; Cox et al. 2023; Laukkannen et al. 2022; Sadeghi-Yekta and Prendergast 2022; MacNeill and Bolt 2019). A synthesizing voice has not yet emerged from this rich exchange, but some repeated themes are raised across multiple sources. These themes lean toward participatory research parameters, particularly as advanced through Indigenous research, where Indigenous epistemologies and agency are reflected in research designs, often as forms of listening and responsiveness to community, spirituality, and land (Ruby et al. 2022, 25).

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Relational and Situational Ethics

Informed by the iterative and emergent characteristics of PBR, the themes mentioned above guide researchers when making choices and responding to discovered insights on their feet. They can be summarized as principles about relating to consenting human and more-than-human participants in situations that emerge during the research with reflexivity about power dynamics and flexibility about how the work is done. The themes are of *caring* for and *being of service* to the people and more-than-people who participate in the research, of *listening* to them and *noticing when to slow down or change path*, of *reciprocal reflection* and *self-reflection*, and of *sharing agency and authorship*. Practice-based researchers are learning more about how our implicit bias (know how) and knowledge claims (know what) are manifested in our research designs (see MacNeill and Bolt 2019, 6) and how they may disadvantage the people and more-than-people we engage. We are becoming more aware that our tendency to draw on subjective experiences, push boundaries and deconstruct norms, or intervene in socio-cultural practices as we develop and apply creative methods have unintended consequences.

This awareness is essential when collaborating with mixed abilities researchers, artists, and community partners to articulate and develop strengths-based dramaturgies of accessibility in the performing arts. It raises questions about how we can design collaborative research processes with space to listen, reflect, and revise our path.

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDIA)

Relational and situational awareness is strengthened by a parallel increase in EDIA training and measures within artistic and scholarly organizations. We are becoming better at recognizing excluding norms and hierarchies at the foundation of systems of creation, education, knowledge, and validation in the performing arts.

In some contexts, this development is dependent on shifting socio-political actions; in others, legal equity foundations provide a somewhat more stable foundation. Commitments to Indigenous reconciliation, decolonization, anti-racism, and—to a lesser extent—accessibility and gender equity are being made by organizations. When this work extends beyond positionality, EDIA committees consult representatives from equity-deserving, marginalized groups while working to establish procedures for, for example, bias screening, anti-racist training, disability accommodations, and more equitable distribution of opportunity.

The ethics practices of the primary disciplines that are combined in my research program, performing arts studies and psychology, have been affected by increased EDIA awareness. This is reflected in research instruments, advisory committees, and research teams that have become more inclusive and representative. However, a (sometimes ideological) sense of necessity to research EDIA topics is higher in performing arts disciplines that operate within associated theoretical paradigms such as feminist and gender theory, critical race theory, and critical disability theory.

In Canada, the population group that benefits from existing norms is smaller than the sum of marginalized groups. In addition to facing the large problem of systemic discrimination and barriers, marginalized groups also struggle to form a majority where we have agency because we cannot be

included under a single set of norms. If our agency remains parked in the crowded lot of EDIA all at once, conflicting barrier-reducing needs and priorities can undermine efforts.

The intention of "Strengths-Based Dramaturgies of Accessibility" is to shift from *accommodating* disabled artists within ableist norms to instead design methods that *take point of departure in the strengths* of the disabled artists. To be of *service* to someone, I envision the program of research as a constellation of spaces, each placing a different group of disabled artists with similar strengths at its centre, and then identifying secondary and tertiary outer circles of the cross-disability and intersectional experiences in the room. The centre of each space will be strengths-based, whereas the outer concentric circles will be "accommodated" on the terms of this centre when possible.

EDIA is being mobilized to decentre research in the performing arts from its historically privileged (white, colonial, male, abled, etc.) points of reference. Perhaps this EDIA work makes it possible to regroup around a multiplicity of differently inclusive centres, while drawing on networked connections for collaborative agency?

Institutional Ethics Procedures

Institutional ethics protocols are often seen as a poor fit for relational ethics and EDIA (e.g., Hibberd 2020; Bolt and Vincs 2015). Many PBR researchers have struggled through ethics board application forms and reviews that require every step of a research process to be predefined, cast researchers and participants in a hierarchy, and understand anonymity as the standard for managing risks of harm.

Although I share these frustrations, I also recognize that two decades ago it was an ethics protocol form that first asked me to consider all degrees of discomfort, loss of agency, or negative exposure as a risk of harm in need of mitigation. It was also an ethics form that first required me to account for who benefits and commit to delivering such benefits. I am, in part, grateful that we are forced to push past our frustration to answer these questions. Over the years, my answers have no doubt been equally frustrating for ethics boards. Like others, my response to "who benefits" has been to hand ownership of co-developed interventions over to community partners and to co-author with participants (e.g., Hibberd 2020). My method of risk reduction has involved partners in designing study objectives and methods over iterative cycles, resulting in multiple updates of our ethics protocol.

Models of co-authorship are becoming more widespread, and ethics protocols are becoming more responsive to PBR and participatory research models. Perhaps PBR researchers' service on EDIA committees and ethics boards, and our engagement with the push and pull of ethics reviews, have contributed to this development.

My research program crosses practice-based development with empirical experiments. The latter requires preplanned steps with systematic methods, elimination of threats to validity, transparent repeatability, and clarity about the limitations of results. The former requires an iterative process of emergent, situated, and often subjective development with space for co-creation, listening, reflexivity, and flexible objectives. Although some of this work takes place in overlapping spaces and with overlapping collaborators, there is methodological separation between development and experimentation.[3] Similarly, each research activity is differently positioned on the overlapping

spheres of the ethics triad. In my case, PBR enables greater relational ethics through participatory and generative principles, whereas empirical research provides stronger procedural ethics through transparent and systematic methods. This difference, including the EDIA strengths and limitations of each position, provides me with a map to help me navigate ethics with greater awareness.

Although preliminary, perhaps this approach to considering and navigating ethical complexities can be of use to others who bring PBR into interdisciplinary projects with equity deserving groups.

Notes

1. I would like to recognize that the thoughts shared here are informed by in-depth exchanges with my collaborator Bruce Barton.

2. Shortly after the MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements raised awareness of systemic sexism and racism, after COVID-19 made visible how expendable older adults and disabled people are to the majority, and as we begin to experience the effects of climate change more directly.

3. This design follows the interdisciplinary "Research-Based Practice" model (Hansen 2017).

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