#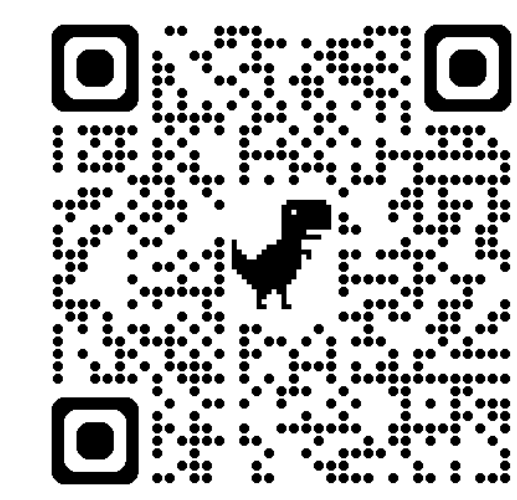 Institutional Research Ethics structures and culture shape how REC members perceive and exercise their agency to support ethical research.

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Introduction

Debates and critiques in the literature express concerns about how research ethics principles are applied by university Research Ethics Committees (Brown et al., 2020; Busher & Fox, 2021; Tsan, Ling, Feske, et al., 2020).

Critics argue that current approaches to ethics review stifle ethical reflection and responsibility.
My research explores how REC members navigate institutional structures and culture. Two universities, one in South Africa and one in the United Kingdom, are studied as case examples.

Important to note:
This presentation is based on preliminary analyses of an ongoing doctoral research project. The insights presented in this poster are drawn from an incomplete dataset. Your feedback or comments on the insights would be greatly appreciated.

Objective

To understand why research ethics structures and cultures are defined as being procedural and rigid, and whether there is potential for change through shifts in discourse and practice.

This presentation offers a critical discourse analysis of experiences and perspectives shared by REC members about institutional factors that enable or constrain their agency to facilitate ethical and responsible research.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight REC members, exploring their experience and involvement in the research ethics review process and the other interactions they have had by virtue of their institutional roles and interests.

Using critical discourse analysis, the interviews were coded and analysed for important themes, insights and contrasts with the current literature (Fairclough, 1989; Talja, 1999).

Preliminary Insights

1) There is a noticeable disparity in perceived agency between REC members who work in the biomedical field and those in the social science field. It is important to take into account the history and culture of specialised or discipline-specific RECs when considering their decision-making and approach to what counts as ethical practice.
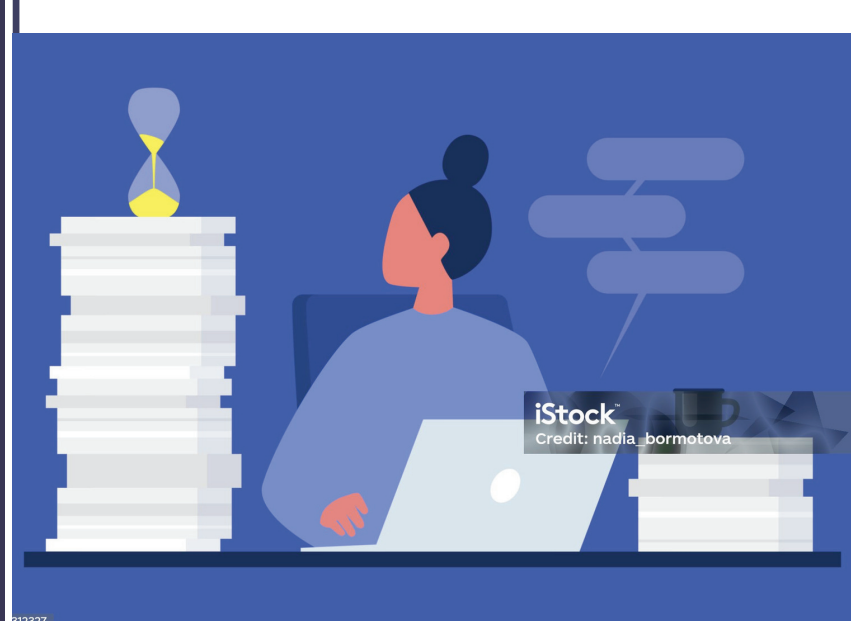
2) Additionally, there is a difference in agency between individuals at the early stage of their careers and those who are more experienced. Younger academics may be pressured by senior leadership to join the REC, and the REC workload could hinder career progression. However, it can also provide them with valuable experience and learning opportunities to better mentor their students or identify errors made by others.
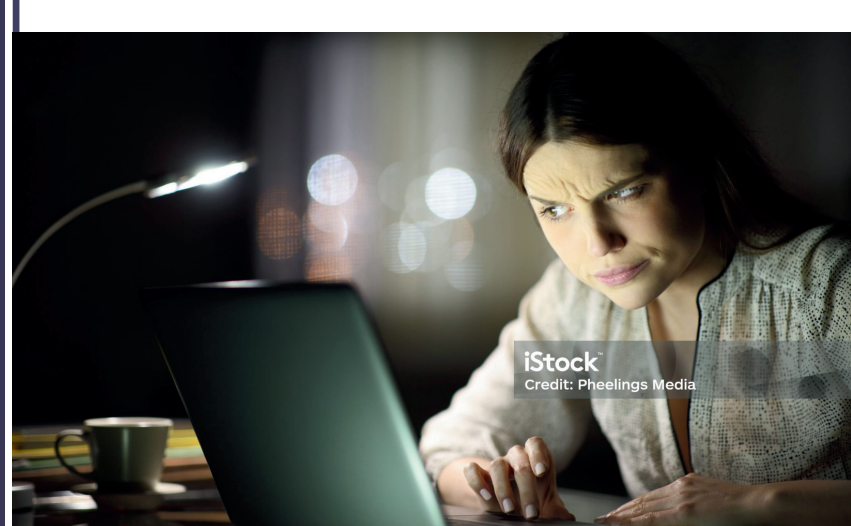
3) Notions of distrust, guilt, and fear appear to influence certain decisions or actions of REC members. Contrary to existing literature (Hammersley, 2009; Schrag, 2010), REC members seem to be fully aware of the ethical challenges and operate with a fear of creating tension among colleagues or distrust.

Conclusion

The way research ethics review structures and culture are set up can significantly influence how members of research ethics committees perceive their ability and agency to support ethical and responsible research.

A deeper exploration of REC members' perceptions and practices around research ethics can reveal the specific discourses and practices that reinforce procedural and rigid review practices.

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