

Jake Trevino
Public Scholarship Final

In her article entitled *Handing the IRB an Unloaded Gun*, Carol Rambo writes a performative autoethnography outlining an adverse experience with The University of Memphis's Institutional Review Board (IRB). IRB is an administrative body established to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects recruited to participate in research activities conducted under the institution with which it is affiliated. While the IRB process is standard when it comes to human subjects research across many universities, pieces of scholarship utilizing an autoethnographical method generally do not require IRB approval. This is because autoethnography is solely based on a researcher's first hand experience of the specific area being written about. Rambo wrote *Handing the IRB an Unloaded Gun* as a direct response to IRB claims that her original piece titled *An Unloaded Gun: Negotiating the Boundaries of Identity, Incest, and Student/Teacher Relationships* was too unethical to be published. The "taboo" article delved into her personal experience with teacher/student attraction, incest, and the boundaries of identity, using the pseudonym Eric to identify the student in question in order to keep the student's original identity safe. While the nature of the piece of scholarship is a touchy one, Rambo (2007) argued that, since no human subjects were technically used in her paper, her IRB had no right to stop the article from being published, which had been fully accepted by the journal *Deviant Behavior* after a peer review process. Important questions arise about the role of IRB and at what point is the board able to impede on the voice of scholars merely sharing stories.

Rambo (2007) makes an argument by framing her unpublishable autoethnography as a confessional tale where the personal experiences of the researcher are made central subject, or an impressionist tale where fiction is incorporated and exaggerations are deliberately made to emphasize a point. When it comes to theoretical framework, Rambo (2007) takes a unique

Jake Trevino
Public Scholarship Final

approach, using the Chilean mythological creature Imbunche (pronounced eem-boonchair), whose bodily orifices had been sewn shut to prevent suspected evil from expressing itself, in order to frame her paper. The creature, ironically, later became known for its great prophecies after being silenced. Moreover, Imunchar is the ritual ceremony whereby priests or male witches (brujos) steal newborns and bind them up or, in other versions, break or amputate body parts to somehow mark the future of the child. Rambo (2007) argues that her original paper was subjected to Imbunchar:

It is my fear that my imbunche and others are silently prophesizing a future that faces autoethnography if we do not act quickly to define the situation for IRB and create a space where tales from a researcher's lived experiences can be told. (p. 357)

Rambo's (2007) piece begins with two almost poetic vignettes that set the tone for the rest of the article:

A rag-doll floats buffeted by the ocean currents, her mouth sewn up, her limbs bound...

A woman sits curled up on her side in the corner of a padded cell, her arms bound around her body by a straight jacket. Duct tape slashes an X across her face where her mouth used to be. (p. 353)

By using a performative autoethnographical approach, the piece includes creative vignettes, personal experience, poetry, scholarship, and excerpts of in-person and e-mail correspondence between her, other academics, and individuals who were presently on the institution's IRB. Rambo (2007) included a range of correspondence between her and her colleagues; some of them condemning the institution for even having a say in the article's publication, and others who argue that the direction of her work could jeopardize her job and her reputation as a scholar. She later reveals that she voluntarily showed it to her department chair

Jake Trevino
Public Scholarship Final

for inspection, who later argued that she needed IRB approval before the publication could ensue.

As the article goes on, a lot of important discussions are brought to the table. Several of Rambo's (2007) colleagues (whose identities were concealed in this article) argued that the piece could have made a great contribution beyond even the content. Some argued that the style of writing was "ahead of its time," and how it fits into an emerging trend that merges personal experience or perspective with theory. One suggested that she get a lawyer, because the activities that she engaged in did not constitute research involving a human subject if it did not involve "a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalize knowledge" (Rambo, 2007, p. 363). Others spoke of her being naïve for wanting to engage in open dialogue regarding "how we can find ourselves in compromising situations with our students" (Rambo, 2007, p. 363).

In this case, one could argue that the IRB "made a performance;" one that silenced both Rambo and the student in question. Rambo (2007) posits that the IRB "wrote their story" and interpreted the rules in such a way that suggest the risks of publishing the manuscript outweighed the benefits. Rambo (2007) frames the hasty act of publication denial as a performative act that derived from the IRB's inability to adequately address the material in question, which served as the rationale behind her performative approach as a critical response. When faced with a discussion of incest, coupled with an exploration of student-teacher attraction, IRB board members found themselves overwhelmed by the substance of the manuscript. Because there were no mandates regarding what to do in a situation like this, the IRB acted in haste and panic instead of searching for alternative ways to address the article. Thus, "performance" ensued. Without a set of rules regarding ethnographic and autoethnographic pieces, the committee was

forced to “ad-hoc” meaning regarding the situation. The uncharted territory forced IRB to take a position/make a response based on “the existing conservative religious/political context, their individual identities, the formal roles they were being asked to enact, and the written rules they had before them” (Rambo, 2007, p. 366).

As a result, this performative act blocked the publication of a story that was inherently Rambo’s own, which arguably impeded on the rights of her to speak freely of her experience. No human subjects were technically utilized within the project itself and the identity of Eric was never revealed within the piece of scholarship itself, as Rambo (2007) argued that no one on campus outside of the ‘Police and Judicial Affairs’ knew his true identity. The University of Memphis IRB argued that this still impeded on the rights of the student in question, however, this point begs questions as to what point can the safety of one’s identity impact the freedom of dissemination regarding this sort of knowledge. Knowledge that is arguably a reality that, despite how taboo, both students and teachers face; this piece of scholarship could have ultimately aided others who found themselves in similarly compromising situations.

More interesting arguments are brought up, including the IRB’s tacit norms of silence mirroring that of childhood sexual abuse:

To speak about it in public is considered rude behavior that disrupts the flow of social interaction because most audiences do not know how to react to such a disclosure...

Based on these interpretive resources, flying-by-the-seat-of-their-pants, they wrote the narrative of Eric and me as untellable, thus reinforcing the tacit norm of silence. It is this tacit norm of silence I resist by writing this as performance ethnography. (Rambo, 2007, p. 366)

Rambo was silenced. “Eric,” who was never given the chance to speak, was also silenced. Rambo (2007) argues that Eric and his safety “are red herrings” (p. 365), and serve as side issues in the broader debate she had with her IRB. Rambo (2007) further argues that society functions through the collective observance of “tacit rules:” If something is problematic or a “breach” of these tacit rules, it does not have a formula or recipe that informs participants how to act towards it, thus social interactions often come to a halt until participants can figure out a way to respond.

If I observe IRB’s denial of approval to publish my autoethnography as a reaction to a breach of the tacit rules regarding childhood sexual abuse, student-teacher relationships, and scientific writing formats, their seemingly senseless conduct becomes sensible (Rambo, 2007, pg. 365).

As autoethnography is a method of producing accounts of personal experience, Rambo’s (2007) piece served as an oral history that should have been outside of IRB control. The American Historical Association argues that “oral histories are not designed to contribute to ‘generalizable knowledge’ that they are not subject to the requirements of the HHS regulations at 45 CFR part. 46 and, therefore, can be excluded from IRB review” (Townsend, 2004). Although the Health and Human Services regulations do not define what “generalizable knowledge” is, the American Historical Council finds it reasonable to assume that the “term does not simply mean knowledge that lends itself to generalizations, which characterizes every form of scholarly inquiry and human communication” (Townsend, 2004). Unlike researchers that are involved in biomedical and behavioral sciences, oral histories do not reach for generalizable principles of historical or social development. Historians simply explain a particular past; they do not generate explanations about the past, nor do they predict the future (Townsend, 2004). Rambo (2007)

Jake Trevino
Public Scholarship Final

argues that the key determinations did not turn on the interpretation of the terms “designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge” (p. 365). Rambo (2007) argues that her IRB was wrong to block her publication, and that her best recourse was to write a response “and hope that we, as a community of scholars, can help our IRBs understand the rules and work together to create a safe, defined space” (p. 366). One where storytelling is permitted without the fear of severe censorship, as the traditional form of scientific knowledge is not the only way of knowing. Rambo (2007) concludes her piece in a powerful way: “The gun was never loaded; bear that in mind... Senseless. Grief. I can’t tell you how much this hurts. My Imbunche” (p. 366).

References

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