

What is 'Value' When Aesthetics Meets Ethics Inside and Outside of The Academy

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As a 'new' research discipline, the creative arts challenges ethics understandings with emergent research practices. In this paper we focus on a current learning and teaching project that attends to ethical know-how in creative practice research in order to address the gaps between institutional research know-how and the practices of creative practitioners in the world. Graduate creative practice researchers working in the university are required to observe the University's *Code of Conduct for Research* and adhere to the guidelines provided by the *National Statement*, however practicing artists working in the community are not similarly constrained. Once creative practice PhD graduates leave the university, they are no longer required to gain ethics clearance for their work but use their own developed sense of ethics to make "judgment calls."

Ethical know-how is situated, contextual, and a mainstay of all professional practices in action. The aim of this paper is to examine the notion of value as it is perceived by academics, practitioners and PAR researchers in and beyond the university as this relates ethical know-how. Through an examination of a survey of PAR supervisors and RHD candidates this paper will discuss issues specific to the creative practice disciplines. This analysis enables us to raise issues specific to the creative arts disciplines and will help us prepare our graduate researchers to become ethical and innovative practitioners in the real world.

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Introduction

Creative practice researchers in the University—both academics/supervisors and graduate researchers—whose research involves human subjects are required to observe their University's *Code of Conduct for Research* and adhere to the guidelines provided by the *National Statement on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (National Statement)*, while practicing artists and designers working in the community are not similarly constrained. Once creative practice PhD graduates leave the university, they are no longer required to gain ethics clearance for their work, but need to call on and use their own developed sense of ethics to make “judgment calls” when issues of an ethical nature arise. On what basis and according to what ‘values’ do they make such calls? In this paper, we focus on the preliminary findings of a survey conducted as part of an Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) project, *Developing new approaches to ethics and research integrity training through challenges posed by Creative Practice Research (2015-7)*. The project is concerned with equipping our graduate and graduating researchers with the skills and know-how they will need in order make those judgment calls. By know-how, we are concerned with a sensitivity towards and reflexivity to what happens in and through practice. As such, the project addresses the gaps between institutional ethics and compliance, that is the know-what of ethics, and the ethical know-how required in the practices of artists and designers outside the academy.

In order to assess the current state of affairs, we conducted a national survey of creative practice graduate researchers and academics about their understanding of ethics, their engagement with the ethics process in the institutional framework and how this translates into their professional practice outside of the institution. Within this context, the aim of this paper is to examine the notion of ‘values’ and ‘ethics’ as they are perceived by academics, practitioners and creative practice researchers in the academy as they relate to ethical know-how, and further, to assess the attitudes towards, and impact of, the procedural or institutional ethics process on creative practice when it is framed as research within the context of the academy, and its reach beyond the academy.

Ethics and the question of value

The team examined the response of researchers gained through the survey process and framed their responses in terms of the question of the value that the respondents placed on ethics both through the formal institutional ethics process and in their practice as designers and artists. We identified three different notions of ‘value’ operating through our questions; values, value adding and valued research. Taking each notion, we have analysed the data from the surveys through the prism of the following questions:

Values – What are the values that CPR researchers hold?

Value adding - How does a consideration of 'ethics' add value to the research?

Valued research – What is valued in/as research in this field?

In the survey, conducted over a 6-month period in 2016-7, 116 respondents from Creative Practice Research responded to our call. 62 academics/supervisors (33 female, 28 male and 1 who did not identify) as well as 54 graduate researchers (37 female and 17 male) from nineteen tertiary institutions across all fields of creative practice—creative writing, dance, design, game design, film, theatre and visual arts (with many of the graduate researchers describing their practice as multi-disciplinary) provided the data that is analysed in this paper.*

Apart from the mandatory identifying data, we asked them the following:

- What do you understand by the term “ethics”?
- Were the institutional ethical guidelines an important consideration when framing a research question or devising the methodology for a project?
- Did institutional guidelines inhibit or enhance your research?
- Were there any evident benefits to the research from engaging in the ethics process?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we asked: What principles do you look to or use in dealing with ethical issues in your independent (external to an institution) creative practice?

Values – what are the values that creative practice researchers hold?

As part of the survey process, we wished to understand what creative practice researchers—graduate researchers, academics and supervisors—understood by the term ethics in relation to their creative practice. From the 54 CPR graduate researcher responses offered, 29 identified ‘participants’ or ‘relation to the other’ as fundamental to their understanding of ethics, while 21 respondents considered ‘ethical being and doing’ as a central concern (Figure 1). There was a similar focus among CPR academics and supervisors who also identified participants and ethical being and doing as critical issues (Figure 2). However, in contrast to the graduate researchers, academics and supervisors were more likely to see ethics in terms of “legal issues” and “practice”, what we would term, following Marilyns Guillemin and Lynette Gilliam, as ‘ethics in practice’ (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

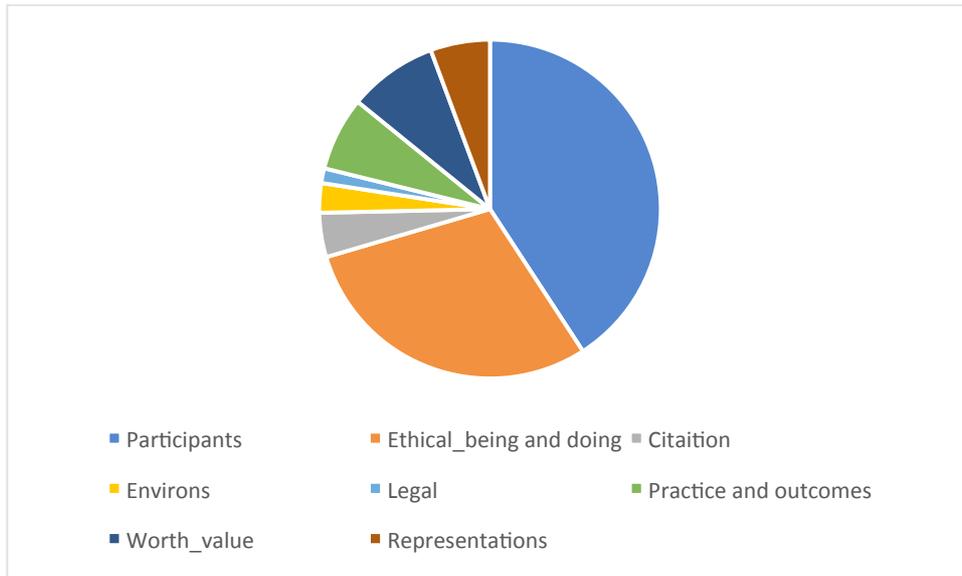


Figure 1 CPR graduate researchers: What do you consider to be meant by the term ‘ethics’ in relation to a creative practice?

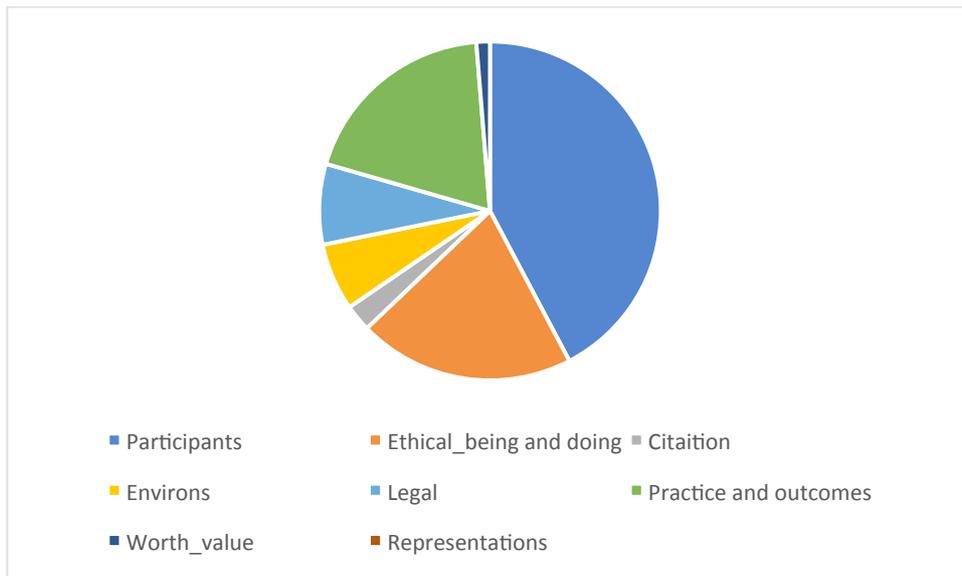


Figure 2 Academic researchers/supervisors: What do you consider to be meant by the term ‘ethics’ in relation to a creative practice?

The central tenets underpinning *The National Statement*—research merit and integrity, justice, beneficence and respect—seemed to be alive and well in the responses of creative practice graduate researchers, whether it be for actual participants, audiences or more general publics. The concepts and practices of do no harm, informed consent, rights to

privacy, fairness, and the duality of freedom and responsibility are central themes that emerged from the survey.

Intellectual property legal issues and possible issues of litigation, a concern with ethical protocols and practices and the impact of the research, loomed larger in the survey responses of academics and supervisors, due in no small part to their roles in the institution as academics and as “responsible supervisors” for their graduate researchers’ projects. However, a number of other nuances emerged for academics and supervisors in response to the question of what ethics actually is. For example, power relations, especially in relation to artistic collaborations, emerged as a recurring theme as did the ethical responsibility for the environment. One academic commented:

In relation to creative practice, especially as it concerns design involved in mass or limited production, I see ethics primarily and broadly concerned with sustainability issues ... I am familiar with the term ethics being used within a legal framework primarily concerned with human research and the university’s exposure to risk, but think this is subservient to ecological concerns with production.

For both groups of respondents, the consideration of ‘ethical being and doing’ evoked more philosophical approaches of “ethics” and its relation to the values that encompass both the principles that guide behavior and the behaviour itself. According to one academic, ‘ethics are defined as “moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conduct of an activity” and ethics in creative practice are similar to those in any human activity.’ For a creative practice graduate researcher, it is ‘the moral principles guiding the methods used in obtaining knowledge. Being morally aware of and respecting the rights of other beings when conducting research.’ A number of respondents highlighted the fact that ethics is not just a set of principles or guidelines, but necessarily encompasses the actual behaviour of the researcher. Thus, one creative practice researcher noted:

Ethics includes the range of my behaviour and conduct towards people I work around in general and subjects in particular. It includes my thinking about the impact and the implications of my practice socially and environmentally. It includes thinking about storage and protection of resource material (e.g. film) and about the display of materials.’

In summary, the survey revealed that while there was a slightly different focus for creative practice graduate researchers and academics, relations or care for the other became a cornerstone and key value in the creative research process.

Value adding - does a consideration of ‘ethics’ add value to the research?

In the 2010 study, *Research Ethics and the Creative Arts*, conducted among CPR academics, many respondents, particularly among the visual arts, believed that:

The ethics protocols, processes and procedures in universities operate as a silent regulator of conduct and a subtle determination of content in creative arts research ... through its very stringent processes of ethical regulation, the university ethics procedure introduces limitations that work against “cutting edge” research and mitigates experimentation at the heart of practice’ (Bolt et al, 2010: 20).

In this survey, completed seven years later, we have returned to this question, to assess whether creative practice academics and their graduate researchers maintain this dim view of the institutional ethics process or whether they considered the ethics process as adding value to the research.

We asked the creative practice candidates, academics and supervisors for a self-assessment of the “value add” of the research ethics process to their own research, and academics and supervisors for an assessment of the benefits or value of the process for their HDR candidates’ research (Figures 3, 4 and 5). Both creative practice candidates and supervisors expressed concerns about the lengthy and often frustrating ethics process, the fact that university ethics processes continue to reinforce a scientific bias, and consider that the process fails to take into account the emergent and serendipitous nature of creative practice research. Nonetheless, there was a strong sense amongst both groups that working through the ethics process strengthened the research design and methodology and enabled researchers to become much more aware of the impact of their research on the participants involved in the research. Further, as one supervisor noted, ‘communicating the project to non-specialists helped clarify the rationale and scope of the project’, just as it also served to educate the non-specialist about creative practice research.

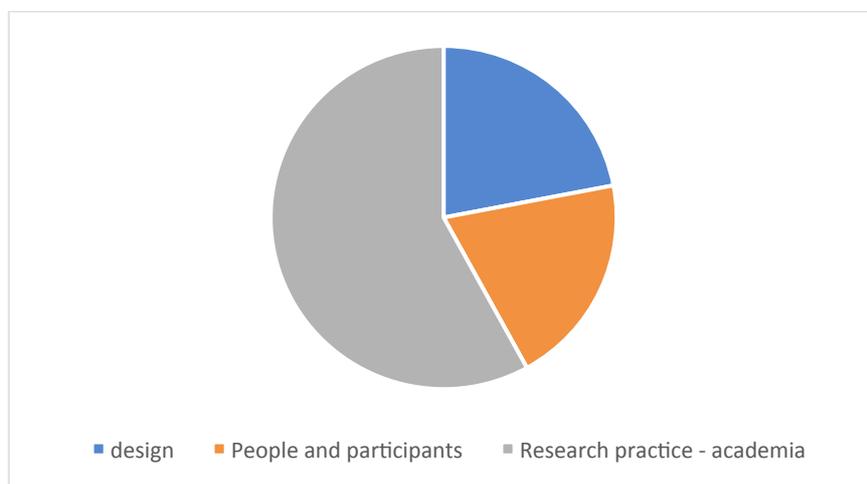


Figure 3 Supervisors: What benefits have you observed from Higher Degree Research candidates doing/completing the ethics application process?

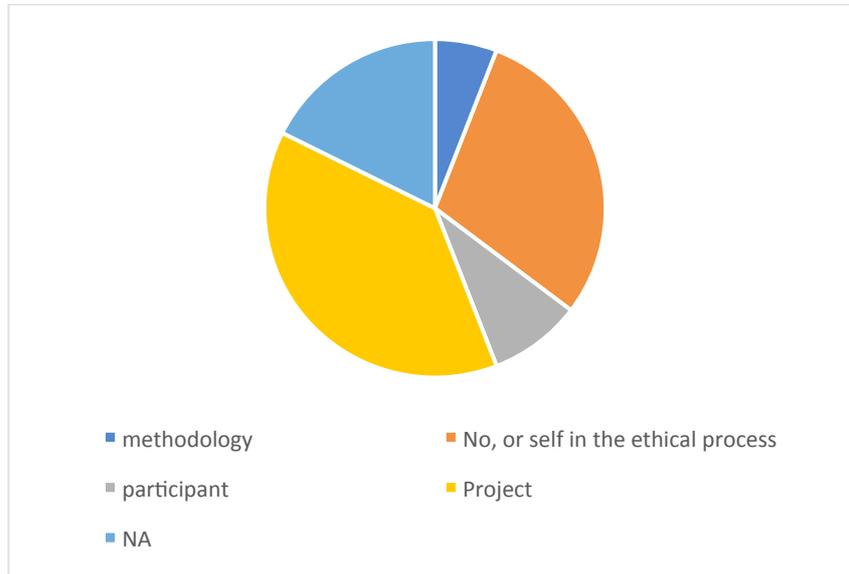


Figure 4 Academic/supervisors: In your own practice what benefits have you observed from doing/completing the ethics application process?

While CPR academics and supervisors were ambivalent about their own experience of the University ethics processes and often avoided it, they were much positive about the value of the ethics process for CPR graduate researchers (Figure 3 and 4). Supervisors identified that completing the ethics process prompted candidates to design and plan the research. Their comments focused on the role of the ethics process in enabling creative practice research candidates to ‘think more carefully about the design of their research and its ethical implications’, ‘focus regarding the proposed research—what, why and how they will go about a process’, ‘clarify (the) research question’, ‘assist in refining the methodology and immediate impact of (the) research on participants/sample’ and that it ‘helps them think about the efficacy of the project and address its impact.’ Importantly, it encouraged a sense of relationality with the other. A number of supervisors commented on the improved clarity about the details and consequences for others of the research carried out and noted that through the process, students have the opportunity to reflect on their project, particularly the way that research affects others.

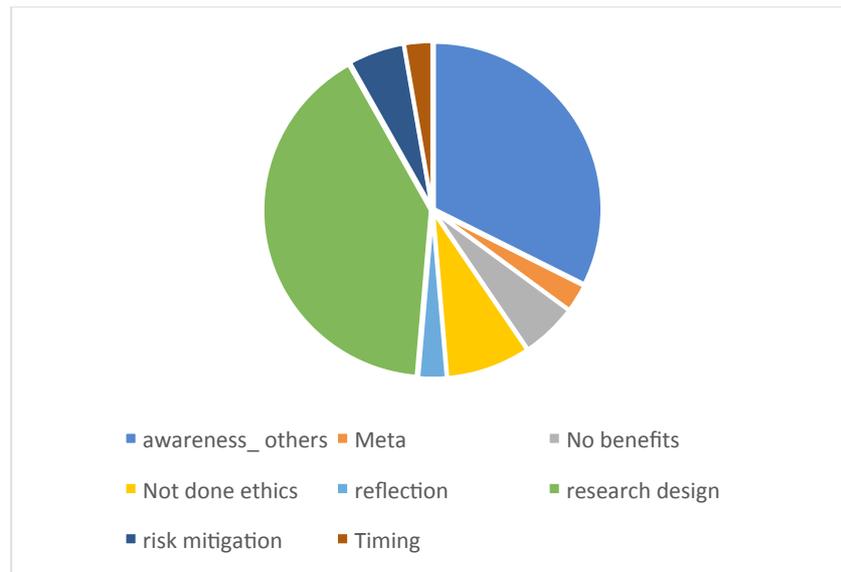


Figure 5 CPR graduate researcher: What benefits have you observed from doing/completing the ethics application process?

Creative practice graduate researchers (Figure 5) shared the supervisors' constructive assessment of the value of the ethics process, particularly in its capacity to clarify and focus the research: 'It introduced questions and issues that opened up new doors'; 'It made me think about and plan my research in a more considered way'; and 'I found the application process beneficial in that it made me consider closely what I was asking of my participants ... and it forced me to clarify lots of ideas around my research which was a helpful impetus in the process of the project.' In summary, even as the ethics process had its frustrations, it led to more robust and meta-aware research processes.

Valued Research – what is valued in/as research in this field?

One of the key questions which we wished to understand in this survey was whether the creative practice graduate researchers and academics have an art/design practice independent of the academy and how they deal with the ethical issues that arise in this practice. Do they deal differently with ethical dilemmas in practice than in the academy? This understanding is required in order for academics to be able to design pedagogical approaches and resources that will be useful to creative practice researchers in their dealings with the what Guillemin and Gillam have identified as the 'unanticipated and contingent ethical issues that arise in the process of conducting research in real-world settings' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004).

Of the 54 respondents, 38 graduate researchers (70%) had independent creative practices while 38 academics/supervisors (61%) had independent creative practices (Figures 6 and 7). In responding to the question: ‘How do you deal with ethical issues in your independent practice?’, about half of both graduate researchers and academics/supervisors answered that they would rely on, what could be identified as, their own ethical know-how. A number of the graduate researchers sought advice from other artists, curators and professionals such as editors or their academic supervisors, while others consulted with the subjects of their research to tease out ethical issues. Academics and supervisors are more likely to look to the discipline-specific ethical guidelines, such as the normative practices and conventions within the discipline—particularly in architecture, journalism, theatre or dance, to their peers and to the academic model of ethics.¹

In their responses, creative practice academics who were also practitioners, spoke with confidence of drawing on their experience, sensitivity, integrity and responsibility in dealing with ethical issues in their independent practice. One respondent talked of ‘ethical dealing,’ another spoke of ‘utilising common sense, compassion, human decency, honour, trust and good will,’ and a third spoke of ‘trying to be sensitised to the consequence of (their) activities and modifying them if appropriate.’ The reflexive nature of ethical know-how is perhaps best summed up by a respondent in the following way, ‘I do this without oversight and have learned partly by doing.’ This respondent qualified their answer by adding that it is principally by ‘reflection and exchange with my peers.’ This sensitivity towards and reflexivity to what happens in practice, we refer to as ‘ethical know-how’.

What do we mean by ethical know-how, and what then does it mean to rely on it? Francisco Varela’s *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, Cognition* differentiates between ethical *know-what* and ethical *know-how*, or ethical expertise. Ethical know-what revolves around the deliberative rules and procedures that provide the basis of the institutionalized ethics approval process. In contrast, ethical know-how does not center on rational judgment, reasoning, deliberation or established procedures. The two work together in striving toward wisdom in our actions. Ethical know-how is situated, improvisational, spontaneous and grounded in immediacy and the specific tissue of circumstances in the moment, and involves behaving with sensitivity to the particularities of the situation. (Ednie Brown, 2012).

¹ The National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA), the Copyright Agency and the Australia Council have worked to establish a range of ethical protocols and practices for best practice in the field.

Part of our interest in Varela's schema lies in the way he writes about the interplay of ethical know-how and know-what, which bears similarities with the methodological aspects of creative practice research. Where one brings existing practice-based expertise into a process of developing new expertise as creative practice researchers, this involves (to paraphrase and adapt Varela's words): after acting spontaneously in a creative practice context, one reconstructs the intelligent awareness that justifies (and better comprehends) the action. And then, these *a posteriori* justifications or articulations operate as a stepping-stone for continued learning about how one practices—or how one approaches practice, leading to clearer articulations of the methodology integral to that practicing. Seen in this light, the ethical dimensions of practice become critical to the value of the deliberations that institutional processes prompt, and vice versa.

Academics spoke with confidence of the reflexive and responsive nature of their practices outside of the academy. While some of the CPR graduate researchers also spoke of common sense, they tended to be more sensitive to the ethical constraints in which their work operated and the tensions that arise for creative practitioners. One CPR graduate researcher spoke of the need to 'trust my feelings and my intentions' while another socially engaged practitioner talked about:

aiming to work in a transparent manner and develop strong trustful relationships based around reciprocity and a shared commitment to the creative work. Constant and honest dialogue with community partner and participants ensures ethical issues are considered and addressed throughout the project.

On the other hand, a number of the respondents spoke on the question of the potential and necessity for "discomfort" within art works. One filmmaker discussed giving the subjects of the film a veto on whether an image would be included in the work, commenting that 'if there is a real discomfort, I don't use the images.' Several others, however, saw discomfort as central to the power of an artwork, with one commenting that in situations where 'the point of the work can be to provoke, I do not feel this is unethical. Context is everything and permission cannot always be sought.' This echoes the disjuncture between ethics and values that the 2010 study identified, particularly around the questions of beneficence and the conflict between notions of beneficence as defined by *The National Statement* and those recognized by the arts community (Bolt, 2015: 57).

In comparing both survey populations, however, there was (with one exception) a sense that the ethical responsibility resides with the creative practitioner. One respondent spoke of the 'moral obligation,' the 'set of principles that I as an artist and a human being try to use as a

guide-line in my life and in my art practice.’ This is a position that brings us back to the tension between ethics and values and reminds us that in the heat of the moment it is the grounded and embodied know-how that guides us in our practice as designers and artists.

Conclusion

Through addressing the question of ethics and value in terms of CPR through this survey of creative practice researchers, it is evident that, while there remains considerable frustration with the ethics process, it does have value for the researchers within the academy, in particular for graduate researchers. Outside of the academy, in contrast, participants tend to rely on their own values or the advice of their peers to know how to move reflexively when ethical issues arise in and through practice. When brought together, as they commonly are in creative practice research, ethical know what and ethical know-how appear to scaffold one another – potentially at least to highly mutual benefit.

Whether or not the institutional ethics process leads to better creative and research outcomes was outside the scope of this survey and hence impossible to assess from this research. However, from the reports of the supervisors and also the self-reporting of CPR graduate researchers, it would seem to have led to more robust and meta-aware research processes. In this sense, CPR researchers are more aware of the values they hold, aware of the value of the ethics process to the research, but also more aware of how ethics is valued or a value within their practices beyond the academy.

*Note: iDARE wishes to acknowledge and thank all of those Creative Practitioner Researchers who responded to the survey on which this essay is based.

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