Reflective Summary: Applying for NHS ethical approval

This short reflective piece intends to give the reader an idea of what is required to make a successful application for NHS ethical approval by providing some insight into my experience of preparing an application. In particular it will highlight any issues and difficulties which I faced during this process and some of the further implications for fieldwork stages of research.

As a relatively inexperienced (postgraduate) researcher based in a non-clinical academic department the application process was especially challenging. At the time that I was applying few people in my department had encountered the NHS application system first-hand and I had to be extremely pro-active in terms of finding out how the entire application process worked and what I actually needed to do to gain ethical clearance. Furthermore although the NHS ethics committee which reviewed my application were very helpful and as it happened (after months of unnecessary worrying) were quite prepared to value my qualitative methodological approach, I can see how it might be a disadvantage for sociologists applying for ethical approval via a system which seems to generally operate with a more medical model of research. As my work did not always fit with this (quite literally into some of the drop-down option menus on the ethics form) I had a preoccupying concern that I would be required to somehow defend the project per se and not just its ethical implications. In particular I was worried about justifying the creditability of my methodological approach which was not helped by horror stories I had heard from other social science researchers who had been through the NHS ethical review process. More specifically I worried that I would be asked to change the participant observation phase of my research design, in part due to ethical concerns I thought the committee might have about participants feeling ‘spied’ on but also because I feared they would not see its value as a research method due to its unstructured nature, and the integral involvement of the researcher and their subjectivity. I was concerned in many senses about the influence the committee’s decision could have on the outcomes of my proposed research. The fact that I have Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funding for my project and I was aware of the strict time guidelines for thesis submission, it made the process feel even more stressful.

However it is important to acknowledge that the concerns and anxiety I had at the time of preparing my application, in many ways probably contributed to the successful outcome I achieved. Feeling acutely that I needed to justify my research- not only in ethical but also
methodological terms enabled me to prepare my application with the pressing sense that it was not going to be enough to say what I was going to do, I needed to say why I was going to do it, and how. Justifying the creditability of my methodology was a key step towards ensuring I could convince the committee that the project was ‘doable’ and therefore ethical in terms of being a worthwhile thing to ask people to take part in. This is what I realised quite early- that although the process is about seeking ethical approval if the project is not deemed sound in other respects it can easily be argued that it would not be ethical to expect people to participate. Consequently my application and in particular the research proposal, were extremely thorough, but of course it was also very lengthy and took a significant amount of time to prepare- in my case about 3-4 months. So although in the end I had a very positive result and minimal corrections to make to my application before a favourable opinion was given, producing an application of the quality required to satisfy the committee was a time-consuming and labour intensive task. Indeed time was a really critical issue for me. I spent a significant amount of my first year navigating my way around what I found to be the rather confusing world of NHS ethics and research governance- which to an extent was to the detriment of doing more in-depth, wider reading in the first year of my PhD. I regret not having more time to spend reviewing the literature now that I am very much in the analysing and writing up stages of my project. Although I consulted the University’s ethics web pages and the NHS National Research Ethics Service (NRES) website to help with the process, I found that many things I needed to do alongside preparing the form and documents for the ethics committee- such as securing insurance and identifying a sponsor- were confusing. There did not seem to be a sufficiently clear explanatory checklist for establishing how all the processes involved interrelated and what would be required of me to produce a complete application. Often it seemed as though I was constantly stumbling upon more things I needed to do which was adding to the list of tasks to be completed- or I was battling with feeling insecure about the bits I did not understand or the things I imagined I needed to do but had not discovered yet. Also because the process took such a long time -bearing in mind that I actually started tentatively researching what I needed to do a few months prior to really starting to write the application- I found that guidance would change, documents would be updated and I was constantly anxious that I needed to keep re-checking the status of things to ensure the application would be valid.

In terms of completing the actual form and research proposal I am indebted to a fellow PhD student who had received guidance from the clinical department in which she was based when
she was completing her application. She kindly provided me with a copy of her form and proposal as a helpful example, and because she had also taken a qualitative research approach this information proved invaluable because in places it was apparent that the form was not really designed to be completed by someone planning to undertake ethnographic research. Often it very much intended the applicant to be able to state in advance specific details about things such as the number of participants to be recruited, the length of time they would be required to spend engaged in the research and a date for completing fieldwork.

To some extent the legacy of this quite rigid approach to research design has repercussions in the field where the spontaneity and flexibility which characterises ethnographic research is somewhat curtailed by stipulations the researcher made to the ethics committee prior to entering the research environment. Due to the inherent fluidity and responsiveness required when conducting research with human participants- especially using ethnographic observational and interviewing approaches- the researcher cannot always say with any certainty how aspects of the research will develop. The ethics review process however does request this sort of predictability, and this can be difficult for researchers carrying out projects similar to my own where responsiveness to what occurs in the setting and in the context of participant’s evolving lives requires the research to take unexpected and unplanned twists and turns. I did manage to convey some of the need for flexibility in my application and this appeared to be generally accepted by the committee although their insistence that I would need to submit an amendment to the committee for review if I wanted to change my interview guide from the one which was presented in my original application, reveals some of the arguably inappropriate structures in which certain research is required to operate. Another example is the fact that I was ultimately tied to the modes of recruitment I had stipulated in my application and there were occasions in my fieldwork where opportunities had to be missed due to the time it would take to prepare a substantial amendment to submit to the committee to seek approval to make a change to what I had proposed in the original application. Unfortunately if as this example indicates, the amendment relates to the researcher wanting to recruit in a manner which is different to what was stipulated in their original application, then often the chance to recruit those other participants or a particular individual has past by the time the amendment is approved by the committee. This is especially the case if, as it was for me, the potential participant was someone who was going to be present in the research environment for a very short while. Nevertheless despite some issues, overall I think I was able to
maintain a practical amount of flexibility in my project. Ultimately this was because I had realised the implications of this issue very clearly whilst preparing the application for review, and did manage to underline in my proposal why a certain amount of ‘give and take’ was essential to make my research doable. I would say it is very important to spend time thinking about what you can stipulate you are able stick too when preparing the application. Finding ways to ‘write flexibility in’ is very useful. Also, once ethical approval is granted, what happens during the research and decisions which are made still have to be very much considered in terms of ‘how do I stand with regard to my ethics approval?’

Finally I would like to finish by acknowledging my particular ethics committee for the encouraging feedback they gave about my application- stating that it was one of the most thoroughly prepared applications they had reviewed- which did go some way to making all the effort and stress almost worthwhile! Furthermore, as I have outlined although I feel there are certain issues relating to the NHS ethics review process which are difficult to manage and reconcile- especially for researchers applying from non-clinical departments and using certain methodological approaches- the intensity that the experience of preparing the application involves makes you think about carrying out your research in very specific and ultimately useful ways. If it can be managed effectively and appropriate support is made available the application process does represent an opportunity to prepare for your research and to think about best practice- and not only in terms of ethics - in a very in-depth and constructive way.