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## Book Review: Ethics in Social Science Research: Becoming Culturally Responsive. Maria K. E. Lahman. California: SAGE Publications, Inc. 2018.290

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# **Book Review: *Ethics In Social Science Research: Becoming Culturally Responsive*. Maria K. E. Lahman. California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018. 290 pages.**

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## **Overview**

In her book *Ethics in Social Science Research: Becoming Culturally Responsive*, Maria Lahman, a U.S. university research ethics board member (Institutional Review Board [IRB]) and/or co-chair for a decade and a half, writes in a personable voice to make her work feel inclusive. This book is designed to assist the curriculum of two types of courses: (a) ethics courses aimed at teaching students about social science research experiences; and (b) courses where “diversity, equity, privilege, and positionality” (p. xiii) play an important role.

Central to this book is the role that power and culture play in determining what ethical research practices are (post IRB approval), who is “vulnerable,” and how “vulnerable” is defined. This book also argues that researchers ought to *become* exemplars of the three R’s: culturally responsive, relational, and reflexive people who view vulnerable populations as “capable and competent yet vulnerable” (p. 13). In other words, Lahman argues that no matter the researcher’s motive or intent, he or she must be aware of two things: (1) the research process impacts vulnerable

participants; and (2) inevitable, unanticipated, and unique ethical dilemmas will be encountered during the research process.

The first four chapters explore an ethical framework and the concept of the “Other.” Research ethics is defined as, “... formalized curiosity—poking and prying with a purpose into what is good, bad, right, or wrong in research” (p. 4), and it is emphasized frequently that IRB approval is only an assessment of the researcher’s *intent*, not the researcher’s practice. Therefore, Lahman calls for an ethical standard deemed “aspirational ethics” (p. 25) which combines the ethics of caring for humanity with ethical, responsible research.

Synthesizing the ideas of the three R’s and aspirational ethics, Lahman presents her ethic of care: culturally responsive, relational, and reflexive ethics (CRRRE [p. 31]). CRRRE reminds researchers that culture is a shifting construct and that differences ought to be continually discussed and validated in order to respect the dynamics between world views, power balances, and research methods.

The Other is also explored in the first four chapters. The Other is someone who is “thought to be different from oneself or from the mainstream” (Johnson et al. as cited in Lahman, p. 14); however, the Other is also “the way we identify ourselves in relation to others” (Johnson et al. as cited in Lahman, p. 15). The Other, then, makes for an interesting relationship between the researcher and the researched! As Lahman says, “Looking back across history, the relationship [between the researcher and the researched] may be described as the powerful (researcher) examining the exotic, unknown, unexplored, or Othered (participant)” (p. 15). The Other does not necessarily imply a vulnerable participant, but without understanding the concept of the Other, “Research may be utilized to better control the Other rather than to understand or improve the Other’s lives” (p. 15).

The last five chapters of the book focus on navigating how to research the following vulnerable groups through the lens of CRRRE: children, people who immigrate, people of diverse sexual orientation, people who are homeless, and people who are participants of visual and virtual research. Specific dilemmas are discussed for each group with a high emphasis on how language alters both our perceptions of vulnerable populations and our perceptions of research ethics.

### **Critical Examination**

Lahman has at least 15 years of formal experience working with research ethics, and, as a result, each word in this book carries significant weight. What stands out about this work, however, is the connection made between being an ethical person and

being an ethical researcher. It is stated many times that IRB approval is only an evaluation of intent, but in the end, how the researcher acts is what creates good or bad ethics. Similarly, in everyday life, intentions to “do good” or help others does not guarantee the upholding of dignity and respect for others. It is made clear, in fact, that researchers are people first; therefore, viewing this book as an everyday guide to being an ethical person is a practical connection to make. That said, there are some everyday topics noticeably underrepresented in this text.

Lahman acknowledges that the groups and topics about which she writes are connected to her personal experience, but the topics of race, people with physical or intellectual disabilities, and research done by vulnerable researchers are not given much attention. While it would be absurd to expect this text or any ethics text to cover *all* topics or *all* marginalized groups, adding any or all of the aforementioned topics would more deeply acknowledge the complexities of culturally responsive approaches to human research.

In summary, *Ethics in Social Science Research: Becoming Culturally Responsive* is an engaging and thought-provoking book. It adds to ethics and research literature in a way that honors participants and illuminates concepts to help guide students toward *becoming* ethically and culturally responsive researchers. This book is user-friendly and offers questions, resource links, an example syllabus, example ethical stances from students, and course activities to help with using this book as a teaching and learning tool.

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