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# Adventures of an Academic Pioneer: Getting Through the Ethics Review in a Foreign Land

## 異国での倫理審査体験を通して—研究上の先駆的な冒険

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This article is a reflective account of the experience of two non-Japanese academics in Japan, a postgraduate student and his supervisor, as they undergo the ethics review process at a Japanese university. As we do this, we will first consider two incidents that occurred during the ethics review process. The first concerns the confusions and misunderstandings involved in the application to submit research plans to the office responsible for the ethics review process at the university. The second is about the communication breakdown and related issues that occurred after a senior professor offered assistance to the postgraduate student and his advisor at a crucial stage in the ethics review process. This is followed by a comparison with the submission, one year later, of another ethics review application. By reflecting on these events, we found evidence of miscommunication between all parties involved, attributable to social, relational, linguistic, and cultural factors, but perhaps above all due to a lack of sufficient communication. In light of this, the paper concludes with guidance for those involved in ethics review applications, especially in cross-cultural settings: lessons for students, supervisors, and ethics review administrators.

本論文は、日本在住の二人の外国人研究者が、所属する大学の倫理委員会での審査プロセスで経験した問題点について記録している。大学院生とその指導教官が、研究のための倫理審査プロセス中に発生した2つの問題点を取り上げた。一点目は、大学の倫理審査プロセスを担当するオフィスでの研究計画を提出するための申請に伴う混乱と誤解に関するものである。二点目は、倫理審査プロセスの重要な段階で、同じ審査をすでに経験した別の教授が、大学院生と指導教官に支援を提供した後に発生した問題について論じる。続いて、その1年後に行われた別の倫理審査申請書の提出との比較が行われる。これらの出来事を振り返ることにより、関係するすべての当事者間の誤解の要因が明らかにされた。それらの誤解は、社会的、関係的、言語的、文化的といった様々な要因が関係するが、おそらく根本的な要因は、十分なコミュニケーションの欠如に起因すると思われる。これらの経験を踏まえ結論では、特に異文化環境での倫理審査申請のプロセスにおいて、学生、指導教官、およびオフィスでの倫理審査管理者と、関係する人々すべてが学べる助言を提案する。

### Keywords

ethics review, critical incidents, collaboration, supervisor-student relationship, cultural expectations

倫理審査、危機的事例、共同研究、指導教員と学生の関係、文化的規範

**T**his paper recounts the experience of a Taiwanese-American doctoral student and his British-Australian supervisor in applying for approval of a research project by their Japanese university's ethics review committee. While proceeding through the ethics review for a research plan is familiar to many university faculty and postgraduate students around the world, a number of factors make this particular experience worthy of attention. First, at the university that is the scene of this paper, the ethics review committee had only recently been formed. Second, with the doctoral student and the supervisor both from countries other than Japan, familiarity with the administrative culture and language of this part of the university was limited. Combined, these circumstances resulted in various misunderstandings and troubles, many of which were cultural or linguistic in nature.

While this paper will largely take a narrative approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), we will focus mainly on two critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954) that occurred during the process of submitting a research proposal to the newly formed ethics committee at our university: an inter-

action with the staff of the office that served as intermediary between the researchers and the ethics committee itself, and an episode with a professor who had already submitted research to the ethics committee and who offered to help the postgraduate student. Through reflective interviews with those involved, together with emails exchanged at the time, our goal through this paper is for the reader to experience something of the unsettling confusion and conflicting emotions that we felt at that time. For this reason, our approach will be first to present the educational context and those involved in this experience, then to report the incidents as viewed by the people involved before seeking to interpret these from a more theoretical perspective.

## Outline

The Background section will describe the human and educational context of this paper: the individuals involved and the specific context of this story, the university and its newly founded ethics review system. We will then consider the wider context: the challenges of studying abroad at postgraduate level and the various types of support that may or may not be available to students as they prepare research proposals for submission to an ethics review committee. This will bring us to the two incidents that were pivotal parts of the process application for documents to prepare a research plan to submit to the ethics review committee: the process of preparing the required documentation, and the submission and processing of these documents. These will be reported through email exchanges at the time and retrospective interviews with the main people involved. As we reflect on the incidents and the interactions of which they were a part, we will refer to and consider the various social, relational, linguistic, and cultural elements that may give insights into what happened. One year later, as we once again prepared to submit a research plan for consideration by the ethics review committee, we were given the opportunity to learn from our experiences, to observe how the context has changed, to change our behaviours, and to reflect on what we have learned. This reflection takes the form of two independently written conclusions by the postgraduate student and his supervisor, written in recognition that our stances and perspectives will necessarily be different, and that these differences may provide useful insights. The paper will conclude with suggestions for postgraduate students, supervisors of such students, and administrators involved with ethics committee proposals.

## Background

First, we need to introduce the protagonists: the doctoral student Stachus Peter Tu and his PhD supervisor, Jim Ronald. After this, we will describe the setting: their academic environment and the newly established ethics review committee at their university.

Stachus is a Taiwanese-American in his late twenties, studying English pragmatics with his advisor, Jim, as a doctoral student at a middle-sized provincial Japanese university. At first glance, as an “Asian westerner”, in Japan most people assume that Stachus is Japanese. He grew up in the United States and is fluent in written and spoken English and relatively fluent in spoken Chinese. Having studied Japanese then lived in Japan for around six years in total, he is also a proficient user of spoken Japanese, sufficient for everyday needs, and while Japanese language courses he took during his Bachelor’s degree help him in his reading of Japanese, the writing of appropriate, error-free Japanese texts is usually beyond him. Stachus added that although he may have the sufficient language ability to communicate in Japanese, the majority of the difficulties he faces are cultural. While he has been in Japan for years, he still lacks the knowledge of “how things are done” in Japan, particularly when faced with new situations. Jim is an Australian who grew up in England and first came to Japan at the age of 27. He started teaching in the Department of English of this university over 20 years ago, and has been

supervising postgraduate students at Master's level for the past few years. Stachus is his first doctoral student. Like Stachus, he is a fairly proficient user of nonformal, nontechnical spoken Japanese, but his ability in reading and writing Japanese is significantly lower and might be compared to that of Japanese children in their second or third year of elementary school. Also, similarly to Stachus, he still struggles with how to deal with unfamiliar situations.

Stachus and Jim get on well and, as well as meeting in an academic context as postgraduate student and supervisor, meet at church or socially. Despite this, neither of them finds it easy to talk about continuing concerns or issues relating to the PhD studies, such as what each expects of the other, but recognize this and are committed to improving it. It remains a work in progress. In fact, the planning and co-writing of this paper has been a vehicle for their development in this area.

This story took place in a small to middle-sized provincial liberal arts university in the western half of Japan, with a total student population of a little over 6,000 students. Of these, there are under 100 postgraduate students studying in a total of six graduate schools that are extensions of five of the university's six faculties. The vast majority of postgraduate students are enrolled on Master's courses, and there are typically no more than two or three doctoral students in the whole university. If we were to categorize the university as a research-focused or teaching-focused institution, it would undoubtedly be on the teaching side of the line. As an example, although the personal research budget allotted to each faculty member is influenced by the amount of research conducted in the previous few years, there is little other pressure on faculty members to publish.

The university's ethics review committee was only established one month prior to Stachus's initial enquiry, following the university's addition of a Food Science Department, research for which absolutely requires an ethics committee. It was at his PhD program entrance examination interview that Stachus first received information about this, when one professor recommended that for his research he should proceed through the newly formed ethics committee. Until this time, there had been no formal guidelines or supervision regarding ethical considerations of research conducted with students at the university or by faculty or students of the university. This continues to be true for most research conducted by students at any but the doctoral level, and, as a rule, by faculty as well.

## The Bigger Picture

In order to understand the wider context, we begin by considering the ethics review process in Japan. Following this, we reflect on the life of postgraduate students studying abroad. After this, we note the lack of support and guidance available for those who are in Japan. Lastly, we explain something of the complexity of the teacher-student relationship.

While many other countries may be stricter about research ethics, Japan generally, and the university in this case, has been slow to set up an ethics review committee or even to give any guidelines on research ethics such as informed consent for research conducted with students. Although the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology stated the goal of ensuring that some form of research ethics review committee would be established in all universities nationwide by 2015 (MEXT, 2014), to date only national universities and medical schools have uniformly established ethics committees, paired with systems to educate researchers regarding the ethics of conducting research. Private universities have shown a trend of being slow to meet this mark (MEXT, 2015).

Postgraduate studies are, for many, a step into the unknown, a journey not shared with many of their friends or others close to them. Postgraduate studies in a foreign country, dealing with a foreign culture and language, may be a couple of steps beyond that. However, these

circumstances are by no means exceptional, and there are many countries around the world where international students at postgraduate level may outnumber domestic students. In the UK, for example, over 50% of the 330,000 postgraduate students registered as full-time were from outside the UK for the 2017–2018 academic year (Bolton, 2019). In such circumstances, the postgraduate student from abroad may rely on various people or resources for academic guidance and support. These will include the postgraduate student's teachers, including his or her supervisor(s). Peers also play an important role, particularly those one or two years ahead who have already gone through what the student is facing, and especially those following the same course of studies and with a shared language and culture. Other sources of help may include university non-teaching staff, with or without specific responsibilities for postgraduate or international students. Paper or online guides, lists of frequently asked questions, even videos on Youtube may also be valuable support as a postgraduate student applies to the university's ethics review committee.

Imagine, though, circumstances in which none of this support is available. For the doctoral student and his supervisor, in a university with a very small postgraduate body and a brand new ethics review committee, there were no postgraduate peers to share their experience, nor was much guidance available from university faculty or from the office responsible. The difficulties experienced with the newness of the situation we were facing were compounded by conflicting cultural expectations of the various parties involved in the ethics committee submission process, the inexperience of the doctoral student and his supervisor with the process, and the language difficulties encountered in a culture in which there is much that is not directly expressed.

As we describe this process and seek to understand the various communication failures and misunderstandings of what was required, and by whom, we will include the perspectives gained through interviews with each of the parties involved. First, it may be worth taking a step back and asking what the nature and purpose of this supervisor-PhD student partnership may be. A good starting point is the following description: "The idea of staff-student partnership implies shared responsibility and cooperative or collaborative action, in relation to shared purposes" (Levy, Little, & Whelan, 2011, p. 1). Although not put into words by us, this does accurately represent our understanding of the relationship. In addition, although we, the supervisor and doctoral student, had already worked together for two years, there were still times of hesitation when we doubted the other's judgment of how to proceed, both because neither of us grew up in Japan and because of conflicting expectations of our respective roles or responsibilities. Each factor, although not unique in itself, combined to form a unique situation that required us both to adapt and learn, in order to get their research plans approved in time. Trust, too, is an important aspect of the relationship, but this, too, is complex. Self-doubt is a natural part of facing a new endeavour, whether taking on doctoral studies or taking on the supervision of a doctoral student.

Derounian (2011), investigating the process of completing undergraduate dissertations, notes the various clashes "of very different personalities, styles, expectations and perspectives on learning" (p. 92) as well as differing attitudes and values that are part of the relationship and interaction between the student and supervisor. He also points to the pressures of academic demands such as deadlines. The differing cultural norms and assumptions that he identifies between any supervisor and student may well be accentuated when they are from different cultural backgrounds, and having to supervise or study, as in this case, in a third culture. As for stressful circumstances negatively impacting communication and relationships, this too was an important aspect of the experience of getting through the process of submitting an acceptable research plan to the ethics committee.

## Incident 1: Submitting a Research Plan.

As Stachus and Jim were working on Stachus's research plan, for a replication of a study of English learners' responses to each other's statements about various discussion topics, we started planning the period over which the study would be conducted. We then realized that Stachus would need to submit his research plan for approval by the newly formed ethics review committee as soon as possible. In line with his belief that students should do such things themselves, as part of their academic development, Jim instructed the postgraduate student to go by himself to ask for necessary documents at the university office that deals with this. Stachus went to the office and, in Japanese, explained what he wanted to a visibly flustered member of staff, who printed out the forms and gave them to him, without any explanation. After thanking her, he left, intending to fill out the forms. He started doing this, in Japanese, and realized that preparing the application on the printed forms was not appropriate. A couple of days later he returned to the office and spoke with the same staff member. He asked her how to access the digital files, and was told that his supervisor (Jim) had access to these and could forward them to him. Assuming, correctly, that his supervisor might be unaware of the availability of the documents via the university server or how to access them, he arranged to meet a Japanese professor whose classes on SLA research he was auditing, to talk about the application process for the ethics review committee. He had heard that she had already gone through the process and that her research plan had been the first to be approved by this new ethics review committee. He showed her his partly completed handwritten forms, and she printed out her recently approved submission then forwarded her completed files to him, thus providing both the digital forms he needed to complete and her own submission to serve as a kind of template. We will focus on this aspect of the application further in Incident 2.

We will consider in further detail some of the background of what happened before reporting and reflecting on the views of the four main people involved: the two office staff, the student, Stachus, and the supervisor, Jim.

In fact, the first two times Stachus visited the office dealing with submissions of research plans for approval by the ethics review committee, the member of staff he spoke with was not the one responsible for this particular work. As her colleague was not present, she printed out the required documents, but could do little else as she was largely unfamiliar with the process. She also seemed confused to see the postgraduate student coming alone to the office, since the office would deal almost exclusively with faculty members, and even doctoral students do not typically conduct research in their own name but under the name of the "principal researcher", their supervisor. Although this may vary depending on the university, Stachus and Jim's university generally requires this. Her advice to the student to obtain the electronic files for the application from his supervisor may well have been a way of telling the student that his communication should be with his supervisor, and communication with the office staff should come from the student's supervisor. At that time, we had no sense of this possible interpretation of her instructions.

The interview with the office staff member responsible for ethics review committee applications, conducted after everything had been completed, was disarmingly frank and straightforward about the lack of readiness to deal with the postgraduate student's submission. The ethics review committee had been formed only one month before Stachus submitted his application, and this was one of the first submissions to be received, the first for a student's research project, and the first by someone who was not Japanese. As the office staff member explained, it was their intention to learn through the early applications, such as Stachus's, what they needed to do or what information or other support they would need to provide for future applicants.

The interview revealed a large gap in understanding between the office and Jim and Sta-

thus regarding responsibilities for the submission of a research proposal for consideration by the ethics committee. It also exposed a perhaps more worrying perception of these beliefs as being both common knowledge and common sense, so obvious that discussion was unnecessary. As the staff member explained, a student, even a doctoral student, is not considered qualified to submit a research proposal; it must be done in the name of their supervisor. Totally unaware of this requirement, and believing that making an application like this to be an important part of a student's development, Jim did not hesitate to send his student to ask for the necessary documents. These kinds of regulations may at first be considered as a form of gatekeeping, which is defined by the Online Collins English Dictionary as "the practice of controlling access to information, advanced levels of study, elite sections of society, etc.". In the ethics committee setting, this would be where there are rules set in place to effectively bar certain individuals from submitting. However, rather than any intention of those who were managing the ethics committee this feeling of being kept out may have been more caused by the frustration as we struggled to navigate this process. In effect, though, we lacked the agency to ask the questions that we needed to ask, due to the formality of the environment, fear of being misunderstood, fear of damaging relationships, and a wish to maintain a positive image in the eyes of the Japanese office.

Which brings us to the question of why the reaction of the office staff, on seeing the student alone, was not to ask that his supervisor come to the office. Even in the strictest of circumstances at a prestigious university such as Stanford University, an ethics review committee typically allows students to submit alone with the approval of an academic sponsor (see "IRB Medical Application Process"). Here, we may only surmise possible reasons. One is that if they saw the supervisor's necessary involvement as being obvious and beyond discussion then they might have inferred that the student's supervisor was aware of this but, for whatever reason, deliberately chose not to provide the documents nor accompany the student to apply for these. A further interpretation is that the office staff's response did actually include an implied request that the student's supervisor visit the office, but that this indirect request was not interpreted as such. With the differing status between professors and all but the most senior administrative staff, it would have been difficult to openly request the professor to come to the office. Instead, this may have been couched in indirect terms, through suggestions that the student consult his supervisor himself, who could in turn consult the office regarding requirements for submitting research plans and other documents for consideration by the ethics committee. However, if this was the intention of the office staff, it was not interpreted as a request of this type. As such, it is an example of pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983), in which the meaning of the intended message was lost.

Jintae and Peltokorpi (2013) report a study into the success or otherwise of cross-cultural adjustment by what they term self-initiated expatriates (as opposed to, for example, refugees). They note that self-estimated success at interaction adjustment largely correlated to two factors: proficiency in the working language of their companies and time spent in the country. Jim is a long-term resident of Japan and Stachus had also spent around five years in the country at the time of starting his PhD. In terms of language proficiency, both the supervisor and student are relatively proficient speakers of Japanese in nontechnical contexts. In the above incident, however, linguistic and cultural failings on both sides led to the confusion that resulted.

One further factor, that of pragmatic resistance, may have complicated matters and contributed to the undesirable outcomes damaging the relationships between the interactants and delaying the approval of the ethics committee. Ishihara (2008) defines pragmatic resistance as "deliberate avoidance of what they perceive as certain community norms that they are aware of and linguistically capable of producing" (p. 5). Both Jim and Stachus may have

been more or less consciously and deliberately refusing to behave in what they perceived as a Japanese way, which they felt to be inappropriate at doctoral level. In Jim's case, as Stachus's supervisor, this was manifested in his insistence on Stachus going to the office to enquire about the ethics committee alone, when he was aware that it might be the norm for supervisors to accompany their postgraduate students, or even to go on their behalf. In Stachus's case, he disliked the way in which he felt university office staff typically spoke to him, seeing it as condescending or patronizing. His response, typically, was to respond frostily, hoping to convey some kind of "Don't try to talk down to me!" message. In both cases, Jim's and Stachus's intentions were open to misinterpretation. Jim's attempt at developing his student's autonomy by sending him to the office may have been interpreted as laziness, ignorance, or deliberate uncooperativeness, while Stachus may simply have come across as aloof or ungrateful. This perception towards Jim and Stachus may be based on the tendency for students to depend on their upperclassmen to do certain things in Japan. The dependency of *kouhai* on their *senpai*, more easily expressed in English as the dependency of underclassmen on their upperclassmen, is common in Japan, and oftentimes expected. The office may have expected Jim, as a superior of Stachus, to assume the main role during the submission process.

## Incident 2: Help From a Senior Professor

A key interaction in the process was between the student and another professor, who had firsthand experience and knowledge of the ethics review committee process. She helped both the student and his supervisor through the process. She was not on this particular ethics review committee, but had already submitted a successful application herself, which is why Jim suggested that Stachus ask for her help. He did meet her, she looked at his preliminary research plan and informed consent forms then printed out the completed forms from her successful application from one month earlier. She also gave him the digital files of the completed forms.

It was at this point that the second incident occurred, in which Stachus adapted the content of the professor's forms, keeping the language largely the same but adding the content of his own proposed study. Although no records of conversations concerning this incident were made at the time, email exchanges between Stachus and that professor were kept, and these will be the principal source of information regarding the incident. One year later, the student met her to have a discussion to shed light on the circumstances of the incident. The discussion was conducted by looking together through the emails that were exchanged and discussing how each party perceived the problem at the time. Specific interactions as recorded in the email exchanges below were deemed to be the most significant.

### *Interaction 1.*

The first interaction was reported in the following email exchange. Some parts of the emails referred to different matters and are omitted.

Email sent by the student to the professor:

*Thank you very much for your assistance with the Ethics Committee forms. I was wondering if you could check my completed forms for any problems at your convenience before I submit them to the Ethics Committee? I would be very much obliged. I have attached the files to this email.*

Professor's reply:

*I have a look at your proposal. Your research plan seem to have yet to be designed well enough to be submitted to the ethical committee. This may be because you try to fit your research into*



*my theoretical framework. The reason why I gave you my documents is nothing but showing you how to deal with ethical problems. The first you should do is to establish YOUR theoretical framework. Design your research in the framework and write it precisely so that the readers (non-specialists) can understand the study procedure. After establishing the plan, list up what ethical problems your research may create. Then think how you can alleviate the problems. Please find attached two documents with my comments inserted.*

Regarding this initial interaction, she described her reaction on seeing Stachus's research plan that he sent her as one of "shock". She had given him a copy of her own documents for him to refer to only to find that he had left much of her wording intact as he inserted his own ill-fitting plans. Behind this was the reality that the level of academic Japanese language in the professor's research plan had seemed so high that Stachus felt that he would be unable to produce anything comparable correctly for his own application, which he assumed had to be submitted in Japanese. As an aspect of possible gatekeeping, Stachus assumed that the application needed to be done in Japanese, in order to be viewed positively and to fit perceived expectations that he assumed existed within the Japanese academic space. Although the ethics committee application had just recently been established and Stachus was a pioneer, this sense of "wanting to fit in" resulted in him not asking whether the application could be submitted in English. As a result, Stachus assumed that the professor was the only person who could lead him through the process, since the professor was a Japanese academic and had already submitted an application. The only way he felt he could produce something approaching what was required was to try to fit his own plan into hers, using the text from her application wherever possible.

Incidentally, due to the above language difficulties, Jim's wife also helped with the translation process of the research plan that was finally accepted. Although she was not working at the university and had no obligation to assist in any way, her contribution played a key role.

## ***Interaction 2***

The following discussion will consider the involvement of the supervisor following Interaction 1, in which the first Japanese draft of the research plan had been sent to the Japanese professor. Parts of the emails deemed to be important and relevant in this email exchange are provided below.

(Jim)

*I have just talked briefly with [the professor]. She is concerned that you have imitated her theoretical background for her study for yours, even though it doesn't match your own plans. I misunderstood - thought you were just using the model. Do you understand the problem, and how to resolve it? She said you haven't responded to her email yet - can you do that? Look forward to talking - later today? Could you bring a copy of the documents for us to look over? When are you free this afternoon?*

(Stachus)

*Thanks for contacting me. I'm still working on fixing my research proposal. Initially i tried to fit my plan into hers because I thought that was the format we were supposed to write it, in terms of the Japanese lingo. I've reverted it back to my original translation but it will take a bit of time, it's still in the works - I need to get someone to check the Japanese. I was intending on responding to her email after I finished correcting everything - I have just done that. Today is a*

*bit difficult – would Friday work? I have attached what I have completed now in this email. I can respond to emails until then.*

(Jim)

*It would be worth sending a quick reply to say that you understand and are working on it. From what I understood, it isn't the format that's the problem, but using the same theory / rationale as she did. Maybe the distinction wasn't clear to you. She was confused as to what you were doing. She is heading to Tokyo at the weekend, maybe earlier.*

(Jim's follow-up email)

*Could you send me the English version, and also [the professor's] one if you could? I need a clear understanding of what is needed. Also, if you can send me the version you sent to [her], it will give me an idea of what the problem is.*

(Stachus)

*Please find the English version of the research plan and the original copy I sent to [the professor] with her comments attached. The English version is not completely reflective of the new Japanese version I sent you in the previous email, as I directly added some parts in Japanese without directly translating from English to Japanese.*

(Jim)

*It's clearer to me, now. You tried to plug your plans into [hers], which are based in SLA. Do you have someone to check your translation?*

(Stachus)

*I'm going to see if [another Japanese] professor can check my translation once it's finished. I'll send you a draft of everything before that though.*

(Jim)

*Yes, asking him, or [another professor] would be a good idea. I wish I were able to help – and even to judge how the translation looks. Will you email him?*

(Stachus)

*Yes, planning on asking him via email soon. Have a good night!*

(Jim)

*If you don't hear from [the other professor], [my wife] could have a look at it for you. Let me know.*

(Jim's follow-up email)

*Have we gone through this together? We have a communication problem that we need to resolve. If you are not getting the help you need from me, you need to tell me. It looks like it refers too much to Chandrasegaran's paper. It's true that it's a replication, but the rationale is not quite the same – what has your study got to do with the composition classroom? Even for her, the rationale of this particular study was not how to improve students' expository writing but to see what support strategies were employed. (True, helping improve students' composition was the focus of her long-term project but not of this particular study).*

Looking over the communication above, it is worth considering that cultural similarity may be just as difficult to adjust to as cultural dissimilarities (Selmer & Lauring 2009, p. 434). Beyond a university's international affairs center, many Japanese offices may not perceive

a need to provide other language support, since the majority of the student body consists of Japanese students. The international student body itself may be the biggest support for the international students, where foreign students navigate the system together and help each other along the way. The relationship between any student and supervisor may be seen as its own “culture”, since their interactions form a unique relationship. Although Stachus and Jim had worked together for more than two years, the adjustment to this particular “culture” may have been just as difficult as their adjustment to the culture of a Japanese university. Although there were similarities between their respective cultures, this may have underestimated the effort required to adjust to each other even after two years of being in a supervisor–postgraduate student relationship. This means that there were still possibilities of communication mishaps. In the incident described above, Stachus did not seek the help he felt he needed, which was an expectation from Jim, and this did not become clear until Incident 2 with the Japanese professor.

An interview with the professor involved in Incident 2 was conducted one year later. Looking back, she felt that the incident was primarily an academic problem resulting from the ethics review procedure being just newly established, from linguistic problems on Stachus’s side, and from some cultural problems involving the need for and presence of an ethics review committee and education related to it. When Stachus first asked for help, even though the professor was not his supervisor, she said that she was very happy to help because she realized that she was probably the only faculty in the department who could offer advice on this issue. She also believed the problems encountered could have been avoided had there been a system established to educate graduate students about ethical issues in applied linguistics research: that if students have a clear understanding of the importance and necessity of the ethical review process, such problems could be avoided. She also believed that the Faculty of Humanities should be more aware of this issue, and that the Faculty should strive to establish a better support system for graduate students. She did not think the problems were resolved satisfactorily in this case due to the fact that Stachus has felt lost, without sufficient guidance. According to her, this may indicate something unsatisfactory in the system. However, she believed that the process that they went through was not wasted time, but actually gave Stachus a precious opportunity to think about ethical issues and his research design as a doctoral student. She also believed that there were communication difficulties between herself, Jim, and Stachus because she was not aware of the confusion the student was experiencing while working on the ethics committee application. She was also not aware that the student would face difficulties in reading the academic Japanese of her application materials. She felt that there should have been more face-to-face discussion. She felt that, more importantly, the underlying problem was the lack of awareness of ethical issues among both faculty and graduate students. She pointed out that all of these incidents meant that there was a need for more education to inform students of the role of an ethics committee at the university and concerning publishing research internationally. She also provided the student with a book to read, called *Second Language Research: Methodology and Design*, especially the section on ethics, which she felt should be read by all students before writing anything. Her belief is that this would help the development of the ethics committee and all other postgraduate students in the Department.

We will now go on to Stachus’s reflections after Incident 2, as recorded in an interview conducted by another postgraduate student using questions developed by Stachus and Jim. Stachus felt that the time taken on the entire ethics committee process far exceeded his expectations. He had expected the whole process to only take from two days to a week, whereas the actual time spent on the process from start to finish was a total of two months. He was not prepared for the seriousness of the process as he had thought it was going to be only a

formality, most likely only requiring him to get the forms signed and approved. He felt that the administrative office responsible for receiving the application for passing on to the ethics committee did not seem supportive. He was given the impression that the “gatekeepers”, the ethics committee itself, was composed of the office staff he met, which was not true. It was not until the interview one year later with the Japanese professor who had helped him that he was told that the actual ethics committee consisted of professors who evaluated all of the forms included in the application, not anyone in the office that accepted the documents. This information was not clear to the student, especially when the Japanese professor had told him that he needed to write his application in simpler layperson terms. This had led him to assume that it was not professors in his field who would be looking at his submissions but office staff, who may not have been able to cope with technical or academic Japanese. It also seemed to Stachus that the office assumed that he had access to all the forms and information he needed and should not have needed to ask for them. He also had the impression that the office did not expect or feel the need to deal directly with students visiting the office unaccompanied, since the office usually deals with faculty.

## Stachus Looking Back

Stachus was happy to a certain degree that there was an official ethics committee to approve research plans since it would satisfy a likely requirement for this by journals he may submit work to in the future. He had been unaware of this possible requirement before the process. He described his experiences throughout the process as feeling “lost”. When he first went to seek information from the office that received submissions for the ethics committee, he did not know that he was not talking to the right person. He was confused as to why the staff member seemed confused, since he was under the impression that this was the job of the people in this office, and they should know what to do. In fact, this one office has responsibility for various different matters, including managing the university’s journals, coordinating volunteer activities, or dealing with extension courses, with staff assigned to a primary responsibility for one of these. In case of absence, however, they all cover for each other, as in this case.

At the time, Stachus described the whole ethics committee as feeling like a “roadblock”. He felt that the difficulties, delays and obstacles experienced in submitting, then revising his application were somehow deliberate. His feelings towards Jim as his supervisor were also ambivalent. He felt that since Jim was also new to the process, he could not guide him adequately. At the same time, Jim, the Japanese professor, and Jim’s wife were his main comforts and supports during the submission process. As a study on academic professions in higher education from Singapore points out (Lee, 2003, p. 135), in each society academics hold multiple roles, from conducting research, to teaching, and to carrying out administrative or managerial duties at their universities. Jim played the main support role throughout the process and devoted a large amount of his time to helping the student but was not able to provide the information or insights that Stachus needed. His main worry then had been that the process would last too long, and that there would not be sufficient time to conduct the planned research. He felt that he had lost confidence in whether the application might be approved in time for him to conduct his research as planned. He was worried that it would affect others who were involved, including his supervisor and another professor who had offered to help with data collection. Stachus felt that his supervisor had devoted an enormous amount of time to assisting him throughout the process. He also felt that his supervisor’s wife contributed a lot of her time even though she had no obligation to help.

## Jim Looking Back

Looking back, Jim had felt out of his depth, and unable to be an adequate supervisor for Stachus through most of the process of gaining the approval of a research plan by the ethics review committee. His written Japanese is very limited, even in comparison with Stachus, who grew up able to read and write in Chinese and so was familiar with much of the Japanese writing system. He also had no previous experience of ethics review committees himself, and while research that he had conducted did take care to obtain informed consent from student participants, this had been done without reference to any review committee or similar. Stachus was his first doctoral student, and as supervisor he was aware that much would need to be learned as he and Stachus proceeded. He was very grateful for the assistance given by the Japanese professor to Stachus in guiding him and providing him with copies of her ethics review board application documents. He was also very embarrassed to hear that Stachus had copied large parts of the professor's application to use in his own, and apologized profusely to the professor for this. She was very understanding and seemed to feel sympathy for Stachus's struggle to complete all the documents in, for him and for Jim, a foreign language. Although Jim believes in theory that struggles such as those experienced through these incidents and the overall process are an invaluable source of wisdom, in practice at the time he only felt a mixture of embarrassment and frustration: with himself, with Stachus, with the office managing the ethics review documents, and with the whole process.

## One Year Later...

One year later, Stachus went to the same office, spoke to the same staff, and again submitted a research plan for consideration by the ethics committee. This time he was accompanied by Jim as his supervisor, and we were greeted by smiling staff who printed out the application form and documents that explain the process of submitting a research plan to the ethics review committee as well as providing the digital files. This time, the documentation for the forms was provided in English, and we were able to submit the research plans in English, too. The planned research was projected to start three months after the submission of the plan, and so we felt that we would have ample time to get through this process in time, despite possible objections to some aspects of the plans.

In the intervening year, Jim had been involved in the translation of the ethics review documents, and had also been a member of ethics committees for two further research projects himself. He had also developed better relationships with the office staff, meeting and talking socially as well as helping with proofreading of materials for various purposes. Perhaps as importantly, he had learned a lot through the previous year's experience of that first application with Stachus. That experience had also made both Stachus and Jim be more honest with each other regarding areas in which they felt ill equipped or lacking in confidence. This, too, has helped create a stronger basis for working together.

One year later, Stachus felt more positive towards the office but still resented the fact that a lot of time had been wasted on the previous application. This year's application was much more straightforward because he knew who to talk to and had access to the documents required for submission. He also had a better idea of how long the process would take, about two months, and so applied three months before the planned research. Stachus imagined that other non-Japanese researchers applying in the future would have an easier experience since many of the problems he encountered with his initial application had been resolved, and was glad that his struggles one year earlier had not been for nothing.

One final incident occurred when the postgraduate student handed over the completed forms and other documentation. The staff member asked in Japanese, ファイルを持っていますか –

*Do you have the file(s)?* This is a very common form of indirect request in Japanese, as in English, and the staff member was asking for the computer files for the completed documents. Stachus's response was almost to panic, as though the utterance had caused a flashback or something was blocking his understanding of the request. Straight after, talking together about how the submission went this time, he explained that he thought that the staff member might be saying that the documents should be submitted in a plastic file, and that without this they could not be accepted.

Although much of the process of preparing and submitting research plans for the ethics review committee has become much easier, this little file incident is an indication of Stachus's continuing feeling of "us vs. them" and fear of opposition and deliberate delay rather than cooperation. His continued use of the term "roadblock" or "roadblocking" when problems with this latest application were brought to our attention by the staff of the office which relays applications to the ethics review committee are also indicative that not everything is settled yet. What this little incident revealed to both of us was that, although so much has improved, perhaps most of all in the relationships among those involved, we are still learning. For this reason, we hope the *Lessons for students/supervisors/administrators* will help those involved in the process.

## Lessons for Students

When you are going through the process of submitting a research proposal to your university's ethics review board or similar, expect it to be a struggle somewhere along the way. It may feel that there are deliberate obstacles to progressing through this stage of research, but in fact very often what may be holding you back are your hesitations to express yourself or to ask questions. In other words, do not let the fact that you are a student, a foreigner, not a fluent speaker, or relatively young keep you from asking questions you need to ask. It is true that there may be people who will be less helpful than they could be, but it is largely up to you to find the best way to proceed. Without communicating problems, students cannot expect others to guess what they need! When confronted with deadlines or difficulties, always ask for help. In short: Know thyself, know what you don't know, and ask for help! Push for help if you don't get it at first. Don't rush deadlines without asking for assistance.

Learning *how* to say what needs to be said is vital—this is the power of pragmatics as an enabler of agency. There are two linguistic goals here: conveying your needs or problems, and keeping a good working relationship with your supervisor and other university staff. For example, how do you tell your supervisor that it's his or her job to go to the office with you, or even rather than you? How do you remind him or her that the deadline is approaching fast and that things need to be done? How do you respond to the office staff's "The person in charge is not here now"? How do you ask questions about the application, when those questions may show how little you know, how bad your proficiency in the language is, how naive you are? How do you voice your fears and receive reassurances that submitting your application in English will not delay its consideration or prejudice its chances of approval? How do you apologize when there are misunderstandings? If you are not confident about how to express all these things best, who can you go to for help—a friend, a teacher, a parent? And how do you ask them?

One more matter concerns time. Take your time to reflect on the best way to proceed, to inform yourself well and consider your options. But do not just hesitate and do nothing, hoping that it will just work out. A more likely outcome of this hesitating paralysis is that you will not finish in time, or that you won't do as good a job as you could, and this hesitation may cost you financially, career-wise, or in damaged relationships.

## **Lessons for Supervisors**

As a supervisor of postgraduate students, you will typically have reasons for proposing one course of action rather than another. Communicate your motives behind your instructions. For example, when sending/telling students to do things by themselves, communicate that you want students to develop the ability to be independent, but that you are there to help. Supervisors also need to understand that postgraduates are not only working with a limited set of skills, but a limited set of resources. These include ease of contact with university colleagues, and ability to make decisions. Postgraduates do not have as much access to resources, particularly authority and connections. In these two areas, supervisors must help their students. As supervisors, any help they provide for their students is always helpful. In short: Be aware of how postgraduates, because of their status, are inherently limited in what they can do. Remember that any help is always appreciated and absolutely needed.

Is your student able to say no, or to suggest an alternative? Is he or she able to point out your mistakes? Or to suggest that what you want them to do is really your job? If not (and if he or she never does, that may mean they cannot), what can you do to enable them to do this? Do you have access to important information, skills, or resources that your student does not? Can you help with these? Find out yourself, then share that information. In your position, is “I don’t know” a good enough response?

You might have conflicting motives for how you behave: one to make your student’s life easy, the other to not spare them from challenges that will help them grow. But these may not be either/or choices but, rather, two extremes along a continuum. For example, rather than just sending your student unannounced to the office that manages the ethics review process, you could go there first and explain the situation, ask who your student should speak to, and when would be a good time for your student to visit. You can also explain your reasons for sending the student to make these enquiries, to reassure the office that you are not just being lazy, shirking your responsibilities, or avoiding the challenge yourself.

## **Lessons for Administrators**

If the ethics review process is new, let the applicants know that it is. Do not try to defend your lack of experience or the lack of information available. Do not assume that postgraduate applicants or their supervisors understand the entire process. Be helpful and open to questions. In the case of international postgraduate applicants, try to put yourself in their shoes and do not expect them to know everything about how things should be done. In short: Don’t be defensive, do be understanding, and do be transparent.

Your job is not to be a gatekeeper, but to be a facilitator. Many administrators have a good sense of these things, and even if not seeing it from the student’s perspective, aim to do what they can to help, to communicate well, and to develop a good working relationship with the applicants. The international graduate student’s position is precarious: they are in a position of weakness. They are aware of this, and administrators need to be, too. For example, if they ask a question, such as “When will he be in the office?”, please don’t take it as a complaint, even if it sounds like it. Give international students the benefit of the doubt in this regard. If they appear to make unreasonable demands or sound bossy, the most likely reason is that they do not know a better way to express themselves. To help, you can initiate, offer, without waiting to be asked.

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