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Ethical Dilemmas of Conducting Research Among Precarious Status Migrants: Research Ethics Boards and Beyond

ERIKA BORRELLI
University of Windsor, Canada

TANYA BASOK
University of Windsor, Canada

ABSTRACT *In Canada, research is governed by national ethical guidelines and standards enforced by institutional research ethics boards (REBs) to protect vulnerable populations, such as temporary migrant farmworkers. However, the rigid and inflexible application of these procedures often creates significant barriers for social science researchers striving to promote social justice for this population and may lead to antagonism between researchers and REB chairs. Institutional ethics frameworks frequently fail to account for the embeddedness of research within rural agricultural communities and the critical role these communities play in shaping ethical decision-making. When REBs overlook these relational and contextual dynamics, they impose requirements that can obstruct meaningful, on-the-ground ethical engagement. To illustrate these tensions, we focus on three challenges, namely, participant recruitment strategies, consent procedures, and protection from trauma. To avoid misunderstandings and antagonism, we call for a paradigm shift toward understanding research ethics as relations, that is, inherently embedded within complex networks of relationships, emphasizing iterative models of consent developed through ongoing negotiations between researchers, participants, and other community members. Bridging the gap between ethical research in theory and practice requires a relational paradigm that recognizes the need to mitigate hostilities and antagonism and emphasizes the importance of collaboration and dialogue – not only among academics, migrants, and community stakeholders but also between researchers and REB members.*

KEYWORDS migrant farm workers; research ethics; qualitative research; interview ethics

Correspondence Address: Erika Borrelli, Graduate Program in Sociology & Social Justice, University of Windsor, Windsor, ON, N9B 3P4; email: borrelle@uwindsor.ca

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Introduction

Universities govern the conduct of their employees by compelling them to align their behaviour with the universities' priorities and values, such as academic entrepreneurship and accountability (Cannizzo, 2016). In their role as "ethical academy," universities employ a multiplicity of regulations and policies that set standards of ethical behaviour, encourage compliance through self-regulation (Cannizzo, 2016), and outline procedures for censoring what is deemed as misconduct (Tesar et al., 2023). Among other forms of conduct, research is guided by elaborate ethical rules. In Canada, Research Ethics Boards or REBs are responsible for ensuring that researchers comply with the ethical research framework, such as the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans – TCPS 2* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022). Like other ethics review boards, such as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the U.S., REBs play a pivotal role in enforcing standards based on fundamental ethical principles such as respect for persons (including voluntariness, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity), promoting beneficence (moral obligation to do good), and ensuring justice (equitable distribution of research benefits and burdens). While it is vital to ensure that ethical guidelines are respected, we argue in this article that at times, REBs impose rigid rules and strict procedures that are blind to the imperatives of social justice research and may force academics to sacrifice important objectives.

Research with migrants, particularly those who lack secure legal status, is prone to the tensions between ethical obligations toward researching vulnerable populations and adhering to certain institutional ethical norms that govern qualitative research (Hernández et al., 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2007; McLaughlin & Alfaro-Velcamp, 2015). This article focuses on research among temporary migrant farmworkers in Canada that we and many others have conducted over several decades. Unlike other migrant populations like refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrant newcomers, temporary migrant farmworkers enter Canada on closed, employer-tied work permits, which restricts their ability to change employers or transition to permanent residency (Basok, 2004; McLaughlin & Hennebry, 2012; Rajkumar et al., 2012; Vosko et al., 2023). This legal framework renders them precarious, that is, it leaves them vulnerable to excessive disciplinary action by employers and immigration-related consequences, such as deportation, upon termination (Basok et al., 2014; Vosko, 2016). Given the precarity of migrant farmworkers' status in Canada, researchers are required to consider research methods and ways to protect these migrants from reprisals that may result from their participation in research projects. At the same time, in the context of migrants' precarity and embeddedness in remote rural communities, research on these migrants calls for certain methodological approaches that, at times, REBs find unacceptable.

In this article, we adopt a framework rooted in feminist relational ethics as an alternative to normative ethical theory (Guta et al., 2012; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Central to this perspective is the understanding that individuals are situated within intricate networks and relationships (Koggel et al., 2022). From this viewpoint, research is embedded in a set of relationships between researchers, participants, communities, funders, institutions and governments, that must be recognized to address ethical dilemmas in more complex and practical ways highlighting the importance of situating research ethics within these relationships by considering power imbalances and notions of trust (King et al., 1999). They propose a "relationships paradigm" for ethics review processes which would "emphasize interactions, power, responsibility, and contextual and historical considerations in examining moral issues" (King et al., 1999, p. 5). From the relational ethics perspective, we focus on three issues representative of the tensions between ethical commitments to research on vulnerable people, such as temporary migrant workers, and institutional research ethics frameworks: (1) participant recruitment strategies; (2) obtaining consent; and (3) protecting participants from trauma. We argue that by adhering to rigid interpretations of ethics, REBs may pose obstacles to social justice researchers. We therefore call for a greater understanding on the part of REB members of the challenges and contexts in which research on temporary migrant farmworkers occurs. We also call for a relational approach to negotiating research ethics between REBs and researchers.

In the first section of the article, we present an overview of the Canadian ethics review framework and the role played by REBs, identifying past and present challenges and measures taken to address them. In the section that follows, we describe the social environment in which research with temporary migrant farmworkers is conducted as a prelude to understanding the ethical dilemmas we discuss in the following three sections. Drawing on our experiences as well as published research, we provide examples of the tensions that may arise between the realities of conducting research with temporary migrant farmworkers and the strict applications of the ethics requirements by REBs. We demonstrate that by ignoring the relational aspects of this research and the iterative nature of consent, REBs prevent social justice research from being carried out. As an alternative, we present a relational approach to ethics review that strikes a balance between maintaining rigorous ethical standards and remaining attentive to the practical realities of qualitative migration research.

Research Ethics in Canada: Unified Framework, Fragmented Practices

In the 1990s, Canada's federal granting agencies – the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) – recognized the need for greater oversight of the ethical conduct of

federally funded research projects. This collaboration resulted in the publication of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS) in 1998, a set of guidelines governing research involving human participants across medicine, natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. These agencies jointly established the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (the Panel) and the Secretariat on Research Ethics with a mandate to interpret, promote, and guide the ongoing development of the TCPS.

Institutional REBs had previously developed independently, but this publication sought to create a unified policy and was the first nationally recognized ethical framework in Canada, requiring institutions receiving agency funding to review all research proposals involving human participants. REBs were granted the authority to approve, request modifications to, or reject proposed research under these guidelines. It is intended to ensure a proportionate and interdisciplinary assessment of the benefit-to-risk ratio of research.

Nevertheless, there were multiple complaints raised by researchers and REBs working with the new policy. For instance, social science researchers argued that a biomedical model was inappropriately and widely imposed on their discipline, causing low-risk research to undergo excessive scrutiny (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Special Working Committee [SSHWC], 2004). In response, the Panel held various consultations and meetings with scholars, REB members, and ethicists, and in 2010, a second edition of the policy (TCPS-2) was released.

The TCPS-2 highlighted three core principles: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice, with the addition of the latter being the most significant change from the previous edition. This introduced a groundbreaking emphasis on the equitable distribution of research benefits and burdens for participants. It also marked a departure from earlier ethical frameworks that focused primarily on minimizing harm rather than ensuring fairness and equity throughout the research process (see O'Neill, 2011). For instance, the TCPS-2 underscores that vulnerability is a complex and dynamic concept, emphasizing that vulnerable populations should neither be unjustly excluded nor inappropriately included in research. The revised version also places greater emphasis on distinguishing the standards that apply to different types of research, including separate chapters on qualitative research and clinical trials, a change largely informed by consultations with academics in the social and behavioural sciences (Millum, 2012; SSHWC, 2004).

While the updated TCPS-2 is a welcome improvement over its predecessor, significant variations still exist in the implementation of ethical guidelines, both between institutions and within them. For example, only some institutions in Canada require researchers to complete the Tri-Council's online course on ethical research (Stephenson et al., 2020). Additionally, ethics review processes and outcomes differ in areas such as submission methods, criteria for externally approved research, risk assessments, consent standards, and

processing times for applications (Page & Nyeboer, 2017; Stephenson et al., 2020; Trace & Kolstoe, 2017; Xie et al., 2024).

While some differences in REB reviews are reasonably expected due to the complexity of ethical decision-making (Friesen et al., 2019), major inconsistencies suggest that factors unrelated to ethics may be influencing outcomes. Egan et al. (2016) found that although REB members are generally confident in their knowledge of research ethics, they are only somewhat confident in their understanding of the TCPS-2 and therefore tend to rely more on personal values and professional experience. Cox et al. (2020) examined epistemic reasoning among REB members and found that they often rely on distal strategies, such as abstract reasoning, to assess potential risks and harms to participants in research proposals. One such strategy is "protective imagination" (p. 387), where REB members attempt to envision what a participant might experience. However, the authors note that these strategies often fail to align with the actual lived experiences of participants, resulting in epistemic gaps.

Moreover, there are notable differences in how REB members perceive their relationships with participants and researchers. Xie et al. (2024) found that while REB members emphasized their responsibility to protect research participants, fewer acknowledged this responsibility toward researchers and institutions. But when REB members did describe their relationship with researchers, the language they used was primarily authoritative and procedural. While this is largely consistent with the REB responsibilities outlined in the TCPS-2 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022), the mandate also emphasizes that "reflection[s] should involve an ongoing dialogue between REBs and researchers" (p. 23). Yet, the ethics review process is increasingly perceived by researchers as unsympathetic and unhelpful, especially when REB members propose revisions to research methods that are either unrealistic for their discipline or only marginally related to ethical concerns (Head, 2020; Sharpe & Ziemer, 2022).

There has been an ongoing debate about the regulation, governance, and increasing calls for the standardization of ethics review procedures, especially regarding their impact on researcher support, surveillance, censorship, and knowledge production (Dingwall, 2006, 2008, 2012; Haggerty, 2004; Stanley & Wise, 2010; Tierney & Corwin, 2007). Significant questions persist about the extent to which the current ethics review process effectively captures the dual role of researchers: adhering to federally governed and institutionally monitored ethical frameworks and guidelines, or "research-in-theory," and the employment of specific expertise, skills, or approaches that enable ethical practices in real-world settings, or "research-in-practice." As Fisher (1997) aptly notes, "the practice of science without guidance from ethical principles is morally blind, but the establishment of federal guidelines without relevance to real-world application will be empty" (p. 2).

Various authors remain steadfast in their calls for greater standardization in Canada's ethics review practices to address persistent challenges, such as

ensuring timely, discipline-appropriate reviews and consistent application of the TCPS-2. These recommendations have included calls for more targeted and standardized training for REB members (Xie et al., 2024), regulated checklists and procedures to streamline reviews (Page & Nyeboer, 2017), and uniform criteria for evaluating external research proposals (Stephenson et al., 2020).

While we agree that these elements are crucial, we emphasize the need to enhance the relational aspect of the review process. The TCPS-2 has made significant strides in providing guidelines for ethical dilemmas in discipline-specific research and qualitative designs. However, the current framework remains anchored in an anticipatory, pre-study review model, which does not fully allow researchers to reassess and adapt methods and strategies as ethical challenges emerge (de Laine, 2000; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004; Mauthner et al., 2012; Roth & von Unger, 2018; Wiles, 2012). Consequently, an enduring concern for researchers, including ourselves, is the inherent unknowability of ethical dilemmas that REBs often presume to know authoritatively (Cox et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2024). This issue becomes considerably pressing when conducting research with precarious and vulnerable migrant populations, such as temporary migrant farmworkers.

The Ethical Landscape of Conducting Research with Migrant Farmworkers in Canada

Temporary migrant farmworkers enter Canada through state-regulated temporary migration programs, such as the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) and the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP). While these programs provide authorized entry for migrants, mainly from the Global South – most commonly Jamaica, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and the Philippines – they also create precarious legal statuses by restricting authorization to "seasonal" or temporary terms (Basok, 2004; Basok et al., 2014; Goldring, 2010; Goldring & Landolt, 2013; Vosko, 2016). This framework differentiates these workers from immigrant newcomers or refugees by denying them access to family reunification, immigrant settlement services, and most notably pathways to permanent residency (Goldring, 2010; Mullings et al., 2021; Rajkumar et al., 2012). Designed to address critical labour shortages in the agricultural sector, these programs also heavily restrict labour mobility, tying migrant farmworkers to single employers, thus creating a problematic link between their legal status and employment status.

Work in agriculture is often characterized as "3D" (dirty, dangerous, demeaning), exposing migrant farmworkers to precarious employment conditions (Vosko et al., 2003), occupational injuries and fatalities (Hansen & Donohoe, 2003), exploitative working conditions, and unsanitary living conditions (Hennebry et al., 2016; Mayell & McLaughlin, 2016). Furthermore, due to the industry's protection and enforcement norms grounded in farmworker exceptionalism, entitlements offered to migrants entering through

these legal channels are often undermined (Rodman et al., 2016; Tucker, 2012). This framework presents a double-edged sword, where migrant farmworkers are both essential to the agricultural sector yet hold precarious legal status and are precariously employed (Basok et al., 2014; Basok & Bélanger, 2016; Caxaj et al., 2023; Reid et al., 2021).

Given their precarity, conducting research with migrant farmworkers in Canada demands careful adherence to the ethical principles outlined in the TCPS-2, by both researchers and REBs. Researchers recognize that heightened ethical considerations and protections are required for those with precarious legal status to safeguard their confidentiality and privacy, given their susceptibility to deportation, detention, scrutiny, and social exclusion (Bloemraad & Menjívar, 2022; Düvell et al., 2010; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018, 2020). REBs, guided by the TCPS-2, acknowledge that contextual and structural factors significantly contribute to the vulnerability of certain populations. As such, they recognize that research proposals involving groups like migrant farmworkers present unique ethical complexities, particularly in areas such as recruitment, voluntary consent, and harm prevention. At the same time, they tend to ignore the fact that research with temporary migrant farmworkers is often embedded within communities, entangled in a network of complex relationships involving institutional, grassroots, academic, and community actors, all of which influence the framing and resolution of ethical dilemmas (King et al., 1999), as we discuss in the next section.

Relational Ethics in Migrant Farmworker Research: Embracing the Complexity of Community Dynamics

Conducting research with and reviewing ethics applications for projects that involve migrant farmworkers in Canada requires understanding their precarious legal status and the underlying policy framework, as well as their working and living environments and the relationships between key actors, such as employers, researchers, trusted community members and organizations (i.e., those individuals who advocate for wellbeing and justice for migrant workers), and migrant farmworkers (Caxaj et al., 2023; Doyle et al., 2006; George & Borrelli, 2023; see also Iglesias-Rios et al., 2023). Agricultural communities in Canada that house temporary migrant farmworkers are sites of both agricultural production and industry, as well as hubs of migration justice and advocacy. These communities are, therefore, comprised of a range of actors with varying loyalties, priorities, and perspectives on social justice research.

First, representatives of agricultural production and industry include agricultural employers, growers' organizations, political figures and governmental officials who all rely heavily on the community's identity as an agro-industry. Agricultural employers often harbour suspicion toward

researchers interacting with their employees (migrant farmworkers) due to concerns about potential revelations regarding subpar working and living conditions, and the potential repercussions of research publication. Consequently, employers actively discourage migrant farmworkers from engaging with outsiders or discussing their circumstances with anyone (Preibisch, 2010; Preibisch & Encalada Grez, 2010). This mechanism of control and inherent mistrust in the research process poses significant challenges for participant recruitment. Given their precarious legal status is contingent upon this employment relationship, migrant farmworkers are often cautious about engaging with researchers, even off the farms (Binford, 2013).

Second, other actors like growers' organizations and governmental officials, who hold considerable influence in these communities, may distrust researchers advocating for social justice, fearing the potential stigmatization of their community and industry, as we have encountered while negotiating possible research collaborations with these organizations. At times, growers express antagonism and overt and covert hostility toward researchers that can create significant hurdles for researchers seeking entry into communities to engage with workers.

To mitigate the potentially antagonistic environment, the relationships between researchers and trusted community members is crucial. Trusted community members, such as those who advocate for the well-being and justice of migrant farmworkers, including informal and formal service providers, NGOs, advocates, grassroots organizations, and churches, may be especially relevant in addressing some of these challenges. For instance, the support infrastructure for migrant farmworkers relies heavily on informal support from grassroots organizations and churches (Baig & Chang, 2020; Caxaj & Cohen, 2021; Caxaj et al., 2023; George & Borrelli, 2023), given the historical lack of government funding. People providing informal support have built trusting personal relationships with migrant farmworkers. These relationships are different from typical "client-consumer" dynamics characterized by power imbalances that exist in seemingly similar contexts, such as refugee camps where NGOs often have power over the distribution of certain resources and privileges (Mackenzie et al., 2007). By contrast, the contexts that shape the dynamics between informal community supporters and migrant farmworkers tend to be more horizontal and less hierarchical. We will now present three specific illustrations of how the institutional research framework and the corresponding requirements that neglect these relational aspects may pose significant challenges for research with migrant farmworkers.

Collaborative Recruitment Strategies

Decisions around the recruitment of study participants are closely bound up with questions of ethics and may be increasingly influenced by institutional

ethics requirements (Mauthner et al., 2012). Accessing migrant farmworkers in rural agricultural communities presents several challenges, with physical isolation and employer surveillance being primary considerations. Due to the nature of their work, migrant farmworkers typically reside on farms in congregate housing provided by their employers, thus blurring the lines between private home and public space (Perry, 2018). Conducting interviews, focus groups or engaging in participant observation at congregate housing facilities requires careful consideration of confidentiality and anonymity, which is essential in protecting migrant farmworkers from structurally embedded fear of retaliation. As a result, recruiting workers from these locations raises significant ethical questions. Migrant farmworker housing is typically situated at places of employment which are in rural and secluded areas. This geographic isolation also significantly limits the mobility of migrant farmworkers within and around rural communities, which is further complicated by inadequate transportation options. Within this context, recruiting migrant participants for a study may necessitate help from some community members.

Trusted community members play a unique role for migrant farmworkers in rural communities. Due to geographic and social isolation, migrant farmworkers are oftentimes inaccessible to researchers, and under the circumstances, researchers rely on trusted community members to introduce them to potential study participants. However, as we have found out in our interaction with the REB, restrictions are imposed on researchers who propose using these social networks in their recruitment efforts. They may also bar researchers who volunteer in some community organizations from recruiting study participants among those for whom they have provided care and support.

These cautions stem from REB's concerns that the involvement of community members, or the informal representation of their organizations via researcher volunteer activity, may imply an exercise of power over potential participants resulting in "undue influence" (see Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022, Article 3.1). REBs often cite risks of coercion or undue pressure to participate, which could compromise participants' ability to provide voluntary and informed consent (Miller & Boulton, 2007; Wiles et al., 2005). Instead, REBs recommend such recruitment methods as the distribution or posting of flyers in public areas, as has been the case with some of our REB applications. However, these recruitment methods are generally ineffective among migrant farmworkers who are often warned by their employers to avoid contact with strangers (Basok et al., 2014). By forcing researchers to give preference to these recruitment methods, REBs may compromise important research objectives that academics wish to advance. When REBs mandate researchers to use public and indirect participant recruitment methods, they fail to acknowledge the relationships between employers, researchers and migrant farmworkers, as described above.

Without approval to cooperate with community members in agricultural communities, participant access is severely limited. While it is crucial to

address power dynamics and coercion in research involving vulnerable migrant populations, REBs often overlook the complexities and underlying context shaping the relationships between community members and migrant farmworkers. By requesting that researchers abstain from using information support networks for recruiting study participants, some REBs pose significant obstacles to conducting research among migrant workers who, for fear of reprisals from their employers and possible deportation, do not respond to public invitations to participate in research.

Navigating Consent in Anticipatory Frameworks

Research in rural agricultural communities with temporary migrant farmworkers often employs a range of qualitative methodologies, including in-depth interviews, focus groups (Basok & George, 2020; Caxaj et al., 2023; Horgan & Liinamaa, 2017; Perry, 2018), ethnography (Basok, 2002; Escrig-Pinol et al., 2023; Holmes, 2020), and participatory action research (Iglesias-Rios et al., 2023). While the updated TCPS-2 recognizes the value of these diverse and flexible approaches, including the growing acceptance of community-based participatory action research (CBPR) (Guta et al., 2012), there remains an overreliance on anticipatory, one-time ethical reviews. This institutional requirement – the expectation for researchers (and REBs) to predict all ethical dilemmas and procedures (Cox et al., 2020) – creates significant barriers for researchers, especially in participant recruitment, as discussed earlier, and in ensuring ethically sound, informed, and voluntary consent processes.

Despite progress made by Canadian REBs in adapting consent procedures, such as allowing consent to be documented through alternative strategies like oral recordings (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022, Article 3.12), REBs still require researchers to anticipate and predict all consent-related challenges and responses in their initial proposals. This expectation is unrealistic in research approaches like ethnography, where the flexible design makes it difficult to predict all consent procedures in advance (Murphy, 2012; Strathern, 2000). Ethnographic consent, for instance, is a relational and ongoing process, based on trust between the researcher and participants, rather than a one-time contractual agreement (Katz & Fox, 2004; Mapedzahama & Dune, 2017). This dynamic process requires continual judgment from the researcher, making the application of rigid consent procedures challenging.

Similarly in the case of CBPR, despite a growing understanding of this type of research conducted through formal partnership agreements, REBs in Canada (see Guta et al., 2012) and review processes in the United States have not fully recognized the role of community partners in defining and renegotiating various aspects of the research project, including consent (Shore et al., 2011).

What is needed is less reliance on anticipatory ethics reviews in REB processes and recognition that ethnographic and CBPR require iterative ethics,

that is, an ongoing negotiation between various research partners (Mackenzie et al., 2007). For instance, recruiting migrant farmworkers for an interview or focus group study may necessitate informal collaboration with trusted community members to facilitate access and navigate consent with participants, as the following illustration makes clear.

During a research project examining the barriers and challenges migrant farmworkers face in accessing community support and services (Caxaj et al., 2023), Erika Borrelli planned to interview workers who had previously engaged with specific service providers and organizations. As part of her fieldwork, Erika attended a series of language classes hosted by one of these organizations, where she openly communicated the aims and goals of the research with both the migrant farmworkers in attendance and the trusted community partner. While several workers agreed to be interviewed, Maria (pseudonym) expressed initial hesitation about participating. Erika acknowledged Maria's concerns and did not pressure her to participate. After attending several sessions, however, Erika encountered Maria and other workers in an informal group discussion with the community partner. Upon joining the group, the conversation shifted toward the research project, wherein the community partner took the opportunity to rearticulate the study's aims and objectives. This prompted an open and collaborative discussion, during which Erika addressed Maria's questions and concerns, many of which had not surfaced during earlier one-on-one interactions. The trust fostered by the community partner, along with their presence, enabled a transparent and productive dialogue, allowing for a negotiated process of consent and recruitment for participation in the study.

Alternatively, researchers may need to employ ethnographically informed techniques, immersing themselves in the field and engaging in community activities alongside workers to build rapport and trust, thereby creating ethical spaces where consent can be meaningful. For example, when Tanya Basok and her team conducted interviews with migrant farmworkers (Basok et al., 2014; Basok & George, 2020), they participated in various community activities, such as dances, celebrations, church services, sports games, and health fairs. They also shared meals with farmworkers at their homes and during community gatherings. In these settings, informal conversations often occurred without formal consent being requested. These casual interactions provided valuable insights that complemented the formal interviews. As the boundaries between qualitative methods often blur, the REB process must remain flexible to accommodate these unique contexts, particularly when emerging issues arise that researchers cannot anticipate or predict.

When researchers modify any of the REB-approved procedures, REBs are tasked with determining the "ethical implications and risks associated with the proposed change" (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022, Article 6.16). While this requirement aligns with the overarching goal of ensuring ethical oversight, it can present challenges when adjustments arise due to evolving field dynamics that require immediate responses. The realities of

research often necessitate innovative approaches to establishing and maintaining ongoing consent. Consent procedures frequently require continuous negotiation to refine and re-negotiate the project's terms, as well as the roles and obligations of both participants and researchers (Mackenzie et al., 2007).

REBs must recognize that researchers cannot always outline every recruitment and consent-related procedure in advance, especially when such consent may be iterative in nature. Moreover, methodologies and overarching objectives may require adaptation in response to emerging circumstances or feedback from participants and community members (Mackenzie et al., 2007). Truly meaningful consent negotiations must extend beyond a simple benefit-risk analysis and anticipatory review and be grounded in participants' lived experiences and understandings (Stephenson et al., 2020).

Evaluating Harm and (Re)Traumatization

When assessing a research project, REBs are tasked with evaluating both the likelihood and severity of potential harm. In migration research, this also encompasses emotional or psychological distress caused by the retelling of stories, which may risk (re)traumatizing participants. REBs, therefore, are increasingly focused on evaluating how research, whether directly or indirectly, may contribute to migrants' (re)traumatization (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022, Article 9.16).

This has led REBs to adopt a strict constructionist stance or "protective imagination" (Cox et al., 2020, p. 387) when considering the approval of interview questions that may cause psychological distress. Following their assessment of the appropriateness of certain questions in this regard, REBs determine whether researchers are permitted to ask these questions or, instead, specify actions that must be taken if they are to be asked. A common practice in research involving other vulnerable migrant groups is for researchers to provide participants with information on available services (Bloemraad & Menjívar, 2022). This practice has also been adopted in research with migrant farmworkers, and at time, is mandated by the REB. However, there are two issues with these approaches.

First, REBs should not underestimate the potential benefits that participants may derive from having their experiences acknowledged by an empathetic listener or a wider audience. In fact, researchers may even be preferred, as confiding in a stranger may be easier than discussing distressing issues with those close to them (Alessi & Kahn, 2023; Ellis, 2016; Isobel, 2021). Although the publication of research findings may not always result in direct structural benefits for the population in question, it can have significant indirect benefits for migrant farmworkers. These workers often encounter social exclusion within the communities where they reside (Basok & George, 2020; Horgan & Liinamaa, 2017; Perry, 2018), and their roles in Canada's agricultural sector

are frequently overlooked and marginalized. Consequently, as we experienced during our fieldwork, some migrant farmworkers express a desire to have their stories told, even if these stories are traumatizing, to raise awareness of the challenges they face and to increase visibility for themselves and their contributions.

For example, during a focus group Erika Borrelli conducted with Guatemalan farmworkers, participants recounted an incident where a compatriot passed away on the farm. Due to the complicated nature of transporting human remains overseas and the lack of support from the Guatemalan government, the body remained in Canada for three months before being sent back to the family. The participants expressed fear, anger, and concern over the limited support provided by the Guatemalan government and wondered what (if any) support they would receive should anything happen to them. Although they recognized that neither Erika nor the merits of the research could directly address or solve the issue of the lack of Guatemalan consular services in the community in question, the participants emphasized their desire for these fears and challenges to be acknowledged. By narrating experiences that were traumatizing, they wanted to raise awareness of this issue so that Canadian citizens could understand their anxieties.

Another example comes from one of Tanya Basok's studies. During interviews, she originally avoided asking questions about working environments and conditions, and farmworkers' relationships with their employers. However, many workers volunteered information on the mistreatment and abuse they felt they suffered because they wanted to share their anguish with someone empathetic to their circumstances and raise awareness among Canadians of the unfairness they were forced to endure (Basok, 2002). In fact, for individuals who have endured trauma or abuse, sharing their stories through research dissemination can offer a sense of empowerment and enable them to reclaim control over their narratives (e.g. Bloemraad & Menjívar, 2022; Clark & Walker, 2011; Stuhlmiller, 2001).

Secondly, mandating researchers to provide a pre-approved list of services and supports on project information forms, as we were asked to do when we requested REB clearance for one of our projects, can be intimidating, legalistic, and ethically questionable in the case of migrant farmworkers. As mentioned previously, the landscape of support for migrant farmworkers in Canada has historically lacked formal federal funding until as recently as 2022 (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022). Even then, this funding is only targeted at three regions in Ontario. The support infrastructure for migrant farmworkers, therefore, still faces significant challenges and remains largely decentralized and uncoordinated. This is in stark contrast to the more formalized and federally funded service provision landscape for immigrant newcomers, refugees, and asylum seekers (George et al., 2017; George & Borrelli, 2023). Moreover, because of their precarious legal status, access to various supports and services is challenged by structural barriers such as employer surveillance, geographical isolation, limited access to

telecommunication resources like the internet and a Canadian phone number, and inadequate transportation.

Therefore, requiring researchers to provide participants with a predetermined list of services as a sort of information exchange, assumes that these organizations will have the funding and personnel capacity to address the issue and be accessible to the worker. Regulating this practice, therefore, disregards the complex reality faced by migrant farmworkers in acquiring support. Additionally, this requirement restricts researchers' ability to make informed, context-specific decisions about when and how to provide service information to participants. This backdrop demands flexibility for researchers to be able to ethically navigate the challenges encountered in the field.

Conclusion: Towards a Relational Approach

In this article, we identified several concerns arising from the strict implementation of federal ethical guidelines (e.g., TCPS–2) by REBs, particularly for studies involving precarious temporary migrant farmworkers in rural agricultural communities. We argued that researchers often face pressure to adjust their methods in ways that can compromise the quality and relevance of their research to this population's unique needs. These restrictions, arising from REB's limited understanding of the needs, community dynamics, and desires of temporary migrant farmworkers, infringe on researchers' academic freedom and hinder their ability to design studies that not only adhere to general ethical standards but also allow researchers the autonomy to make on-the-ground ethical decisions while addressing the specific challenges of working with precarious migrant populations. The pressure to comply with the unilateral conditionality of REB application approval leads to frictions and antagonism. By situating research on migrant farmworkers within the social field characterized by complex social relations with different actors, we identified three issues, in particular, that pose challenges to researchers: (1) recruitment strategies that fail to recognize broad social and community contexts in which migrant farmworkers are embedded; (2) anticipatory review models that demand that researchers predict all potential ethical challenges and responses in advance and ignore the need to see consent as an iterative process based on negotiations between various partners, (3) a limited understanding of what constitutes harms and potential for (re)traumatization.

We argued that community-negotiated and iterative consent models that view participants' autonomy as inherently social and relational, and consent as ongoing, are more appropriate for research on migrant farmworkers. These models recognize that individuals are embedded in networks of relationships and that ethnographic and community-engaged collaborative research requires flexible approaches to research design, including recruitment and the negotiation of consent, and, by extension, to ethics review (Ellis, 2007; Fisher,

1997; King et al., 1999; Mackenzie et al., 2007). Furthermore, trauma-informed interview methods would allow researchers to assess in the field whether a participant is "recounting or reliving" traumatic events (Alessi & Kahn, 2023, p. 144) and would eliminate the need to avoid certain interview questions that enrich the understanding of migrant farmworkers' lived experiences while also providing the opportunity to migrants to share their experiences and raise awareness about social injustice with the broader audience.

For REBs, understanding specific challenges and the community context is essential for making informed ethical judgments about proposed research (Hammersley, 2009). Echoing others (Burke, 2005; Ellis, 2007; Fisher, 1997; Guta et al., 2012), we therefore advocate for a relational approach to ethics review, grounded in collegial dialogue between researchers and REB members during the review process. Without embracing research approaches that prioritize relationships based on trust, ethical review procedures will remain restitutive (Daku, 2018), and standardized practices will continue to obstruct researchers in the production of knowledge and justice. Prioritizing a relational approach, alongside ongoing efforts to standardize the ethics review process in Canada (Page & Nyeboer, 2017; Stephenson et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2024), ensures that increased standardization does not inadvertently create additional barriers or challenges for researchers. By fostering trust between REBs and researchers, this approach will enable researchers to make on-the-ground ethical decisions and support the use of iterative and flexible methods and techniques in the field. These negotiated flexible approaches will enrich research in pursuit of social justice for migrant farmworkers.

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