

Performing Integrity: Managing Misalignment while Researching Transgressive Social Worlds

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The qualitative literature criticizing REBs suggests that researchers should develop an approach to research ethics that does justice to their daily practice of fieldwork. In this article, I contribute to this exploration by presenting three cases of negotiating research ethics while researching transgressive social worlds. These cases are related to political tension while researching cannabis shops, privacy issues while using visual methods to research an anarchist community, and contentions with a research participant while researching academic fraud. In the description of these cases, I highlight the essential role of performing integrity, which is an interactive and dynamic social process in which researchers present themselves as reliable and credible. In the cases that I present here, there were instances of misalignment, which triggered an internal conversation on the part of the researcher, who subsequently reflected on possible aligning actions. This article discusses how performing integrity and (re-)aligning activities differ by audience and by research phase.

Keywords: Research Ethics Boards, ethics review, performing integrity, aligning actions, internal conversation, transgressive social worlds, stigma

INTRODUCTION

The guidelines of Research Ethics Boards (REBs), related to topics such as anonymity, harm, consent, vulnerability, and confidentiality, tend to be problematic for qualitative researchers, especially regarding how they negotiate research ethics in situ. A range of publications highlight this problem and relate it to the static and rigid positivist biomedical model, which underpins REBs and is in contrast to the explorative and iterative practices of qualitative research (e.g., Hammersley 2009; Lincoln and Tierney 2004; Murphy and Dingwall 2007; van den Hoonaard 2002, 2011). The

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literature criticizing REBs suggests that qualitative researchers should develop an approach to research ethics that does justice to how they negotiate research ethics in the daily practice of fieldwork (e.g., Floyd and Arthur 2012; Halse and Honey 2007; van den Hoonaard 2023). For instance, van den Hoonaard (2023) states that qualitative researchers should construct a separate “research ethics covenant” that is grounded in the daily practice of how qualitative researchers manage ethical issues in the different phases of their research. In order to do this, qualitative researchers must explore and reflect upon the often intuitive, creative and improvisational ways they engage with ethics in the field. In this article, I contribute to this exploration by presenting three cases of what I term “performing integrity”¹ in transgressive social worlds. These cases are related to political tension while researching cannabis shops, privacy issues while using visual methods to research an anarchist community, and contentions with a research participant while researching academic fraud. Especially in transgressive social worlds, members tend to deviate from dominant social norms, which can result in social degradation and stigmatization as I discuss in detail below. I explain that this type of research — because of the possible vulnerability of the research participants caused by potential stigmatization — will likely lead to ethical issues that need to be negotiated in the field.

In these examples, I highlight the essential role of performing integrity as a social process in which researchers aim to present themselves as reliable and trustworthy while gaining access, engaging with research participants, sharing findings and exiting the field. Performing integrity has an interactive and dynamic character in which researchers carefully read how situations develop and pay attention to the self-presentation of research participants. During this process they engage in an internal conversation (Athens 1994; Mead 1934; Wiley 2006) that shapes how they present themselves ethically as researcher selves. In research in which performing integrity has a habitual character, research participants are familiar with the process and accept it in a matter-of-fact way. In these situations, in which the definition of the situation is shared and thus not problematic (McHugh 1968), researchers and research participants engage in an almost ritualistic performance, in which research is introduced, the relevance of the research is explained, and consent forms are signed. In this article I discuss examples of misalignment — conflicts in the definition of the situation — in which I had to go beyond the routine performance of integrity. As such, performing integrity gains a reflective, emotional and moral character which results in an intervention to engage in a process of re-aligning and to restore my narrative credibility.

Performing integrity can also be embraced by stigmatized research participants who wish to normalize their shamed self. For instance, in the case of Mark,² this played a significant role. As this is not the main theme of this article, I will not focus systematically on this side of performing integrity here. Elsewhere I have described his strategies to normalize his shamed self (Müller 2024).

In this article I explain how during the performance of integrity, researchers take into account a variety of ethical (research) narratives socially constructed by different

audiences. Here I focus on how I engage in an internal conversation while trying to match the following narratives: my personal ethical narrative, the bureaucratic REB narrative of my university, and local ethical narratives. These can be in line with each other, but specifically in studying transgressive worlds, they might misalign, which drives researchers to negotiate research ethics with their audiences. I reflected on the validity of these different narratives, thus transforming my own personal narrative of how to best perform integrity. In addition, I show that the negotiation process is not only limited by the moral narratives of research participants but also by the “researcher self,” who seeks to maintain a sense of sincerity and authenticity.

In addition, I show that though the guidelines of REBs tend to focus on the relationship between researchers and research participants, shadow actors, who are outside the immediate research setting, such as academic peers and politicians, can shape the performance of integrity. Without understanding how these third parties shape the research process, it will be difficult to identify ethical issues and address them. I also highlight that in order to be competent in negotiating ethics, researchers have to comprehend the wider social, political, and historical context of their research as it shapes local narratives and thus how different audiences negotiate (research) ethics.

The debate on research integrity tends to focus on scientific misconduct in relation to producing and presenting findings, such as in plagiarism and the fabrication of data (Nair 2018). Though performing integrity is also relevant in this respect, here I focus on performing integrity while interacting with research participants in the field. I am specifically interested in how performing integrity plays a critical role in situations of misalignment and re-alignment.

The literature on remedial or aligning actions (e.g., Goffman 1971; Mills 1940; Scott and Lyman 1968) does not tend to focus explicitly on research ethics. And as far as I know this is the first publication on research ethics that includes the conceptual framework of aligning actions, which is defined by Stokes and Hewitt as follows, “Largely verbal efforts to restore or assure meaningful interactions in the face of problematic situations ...” (Stokes and Hewitt 1976:838).

The field of aligning actions tends to focus on overt and “shared” misalignments and how to successfully restore them (Dellwing 2015). This also plays a crucial role in the cases that I discuss, but I also highlight that there is a crucial phase before overt and shared misalignments become overt and shared, namely sensing and creating awareness of misalignment. I discuss several examples in which performing integrity includes sensing that there is a potential misalignment and raising and discussing this with research participants. I also focus on situations in which aligning or realigning was not possible, a theme hardly studied in the literature on aligning actions (Dellwing 2015). I explain that this is related to threats experienced by the aspired selves of those involved in the interaction.

I start with two (smaller) examples: a study on coffeeshops (cannabis shops) in Rotterdam (Müller 2015), and an ongoing research project on an anarchistic community in Utrecht, called Buurland (Neighbourland). In the first two examples, I focus on performing integrity while establishing a relationship with the research

participants at the start of the study. Because this has a liminal quality, the identity of the researcher needs to be shaped actively by performing integrity.

The first study took place in an REB-free context and was related to an evaluative study of an intervention aiming to close down coffeeshops which was part of the stigmatizing policy of a centrist/right-wing government. Performing integrity focused on restoring my credibility which was challenged by political tension during the fieldwork. The second study is overseen by the REB of my university and is related to a social housing area, called Buurland, with 240 inhabitants. Because the plan was to demolish Buurland, temporary rent contracts were given to new inhabitants, mostly students. But while the demolition was postponed over a period of 15 years, this area became a place in which an alternative, anarchistic and sustainable community developed. Its transgression consists of a range of activities (without asking the permission of the powerholders, i.e., the city of Utrecht and the housing cooperation), such as altering the physical structure of the apartment, building a green house, organizing the yearly fest, painting the outside of the apartments and an informal subletting system. Here, performing integrity was shaped by “privacy issues” related to using visual methods.

The third extended example is related to my research on “Mark,” a social scientist who committed fraud in over 50 top tier journals. This case differs from the previous two as it includes a wide range of audiences and covers different situations of misalignment from the start of the study until the presentation of its findings. Mark was represented in the media as an academic “monster” with narcissistic tendencies. He felt that he was stigmatized and demonized. This example was initially related to a REB-free academic environment in the Netherlands (2013–2014). But when I worked on a paper about Mark in 2022, ethical problems developed. In this example of studying up, Mark rejected the article which I tried to manage by negotiating with him (see Müller 2024).

In these examples I focus on how two often interrelated qualities of ethnographic research shape the performance of integrity: (1) the dynamic and fluid character of ethnography which is shaped by its exploratory and iterative character (Becker 2009; Charmaz 2014; Müller 2021) and (2) the unique character of local narratives of ethics (Hammersley 2009; Lincoln and Tierney 2004; Murphy and Dingwall 2007; van den Hoonaard 2002, 2011). Especially when one is involved in researching transgressive social worlds, local narratives of ethics might differ from the researcher’s ethical narrative and the REB’s narrative, resulting in not sharing the same definition of the situation. In the cases discussed here, performing integrity focused on re-aligning these narratives. I highlight here whether and how performing integrity was shaped by the research phase and the audiences that were involved.

While negotiating research ethics during my pre-REB-controlled studies (1986–2015) I had ample agency to negotiate research ethics in the field as this was solely allocated to me and thus my full responsibility. This does not mean that I was completely in control of these negotiations and that they automatically resulted in a shared understanding of research ethics. Also, in pre-REB-controlled studies,

researchers cannot control performing integrity solely as they depend on audiences, such as the research participants, who might read the self-presentation of researchers differently than intended, resulting in a conflict about the definition of the situation. I explain here how this can result in a dialogue which consists of an intersubjective process of shared meaning making in which researchers and research participants negotiate about the ethical character of researchers and their research.

Also, in my pre-REB-controlled studies there have been several situations in which I had to remedy misalignments with research participants. In several cases, persons did not trust me, as I discuss in the first case of this article. Though these situations were at times painful, they were normalized by my understanding of these conflicts as part of mundane life and being shaped by everyday social situations, such as misunderstanding, misinformation, or the (political) strategic interaction of research participants (Müller 2018). Negotiating ethics and performing integrity were an essential part of doing research, as I show in the case on researching coffeeshops in Rotterdam.

DISCUSSION OF THE THREE CASES

Researching Coffeeshops in Rotterdam

The first example that I describe is related to a study on coffeeshops (Müller 2015). In the first decade of the 2000s, centrist and right-wing politicians socially constructed an anti-cannabis narrative, highlighting that coffeeshops were supposedly related to a range of social problems, such as organized crime, anti-social behavior, and the abuse of cannabis by school-going teenagers (under the legal age of using cannabis, 18 years). Though this narrative was contested by politicians, researchers, and the wider public, the centrist/right-wing government decided that to protect youth, coffeeshops were not allowed to be near a school, meaning not within a range of 250 m. The common reading of what was to be called “the 250 m school distance rule,” was that it was highly symbolic, as youth under 18 were not allowed to buy cannabis in coffeeshops anyhow and that many coffeeshops would remain open which teenagers would pass while traveling in the urban environment. Still, in 2009, the city of Rotterdam decided to implement “the 250 m school distance rule” with the sole aim to de-normalize the presence of coffeeshops. As a result, 16 coffeeshops had to close down. In 2011, the city of Rotterdam was contemplating closing more coffeeshops as they wanted to implement a stricter “school distance rule.” The new rule of 350 m meant that a dozen coffeeshops would be too close to schools and therefore had to shut down. The city asked Rotterdam Erasmus University to study what the possible impact might be of the closure of more coffeeshops on community safety, especially in relation to anti-social behavior. The study in which I was the principal researcher focused on the situation as it evolved over the last 5 years and consisted of document analysis, observations, and interviews with coffeshop managers/owners and senior police officers involved in trying to control the coffeeshops.

Because of the closure of coffeeshops in 2009, the relationship between coffeeshop owners and the city had worsened. Coffeeshop owners did not see the city of Rotterdam as a reliable governing body anymore. I expected that this political situation would hamper my access to coffeeshop owners. And indeed, only one coffeeshop owner volunteered to participate. But as he was an important research participant because of his active and public role in the cannabis industry, I hoped that he could give me an informed overview of the current situation.

During the interview I began to notice that he became tense and that his answers seemed at times evasive and vague. In my experience, when interviews go well, they can be physically tiring but also invigorating because of the joint action of talking, relating, and sharing knowledge. But when this is not the case, specifically when I feel drained, I know that it is likely that tension is troubling the flow of the interview. Part of my performance of integrity is to highlight what I sensed as a possible misalignment during the interview. Maybe the research participant does not want to discuss a certain topic or just does not feel comfortable doing the interview.

I asked the coffeeshop owner if something was wrong. Initially he tried to ignore my question and discount that a situation of misalignment had developed. But when I explained that I felt he seemed to be keeping things to himself, he said that he had heard that I worked for the Public Prosecutor and that he could not share everything with me. I said that he was probably misinformed, maybe because of how I introduced the research. I tried to reassure him and explain to him that the city commissioned this research. He did not believe me and said that a contact told him that I worked for the Public Prosecutor or even for the Ministry of Justice and Security. This was highly problematic for him, since the current Minister of Justice and Security used to be the Mayor of Rotterdam. In this former role, he was primarily responsible for implementing the “250-metres school distance rule” that closed down 16 coffeeshops.

I wondered who his contact was and why this person was misinformed. This person acted as a shadow actor, not directly involved but still having a strong presence back-stage. The shadow actor is hidden in the shadow of social life, outside of the interactional awareness of the researcher, and can unexpectedly show up and redefine the interaction.³ I asked him who gave him this information. He answered that he did not want to tell me her name, but that she was a researcher. At that moment, I immediately realized who she was. She had been publishing on coffeeshops over the last two decades, criticizing the government for criminalizing the cannabis industry. I had read her work, and I thought that it was rigorous and accurate. But I also knew that she had an ongoing dispute with Dirk, who was the leading criminology professor at my university and involved in this current research as a supervisor. In contrast to her, Dirk was in favor of reducing the number of coffeeshops.

I assumed that she had made the assumption that the commissioner of this research was the Public Prosecutor because Dirk did work in the past for the research department of the Ministry of Justice and Security. When I said her name, he acknowledged that she was his source. I said that I liked her work and added that she probably was misinformed. I added that I could prove this by sending him the



FIGURE 1. This label is put on a small plastic cannabis container. The translation of the dutch sentence refers to the idea that the use of cannabis should remain fun. The information below the text is given for situation in which cannabis use becomes problematic. The information on the left side refers to a deposit which aims at the prevention of littering

contract between the university and the city of Rotterdam. Once back at my office, I emailed him the contract, and he replied in a positive way.

We made an appointment for a second interview in which we got along well. It was clear that he saw this as an opportunity to show that he was a credible entrepreneur. In fact, he also seemed to be involved in a performance of integrity when he highlighted that he cared about reducing anti-social behavior of his clients. For instance, he explained that his clients had to pay a deposit for the small containers of cannabis and stated that the packaging included a warning and a site to gain help (see Figure 1).

What he shared with me was valuable and in line with what the police officers had told me. The research showed that most coffeeshops were managed in a proper way and that there was hardly any anti-social behavior. This was partly related to the pro-active attitude of coffeeshop owners who tried to avoid any form of nuisance by,

for instance, hiring security guards who supervised the public space around the coffeeshops. The conclusion was that the present situation was seen by all involved parties, police officers and coffeeshop owners, as a “workable” situation. The research report advised the city not to close more coffeeshops because it might jeopardize the current equilibrium. The city accepted our suggestion and did not implement the “350-metres school distance rule.”

In this example of negotiating ethics, I described performing integrity as an active form of re-alignment. This took place in the beginning of the research, engaging with the coffeeshop owner for the first time. This can be a vulnerable moment in any research as trust still has to be established by performing integrity. My performance of integrity went beyond the standard performance of integrity as I had to recover my presentation of a sincere self. This process started with sensing and highlighting an awareness of a possible misalignment, which at first was disputed by the coffeeshop owner. This situation triggered an internal conversation about the stance of the coffeeshop owner and how to understand this by relating it to the wider political and academic context. I was faced with a pre-conceived notion of myself as unreliable, socially constructed by a colleague who acted as a shadow actor. As I decided that the coffeeshop owner was my main audience, my aim was to restore my relationship with him. I used the contract as a resource to engage in my performance of integrity and re-align our moral narratives.

Researching Buurland

In researching Buurland, which is described by the research participants as a place of freedom, creativity and community, I focused on the perspectives of its inhabitants and how they give meaning to their alternative, anarchistic community and its transgressions. I was also interested in whether they encountered negative reactions which had an othering and stigmatizing character and how they were able to manage this.

Before I focus on performing integrity while researching Buurland, I describe the organizational practices of the REB of my university and how it shapes my performance of integrity. The REB at my university takes place at the level of micromanagement. Though it is framed as support and guidance, the practice is that supervision can have a controlling and invasive character, as I describe in detail later. They require that researchers describe in detail the research plan, such as the goal(s) of the research, the research methods, how to gain access to the field and how one samples research participants. Before researchers can start their research, they must hand in the exact tools they will use in the field, such as interview guides and questionnaires. Persons assigned to review the documents can comment on any topic that (according to them) might create ethical problems. In addition, any change to the research design should be reported immediately.

In the case of Buurland, several audiences played a crucial role, such as the researcher self, the REB, and the research participants. Performing integrity started during the preparation of this study. I first had to perform integrity in relation to the

reviewer of my application. This was specifically related to my intention to take a photo of each participant while doing interviews. I explained that taking photos of my research participants would help me in remembering what they said. In reaction, the reviewer highlighted the possible privacy issues related to taking pictures of my research participants. The reviewer suggested taking pictures of objects in the room where I interviewed the research participant.

The researcher selfplayed a crucial role as it was hard for me to engage in negotiating research ethics as the stance of the reviewer was far removed from my personal ethical narrative, which was grounded in my research experience over a period of three decades and thus had shaped how I define myself as a researcher. During the internal conversation, it was difficult for me to identify with the position of the reviewer and therefore finding a solution seemed impossible. My stance had a durable, non-negotiable character as it was part of how I saw myself as a researcher. Many times, I have used visual methods (van den Scott 2018), and only on rare occasions does someone refuse to have their photo taken. In addition, I have been involved in making documentaries and publications with photographs in which the faces of the research participants are visible. In these projects, most persons enjoyed being photographed or filmed and gladly participated. A few objected, and I of course accepted this as being part of my performance of integrity (see also Hill and Potter 2022). But overall, taking pictures or making documentaries was in line with the dominant local ethical narrative as most research participants felt proud of being visually represented in these projects.

Understanding the organizational context of gaining ethical approval was crucial for me in how to relate to this situation. I approached a colleague who was a senior member of the committee and asked him how to deal with the situation. He was a crucial resource as he explained to me that this was one of the first cases of the reviewer and that this person had never been involved in any qualitative research before, let alone ethnographic research. My reading was that because of the lack of knowledge of fieldwork this person seemed to rely on a literal interpretation of the formal rules as they were described by our university. Though my colleague disagreed with the reviewer's comments, he also told me that he could not intervene, as he wanted to respect this person's autonomy. He suggested that to avoid any form of delay and potential conflict, it was best for me to find a compromise which would be acceptable for the reviewer and me.

In my reply to the suggestion of the reviewer to take photographs of objects, I explained that I would not be able to relate automatically what research participants had said to objects in their rooms. In reaction, the reviewer agreed with taking photos but that I should destroy them as soon as possible after I analyzed the interviews. I was satisfied with this answer because its implementation was in line with my iterative research practice, which consists of an ongoing analysis which tends to continue till the end of my fieldwork and the writing of my publications. But the reply of the reviewer also meant that they did not want me to use the pictures of my research participants in a presentation nor in a publication. This did upset me, as I tend to use

photographs to enhance my publications, but I decided not to continue the negotiation as I thought that this was the best solution I could get.

My performance of integrity in Buurland started with an exploratory visit in which I presented myself to two inhabitants, Hans and Marja, as a Dutch scholar from an English university who had researched this neighborhood over a decade ago. My research had contributed to a documentary and a photographic book, which Hans and Marja were familiar with. I said that I was intrigued by the transformation of the marginalized neighborhood that I studied more than a decade ago into the present day Buurland. I gave them a digital copy of the documentary. Later I learned from them that my past performances of integrity as a researcher in the neighborhood had a positive impact on how they defined me as a trustworthy researcher.

Before I started my interviews, I visited Buurland several times. One crucial event that sparked my internal conversation on privacy and photography was the yearly Buurland fest which attracts hundreds of people, of which many comply with the dress code related to the theme of the festival, which was this year “Buureaucracy.” It was my intention to take photos, and I noticed that I was not the only one. Many people took pictures without asking permission. In this situation, it seemed part of the dominant local culture to expect that people would take pictures of you. In addition, taking photos was a social event in which people presented themselves in a desired “modeled” way.

When I entered the negotiation of taking photos during my interviews, nobody rejected outright my request. One person asked whether I would put her picture on Twitter or Instagram. She said she would not like that because she did not like to read negative comments about herself. When I said that I have no Twitter account nor an Instagram account and that I only use the photos for research purposes, she agreed with her picture being taken. In contrast, most reacted enthusiastically and put an effort into posing in front of my camera and thus created an engaging social situation in which research participants and researcher are mutually involved as performers and audiences. For instance, one person asked whether she could check the photos I had taken of her. When she did not like them, she said let us take some more and she moved her body in different positions while sitting and looking straight in the camera. When I asked another research participant if I could take her photo, we were sitting in the garden of one of her neighbors. She told me that she wanted me to take a photo of her in her house. We walked into her house and carefully she selected a room, placed herself in a comfortable seat and put a fluffy toy animal on her lap. Later I sent one of the photos to her, to which she reacted positively.

The overall positive stance toward taking photos triggered an internal conversation in which I reflected on how to align myself with the norms and values embraced by two audiences: the REB and the research participants. Being caught between the ethical comments of my university and my experience in the field, I gradually drifted towards the social use of taking photos in Buurland. It seemed inappropriate to prioritize the institutional ethical guidance of my university over the local Buurland culture. I realized that aligning myself to the standards of my university would also

mean that as an ethnographer I could not engage fully with the local culture. I decided to prioritize the local ethical narrative around taking photos and thus aligned with their perspective.

During an interview a research participant indicated that there was a website that contained many pictures of the last fest. When I found this website, I discovered dozens of pictures of the party. And when I explored the World Wide Web systematically I discovered many more sites with dozens of pictures of people who lived in Buurland, including several of my research participants, which supported my choice to prioritize the local ethical narrative around taking photos.

This specific case shows how local narratives of ethical behavior can significantly divert from REB narratives. By prioritizing the local culture, researchers can engage in an interactive and meaningful way with their participants. At the same time, taking photographs also became an important research tool as it helped to understand crucial aspects of the culture of Buurland. In many instances, taking photos was seen as a meaningful shared social interaction. In this way, taking photos had a reciprocal character as it was used by the research participants to carve out their desired self-presentation.

As in the first example, we can see that performing integrity played a crucial role in the beginning of the research. Three audiences were involved: the researcher self, the REB of my university, and the research participants. My past performance of integrity in the neighborhood, materialized in a video documentary and book, supported my present performance of integrity. The misalignment between my own ethical position and that of the REB of my university was difficult to solve as my position as the researcher self was shaped by decades of doing research and thus had become a core part of how I define myself as a researcher. My aim was to align with the local narrative and embrace a situation in which they could perform their desired selves while taking photographs.

In the following case on scientific misconduct, I focus on my interviews with Mark, an academic fraudster. This case has developed over time from a REB-free environment to one managed by the REB of my university.

Researching Mark's Academic Fraud

My research on Mark's academic fraud consisted of five interviews with him (12 h), document analysis (of how the media covered his fraud, his book on his fraud, and interviews with him in newspapers), and several meetings with Mark beyond the specific interview setting, which I discuss later. Before I focus on how I performed integrity as an active form of (re-)aligning, I discuss the wider social context of Mark's case of academic fraud.

Mark's CV was impressive. Early in his career he became a professor and in his mid-40s he became a dean. He was seen as a well-published and successful academic with many awards, grants, and over a hundred publications on his CV. His fraud

filled the headlines of newspapers and was debated on prime time television. He had fabricated data in at least 55 top-tier publications. Ten of his PhD students had worked closely with him and had used the data he fabricated. As a result, they lost these publications. Mark was horrified by the negative press and felt he was unfairly treated, stigmatized, and even demonized. In interviews in the media, he voiced a victim-perspective, and he stated that he was misrepresented by both journalists and academics.

In contrast to the previous examples, we can see here that performing integrity plays a vital role from the beginning of the research to its final publication, which can be explained by the highly emotive and moral impact of the researched transgression. During this process a range of audiences and shadow actors played a critical role, such as (potential) research participants, a chief editor of a journal, and me as the researcher self.

At first, I was mostly interested in his PhD students. I could relate to their pain. It must have been horrible to hear that your PhD is based on fake data. I wondered how they were managing this traumatic situation. Their names were mentioned in the first report of the committee, and I was able to contact one of them, Sara. While trying to perform integrity, I sensed she was on her guard and that this might lead to a situation of misalignment. She wanted proof and asked me to send her an email using my university email. After she received my email, she felt more comfortable, but I sensed she was still cautious. We made an appointment to meet each other, but I was not sure whether she would follow through given her initial suspicion. When I received an email the next day, I expected a rejection. In the email, she said that she had told her husband that I had contacted her. In his position as a shadow actor, he reacted in an enthusiastic way because he knew me from a research project we had done in the past. He turned out to be a crucial third party supporting my performance of integrity. He vouched for me and told her that I was okay. My past performance of integrity as a researcher, as in the previous case, was helpful in establishing my moral credibility. As a result, she invited me to her house for dinner after which we did the interview, which went well.

She said that other PhD students probably would like to talk to me too if they knew that I was interested in their perspectives. She was willing to introduce me to them. This was beyond my expectation but the follow up was disappointing. This was related to a “failure” in my past performance of integrity. I had written a column for my Law School’s Newsletter in which I discussed Mark’s fraud. I also wondered what the role of his PhD students was. For me this was an open question, but most former colleagues of Sara read this differently because of their definition of science and their emotional state of being. Because of their trauma, they were cautious and when they read my column, they understood my open question as a hypothesis that I wanted to confirm, which fitted their scientific approach, not mine. Similar to the coffeshop case, they socially constructed a pre-conceived negative notion of myself, which resulted in a situation of misalignment. They decided that I was biased and therefore refused to participate in my research. Sara was deeply disappointed by their

reaction as she thought it was crucial to participate in my research to further our understanding of Mark's fraud. Sara had put an effort in re-aligning our perspectives, but without success.

After some period of time, Sara asked me whether I wanted to interview her former supervisor. After confronting him with his actions, she was able to forgive him, and they had remained on speaking terms. I replied positively. I decided that gaining his insider's perspective might provide insight into how he dealt with the stigma of being a white-collar offender. I wanted to talk to him as I wanted to hear his side of the story. After I agreed to interview him, Sara contacted him, and after some time, he replied positively. But after my request for an appointment for an interview, he stopped emailing me.

A month later, I discovered that he would have his first public lecture reflecting on his fraud. The organization that had invited him wanted to give him a platform to express his side of the story. The place was packed, and the audience listened attentively. The presentation was in fact a performance of integrity as Mark discussed his fraud in a sincere way and tried to explain it. After his lecture, I had to wait a while to talk to him as he was being interviewed. When he showed up again, I approached him, shaking his hand and asking him how he felt. He shook his head and said "so, so." Then he asked me who I was. When I told him my name, he recognized it. I told him that I still wanted to interview him. He said that he still was willing to be interviewed and excused himself for not replying to my email; he was too busy.

When I shook his hand, I experienced a strong unexpected sensation of alienation. I felt that he was not there, as if he was unreal, in some sense fake. It is still hard to describe this feeling. Distrust is too strong, but it is perhaps somewhere between disbelief, being cautious, and distrust. When I left after our short encounter, these adverse feelings left me confused. I sensed that a situation of misalignment was developing. I have interviewed many "deviant" persons but never felt this kind of troubled emotion. As a result, I engaged in an internal conversation in which I reflected on these feelings and which aligning action to take. I realized that Mark must be confronted with distrust constantly. I was afraid that my initial reading of him would become a barrier in creating rapport.

At this stage, performing integrity had the character of an internal conversation debating what would be the ethical way to move forward. Similar to the previous two cases, performing integrity was crucial in the beginning of the research and was related to how to establish a relationship with the research participant. Should I keep my first experience of him to myself, or would it be better to share this with him? The researcher selfplayed a crucial and almost non-malleable role because in the societal context of those days I did not want to associate myself with the choir of academics and journalists that othered him. If I wanted to interview him, I should be honest and open. Concealing my first emotional response would be unethical, especially considering his vulnerable position. I decided to share my experience during our first encounter. I wanted to give him the agency to decide whether he

wanted to participate in this research. I realized that he could feel offended and that this would terminate our encounter, but for me this was the only way to go ahead and to realign with him.

At the beginning of the interview, which took place in a café in the center of the town where he lived, I shared my experience of him during our first encounter. He told me that he understood me because many people distrust him. When I replied that my experience was more related to our first contact, he said that he was extremely nervous and insecure that day in the church and that he had taken some medication to calm his nerves. I understood that my reading of him came from the fact that Mark was not fully present in the interaction and that my gut feeling was right. But now I understood why: he had to create a front as he was nervous, insecure, and was trying to deal with the stigma and trauma he had experienced.

Mark did not seem to be shocked with what I shared with him, but he did want to know how I would approach him. He checked my integrity as he wanted to know whether I came to interview him with the aim to confirm a pre-conceived negative interpretation of his moral character. He took the lead in the next phase of our negotiation of research ethics and asked what my stance towards him would be. The following passage is an example of how our interaction consisted of a chain of misalignments and re-alignments.⁴

In the beginning of the interview, Mark says, “I am afraid. I have been traumatized by the most horrible nonsense stories.” When I ask him, what are you afraid of, he replies as follows:

M: I’m afraid that you are another one. That you will hurt me again. That it is unkind. Not loving. Not attentive.

Mark starts to negotiate how he wants to be treated, which triggers an internal conversation. I understand that he feels uncomfortable by the way he was treated in the media, but at the same time, I wonder what someone can expect when caught committing systematic academic fraud over years. I do not expect his reaction, and I am a bit thrown off by his wish for the interview to be kind and loving. I am not here to be kind to him, as he suggests in his answer. Attentive, even empathetic, that is fine with me, because that is in line with my ethical research narrative; in line with how I define my researcher self and how I prefer to do my interviews. I feel a growing distance between us due to the misalignment of our positions during the interview. I feel awkward and sense that I have to make clear where I stand. I again decide that honesty is the ethical way to approach him and try to re-align our positions.⁵ I reply as follows:

T: It will be attentive, but I’m not sure whether it will be loving (friendly uncomfortable laughter).

M: I think that is the same.

His reaction feeds my internal conversation on research ethics. I cannot possibly agree with him. I feel I have to be honest so he knows what he can expect from me. I sense I have to make clear that I see it differently. Being attentive is a morally and methodologically good stance for a researcher, but loving is not right in this setting. I have to be frank, to explain that a situation of misalignment has developed. I have to make clear that it will not be loving, but that I still will treat him fairly.

T: No, no, there is a difference.

The negotiation of research ethics continues as he feels the need to explain himself. He refers to a talk show he was invited to. The host said to him that she had to be hard on him. He explains he did not feel like going and says: "People have been very hard on me for three years." He continues his explanation by stating that he wrote a piece this morning on perspectives:

M: I always try to discover what the perspective is of the other. And then I make my next move. I am trying to relate that you can understand each other. That is what I mean with loving.

In reaction, I try to realign our narratives. I start explaining to him that my method in my studies has been to focus on the perspective of research participants and see social reality through their eyes, how they attach meaning to their social world, after which the following interaction develops.

M: I think that you are personal; we will discuss that later. You are choosing to focus on a background approach, which indeed has been glossed over, I think. But there is also a systems approach.

T: Yes, of course, yes.

M: It is a very long list. The world does not know this list. That is just not right.

After this back-and-forth dance of misalignment and realignment, Mark seemed to accept my performance of integrity as valid, but we continued to negotiate research ethics, specifically in relation to my future publications on Mark. We decided that I would send him drafts of publications on him so that he could check whether they are in line with our interviews. As Mark felt mistreated by the media and the academic establishment, I wanted to give him the assurance that I had no intention to misrepresent him. We agreed that he could indicate what he does not like, and I would change that or rephrase that in a way that is acceptable for him. I did not have a problem with this arrangement because this was in line with how I define the way I do research. I see a qualitative interview as a coproduction and that this arrangement extends the coproduction even after the interview.

In this specific context of researching academic fraud, the distinction between the researcher as a performer of integrity and the research participant as audience becomes problematic at times. In many ways Mark was involved in a performance of integrity, showing, as he did in the lecture in the church, that he was not an academic

monster. As explained in Müller (2024) in the years after he was caught, he was engaged in a long-term process trying to normalize his shamed self by using techniques of neutralization (Matza and Sykes 1957).

During the first interview, we also negotiated a shared definition of how to interact. Almost naturally, the interview is redefined as an interaction similar to a debate: we challenge each other and try to convince each other, alternating situations of misalignment and realignment. This created a relationship in which we could communicate in a frank and direct way, as can be seen in the previous interview example. Mark highlighted during the research that he appreciated the reciprocity that was part of our engagement. At times, he pointed out that he valued my open and direct approach and that he appreciated my commitment to trying to understand him. For instance, when I discussed the book he published on his fraud, I held it in my hand. He saw that I had made many notes in it and asked if he could have a look at it. When he went through the book, he smiled and said that I had really taken his work seriously and that he liked that.

After the interviews, Mark and I stayed in contact and our reciprocal relation developed in different directions. Mark reviewed my first draft of a publication on his fraud that focused on his academic socialization into academic misconduct. I felt it was ethical for me to support Mark in his effort to get back on track again. I invited him to give a lecture on his fraud at my university during which students could ask questions. Through my network I was invited to be a speaker on Mark's fraud at a leadership training for civil servants. I negotiated with this institute to invite Mark for a commission, and we presented together.

Though Mark and I did not have any contact for several years, I felt obliged to send him a draft version of an article at the end of 2022, as I promised him at the beginning of the research. The paper focuses on our interactions during the interviews and how I navigate between empathy and challenging him. It has a frank, open, and autoethnographic character as I describe my emotional reactions to him, as can be seen in the excerpt discussed previously.

His response to the first draft of this article was negative. Literally he said, "I veto it" and added that it was harmful. I was stunned because I had never given him the right to veto. But also, I was surprised by his overall negative reaction. I had not expected this reaction for three reasons: (1) I did not present any new data, (2) we had a relationship in which frankness and confronting each other were accepted, and (3) I thought that Mark had moved on since 2015 and had come to terms with his past self. In hindsight, my main mistake was that I relied on my past performance of integrity, but because of the long period of non-communication I should have started all over again and engaged in an active performance of integrity, reestablishing our relationship.

I tried to engage in a negotiation of research ethics with Mark. But when I asked him whether he could indicate which parts were a problem for him so I could adapt them in a way acceptable to him, he refused any cooperation. He said that the whole paper was harmful.

I did not feel that he would have the right to stop me from publishing the article. Still, in reaction the situation triggered an internal conversation which led me to try to look at the paper from his perspective. I could see two reasons why Mark would be upset: (1) the way I represent him in the interview is not flattering. He might feel embarrassed by his answers which contrast with his aspired self; (2) the other reason he might be upset is that I show explicitly my emotional reactions to him, which vary from disagreement to bewilderment. But on the other hand, debating was an integral element of our interaction and Mark had engaged with me in a similar way. So, I asked myself, what has changed?

I needed to know more about him to understand his reaction, so I searched for signs of him on the internet. I found an interview from 2020 in which he represents himself as a victim as he did in earlier interviews. He also seems to regret that he sought the attention of the media. He indicates that he probably published his first book too early. When I visit his website, I notice that Mark had deleted all references, articles and videos, related to his fraud, which had been available on his website for years. After years of engaging with the media and discussing his fraud, Mark seems to have decided to break with the past and his former public persona. I concluded that this seemed to shape his negative reaction too. My article hit him as a boomerang from his painful past which he wanted to leave behind. Was it ethical to continue? To paraphrase Becker (1967), whose side was I on? Mark was certainly not an underdog, beaten and exploited by the system. Mark was a privileged person who played the system, misused his position of power and harmed those who were dependent on him.

This situation triggered another internal conversation about research ethics. Should Mark have the power to silence me as a criminologist? Is it acceptable that any high-status white-collar offender can use ethical research guidelines to control the way social scientists write about him or her? This will make us as social scientists vulnerable, manipulatable, and could compromise our work. In addition, I think that there are other ethical standards in cases of studying up, specifically for high-status white-collar offenders with a public face who have misused their “position of power and trust” to advance their career. As they have had a negative impact on society, they should be part of a public academic exploration analyzing their misdeeds (Souleles 2021). I decided that Mark was in no position to stop my publication. I offered him to change parts he did not like, but he rejected this offer. To my utter disappointment, I did not see any opportunity to re-align our perspectives on the draft that I had sent him.

As the original research took place in a time and country where REBs were absent, we did not sign any documents that we could fall back on. In this period, I realized that a signed agreement would have been helpful and would work to my advantage. I decided to discuss this ethical dilemma with the chair of the research ethics committee of my faculty. She stated that in principle my paper was in line with the research ethics guidance of the faculty, but that it was best to have a defensive approach. Embracing a pragmatic stance, she suggested that I anonymize the text. She stated

that this was the best way to comply with the ethical guidelines of our university and the university would support me in case of an escalation.

Her reaction triggered an internal conversation of the validity and the consequences of her suggestion which conflicted with the researcher self. On an ethical level, I felt I had to reject the advice of the head of the ethics committee. The first reason was that Mark had done everything to be in the public eye. He had sought publicity at least until 2020. As I write, it is still easy to find many documents on him, ranging from interviews with him to videos of his public presentations. And anonymizing would be a hollow gesture as it is easy to retrace him on the internet. Still, I complied with the ethical guidelines of my university for pragmatic reasons, as I wanted to move ahead with my article.

In this period, I also engaged in an external dialogue with several colleagues in an informal way and as a result of presentations I have given on the ethical issues related to this research. I wanted to know whether I was on the right path trying to publish an article on a fraudster who rejected the first draft of my publication on him. I was surprised by the shared and unequivocal character of the reactions. Where I still felt uncomfortable going ahead, most people said that I had the right to publish the article in an anonymized manner.

I felt supported by the reactions of my colleagues, and I decided to send the anonymized article to the *British Journal of Criminology*. As I followed the ethical guidelines of my university, I felt protected. But my submission got rejected immediately because I had transgressed their research ethics guidelines, as Mark did not want the paper to be published. I was shocked and so was the head of the REB of my university. I wanted to engage in a negotiation about research ethics with the Chief Editor and asked for clarification. His reply was that the journal and its publisher had decided that the article was not ethical. Again, I asked for clarification, but that never came. I thought that it was appalling that the journal let itself be compromised by a high-status white-collar offender who knew how to manipulate the ethical guidelines to save face. Of course, I am not sure, but my gut feeling is that the publisher, who acted as a shadow actor, wanted to avoid a liability case and made a risk assessment, which uncritically was accepted by the *British Journal of Criminology*.

During the review process with another journal, I decided, triggered by the reviewers' comments, to put less emphasis on the emotional and confrontational part of the paper and focus more on the analysis of how Mark used techniques of neutralization (Matza and Sykes 1957) to normalize his shamed self (Müller 2024). Was this an ethical decision? No, not in principle, as I followed the excellent comments of the reviewers. But the fact was that the result was less problematic from an ethical perspective and less potentially harmful for Mark. As a result, I felt relieved and realized that in the back of my mind I still was engaged in an internal conversation about research ethics. My preference would have been to share the final version with Mark, as this is in line with how I want to perform integrity. But I was advised not to do this as I had done what I had to do according to the ethics guidelines of my university.⁶

In sum, performing integrity played a decisive role in this case, from the beginning, gaining access to Mark, to the end, when submitting a paper and dealing with editorial reviews. I had to remedy ethical misalignments with several audiences, such as Mark's PhD students, Mark, the head of the REB of my university, and the *British Journal of Criminology*.

In several phases of this research, I engaged in a prolonged and in-depth internal conversation considering aligning actions to manage problematic situations, such as how to approach Mark at the beginning of the research, how to deal with his "ve-to" and the suggestion of the head of the research ethics committee to anonymize the article. Performing integrity was not only shaped by these social actors, but also by the researcher self. I avoided re-alignment that threatened my moral stance as a researcher.

Because of the highly public, emotive and moral character of the researched transgression, this case consisted of a complicated, multi-layered and conflict-ridden way of negotiating ethics and performing integrity. This case shows how to act in situations of ethical misalignments is highly debatable and shaped by how a researcher relates to the social worlds they interact with, which includes research participants, colleagues, editors of academic journals, reviewers, and institutional actors.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have followed the suggestion coming from the qualitative literature criticizing REBs to gain a deeper understanding of the daily practice of performing integrity in qualitative fieldwork (van den Hoonaard 2023). The three discussed cases are related to transgressive social worlds, and more specifically to problematic situations in which there is misalignment, defined as a mismatch between how social actors define the situation. This misalignment is shaped by the specific cultural context of each study: the politics of stigmatization in relation to cannabis shops, privacy problems related to taking photos within an anarchistic social world and the stigmatization of an academic fraudster. While in non-stigmatized research performing integrity tends to be routine, in the cases discussed here it has a more dynamic and challenging character.

Performing integrity consisted of being involved in a constant process of managing situations of misalignment, which goes beyond the static research logic within the REB narrative. This article highlighted an element of aligning strategies that is hardly discussed; sensing the development of a possible misalignment and raising this in the interaction, an intervention which tended to take place at the beginning of the research. In the coffeeshop study I sensed that the research participant was uncomfortable, and I highlighted this during our interview. In the academic fraud study, there were several situations of sensing misalignments, starting with the alienation I felt when meeting Mark for the first time after his lecture in the church and the discussion at the beginning of the interview on how to interact with Mark.

In the Buurland study I sensed a tension between the local culture around using visual methods and the REB guidelines.

Sensing misalignment and trying to react appropriately goes hand in hand with engaging in an internal conversation, as the researcher self is trying to understand and explain the divergence in the definition of the situation. It is crucial to understand that the way research participants react to the researcher is valuable as “data.” Their reaction to us gives us insight into the social worlds that we study, in how our research participants define the situation. In order to realign, the researcher has to understand the perspectives of research participants and will thus gain a deeper understanding of their social worlds.

In all three cases, research participants interacted in a way which was not in line with my expectations. The coffeeshop owner showed resistance by giving incomplete answers, the inhabitants of Buurland claimed control by consciously constructing their self-presentation while being photographed, and Mark indicated he wanted to be treated in a “loving” way. In the internal conversation that followed, I gained a deeper understanding by reflecting on the observed behavior within the wider social contexts of the three studies. These insights correspond, respectively, to the disrupted relation between coffeeshop owners and the city of Rotterdam, the social meanings of being photographed in the context of Buurland, and the stigmatization of Mark as an academic “monster.”

But in order to realign definitions of the situation, one has to go beyond an internal conversation and embrace a more dialogical modus of performing integrity. This took place in all three cases. The research participants and I became involved in a dialogue about who commissioned the cannabis shops study, how to take photographs of the inhabitants of Buurland, and the emotional and moral tone of interviewing Mark. The dialogue triggered a deeper understanding of the research participant’s definition of the situation, which played a fundamental role in reflecting on and choosing aligning actions. In the cannabis study I realized that another researcher acted as a shadow actor to discredit me, which was resolved by using the contract between the city and the university as a resource for realignment. In the academic fraud case, accepting the definition of the interview as an open debate realigned me and Mark. In the Buurland study, prioritizing the local definition of taking photographs as “posing” over the REB narrative was crucial in aligning with the research participants.

When we look at the stages of doing research, it becomes clear that problematic situations which require realignment tend to take place when relations between the researcher and the research participants have a liminal character and still need to be developed. Especially at the beginning of the research, performing integrity is necessary to define oneself as a reliable and credible researcher. When this becomes problematic, researchers have to consider actions of realignment. In two cases—researching coffeeshops and Mark’s academic fraud—realignment with research participants had to take place in the beginning of the research. In both cases performing integrity included sensing that a situation

of misalignment had developed, raising this issue, and discussing it. In the Buurland study and the interviews with Sara, Mark's former PhD student, performing integrity as an active form of re-alignment was not needed. In both cases past performances of integrity contributed to establishing my identity as trustworthy and credible.

The three cases show that performing integrity consists of navigating between different ethical narratives. The cases show that navigating is limited by the threat to self as defined by the involved social actors. The PhD students of Mark who declined to participate saw me as a threat to their aspired selves because they defined me as prejudiced against them. Mark rejected the draft version of the article as he saw it as a threat to his aspired self. Performing integrity was also shaped and limited by the researcher self. In the Buurland study I chose to engage with the local narrative on privacy and photography over that of the REB because this was in line with how I do research and how I define myself as a researcher. In the case of researching Mark's fraud, I did not align myself with his veto because I considered this a threat to my self-definition as a scholar.

In general, performing integrity means trying to find an alignment that suits both researcher and research participants, but this was not the case in the final phase of researching Mark's fraud. The decision to persist in publishing was not only shaped by my self-definition as a researcher but also by Mark's high status and his misuse of that status to advance his career. To paraphrase Becker (1967), I was not "on the side" of the former top dog protecting his social status. I do think that in research that involves "studying up" there are different standards for performing integrity (Souleles 2021). High status social actors tend to have ample resources to manage stigma, as is the case with Mark, who had access to many media outlets to redefine himself publicly. Still, though I decided to persist in publishing the article on Mark, I continued to be engaged in performing integrity while rewriting and anonymizing the article with the intention to minimize potential harm.

The three cases show that researching transgressive social worlds can become highly challenging because it can endanger the aspired self of the research participants. The researcher participant's sense of threat can be explained by the fact that they have been scrutinized by media and state agencies and therefore feel threatened and stigmatized. In these situations, performing integrity gains a dynamic, moral and emotional character and requires an internal/external conversation reflecting on the validity of competing ethical narratives and on which (re-)aligning actions to take.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

NOTES

1. At first glance performing integrity might be read as “Goffmanian” reputation management. But in fact, this article goes beyond this specific understanding of performing integrity. I am not stating that performing integrity by definition does not have the dimension of reputation management while doing research, but in the three cases that I discuss here I do not focus on this dimension as it was not a central feature of these cases.
2. All names in this article are pseudonyms.
3. The shadow actor shows similarities with Athen’s concept of “phantom others” (1994), who are also not physically present in the interaction. The difference is that social actors are aware of phantom others as they play a role in the internal conversation. One might say that shadow actors can become phantom others when they start to shape the internal conversation and the definition of the situation. In addition, I prefer shadow over phantom as shadow seems more neutral than phantom, which also carries an eerie “connotation.”
4. These interview excerpts come from the anonymized draft version of the paper that I had send to Mark, which I excluded from the final published version. I have changed some parts for editorial reasons, such as adding the concepts of negotiating research ethics, and reflecting on the internal conversation that was part of that.
5. The description of the internal conversation is based on notes taken during the interviews and methodological reflections on the interviews while analyzing them. The internal conversation is an ongoing process and capturing this in words is a “rationalization” and maybe even a “reification” of a thought and feeling process that has a more fluid, dynamic and intuitive character while doing interviews. But as we are stuck with words there is nothing left than to accept this “freezing” of the internal conversation which does not justice to its liquid, jittery and multidimensional character. This problem might be solved by moving to the genres of art and poetry, but this has not been my preferred choice of communication in this publication.
6. In line with this advice, I also did not send this current paper to him.

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