

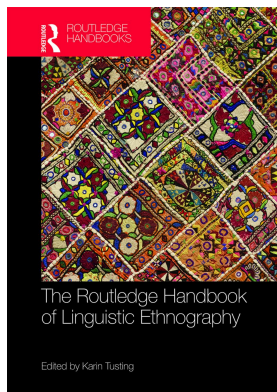
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Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Ethnography

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Ethics

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315675824-14>

Fiona Copland

Published online on: 20 Sep 2019

How to cite :- Fiona Copland. 20 Sep 2019, *Ethics from: The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Ethnography* Routledge

Accessed on: 08 Jun 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315675824-14>

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Introduction

As the Introduction to this collection and other chapters explain, a precise definition of linguistic ethnography (LE) is difficult; rather than describing a finite set of procedures, it is an umbrella term that seeks to provide a space for scholars using ethnographic and linguistic tools of data collection and analysis across a range of disciplines. What is more, LE is “an interpretive approach which studies the local and immediate actions of actors from their point of view and considers how these interactions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures” (Copland & Creese, 2015, p. 13). LE, therefore, supports researchers to answer two questions that Heller posed over 30 years ago:

What is it about the way we use language that has an impact on social processes?
What is it about social processes that influences linguistic ones?

(Heller, 1984, p. 54)

Because of the focus on the social, in which human interactions are a central unit of analysis, ethics is hugely important in linguistic ethnographic work. In all stages of planning, data collection and analysis, the researcher makes decisions concerning the well-being of the participants. Across the same timescale, the researcher also makes decisions about the well-being of the research project. It is when the well-being of participants clashes with the well-being of the research that ethical decision-making comes into its own.

In this chapter, I will first outline key ethical concepts pertaining to LE research, from a historical perspective. I will then discuss critical issues and debates which trouble researchers in the social sciences in general and, in some cases, linguistic ethnographers in particular, before turning to current concerns in the field. Finally, I will suggest some implications for practice of which researchers involved in LE should be mindful. At points in the chapter, I have inserted six different ethical dilemmas that colleagues, students and I have faced in our linguistic ethnographic work. I use these dilemmas to illustrate the ethical principles under scrutiny and to demonstrate the contextual nature of ethical decision-making.

Historical perspectives

It is fair to say that in the social sciences, ethical principles for the most part derive from medical sciences. The reasons are both historical and pragmatic. Medical scientists have for many years been expected to consider ethical issues in their work. Indeed, the American Medical Association first introduced a code of ethics in 1847 and ethics is taught on medical and biomedical programmes globally; Keele University in the UK even offers an MSc in Medical Ethics. In contrast, in the social sciences, ethical considerations have only recently come to the fore. This is not to say that social scientists did not behave ethically in the past (although it is clear, reading some research papers, that ethical decision-making was not a central concern) but rather that there was no explicit code to guide their practice. Over the last 20 years or so, social scientists have been expected to explain their ethical stance both to ethical review boards (which will be discussed in the ‘Critical issues and debates’ section) and also in their writing. With no defined body of work in social science ethics to guide them, social scientists have turned to medical ethics.

It is important to be aware that in the medical sciences, ethical principles have been developed over time. Many have been refined after medical research has either gone wrong or been challenged, making ethical decision-making visible. Some of these ethical dilemmas are well-known, such as the Tuskegee Syphilis trial (1932–1972) in which black adult males with syphilis were not treated with penicillin, in order for scientists to observe the natural progression of the disease. While it is almost impossible to imagine such an ‘experiment’ being allowed today, medical science ethics continue to be debated, for example, in relation to stem cell experiments. The challenge in this area is to balance the requirement to respect the value of human life with the duty to prevent or alleviate suffering (Eurostemcell, 2018). This concern is generally called ‘*beneficence*’ (that is, ‘do good’) and contrasted with its negative (avoid ‘*maleficence*’, that is, do no harm). In the case of Tuskegee, the researchers believed that the experiment would provide evidence to treat syphilis more effectively in the future (beneficence). However, to create this evidence, men were denied medical support, and hence suffered (maleficence).

While it is rare in social sciences to have to consider moral dilemmas of the import of Tuskegee, it is common to have to weigh the merits of beneficence and maleficence and to decide in favour of one or the other. The British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL), of which the Linguistic Ethnography Forum (LEF) is a Special Interest Group, in 2016 updated its ‘Guidelines on good practice in applied linguistics’ (BAAL, 2016) and provides useful help in this area with a particular focus on informants.

Informants are the people involved in the research (often called participants or even actors). They must be fully briefed about the research and they must give their consent to take part in it: this is called ‘*informed consent*’. In the Tuskegee experiment described above, informants were not aware that they were taking part in research and so they would not be treated: their consent, therefore, was not informed.

Usually, consent is evidenced through a signed document. In order for ‘informed consent’ to be obtained, full details of the research are usually presented on an information sheet, which contains details of the project, contact details in case the informant wants to discuss an issue involving the research and a list of research activities the informant agrees to take part in, such as recording or interviewing. The informant will be encouraged to keep this page for reference. On a separate page, the informant will be asked to sign and date to demonstrate consent. The researcher will keep this page. An example can be seen in Figure 14.1.

Dear Student

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in the focus group. Data from the focus group will be used to develop findings for the British Council project, *Master's programmes in ELT: A survey of UK provision and student experiences*, currently being undertaken by researchers at the University of Stirling. The project aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What Master's courses in ELT are currently offered in the UK?
2. What are the modes/formats (including online and blended), components (including dissertations) and target students of the different programmes?
3. What are the key factors influencing a student's decision to enrol on one of these programmes?
4. What are students' expectations of their chosen programmes?
5. In what ways do the programmes fulfil (or fail to fulfil) their expectations?

The focus groups will be recorded and the data transcribed. You will not be identified by name and no personal details about you will be disclosed. The words you speak in the focus group may be used verbatim in research reports and other academic papers.

You are free to withdraw at any point from the focus group without explanation.

If you would like at any point to ask questions about the project, please contact Professor Fiona Copland at the University of Stirling (fiona.copland@stir.ac.uk).

Once again, thank you very much for taking part. If you would like your name to be entered into a draw to win Amazon vouchers, please give your email address to the focus group leader.

All best wishes

The ELTRA Team

Consent form

Master's programmes in ELT: A survey of UK provision and student experiences

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the focus group. We very much appreciate your time.

Please read, tick if you agree, and then sign.

- a. I have read the information sheet about the aims of the focus group. ()
- b. I agree to take part. ()
- c. I agree that the focus group can be audio-recorded. ()
- d. I agree that the focus group can be photographed for identification purposes. ()
- e. I agree that the photographs can be used in publication. ()
- f. I agree that the focus group can be video recorded for transcription purposes. ()
- g. I agree that the video can be used for publication purposes (e.g. articles, conference presentations). ()
- h. I agree that the data from the focus group can be used in academic publications. ()
- i. I agree that the focus group facilitator can photograph the artefacts we use. ()
- j. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time. ()

Name: _____

University: _____

Signature: _____

I would like to be entered into the draw for Amazon vouchers. My email address is: _____

Figure 14.1 Example of two-page consent form

Although most institutions prefer informants to sign consent forms, there are times when signing may not be appropriate. Consider this first ethical dilemma:

Ethical dilemma 1

A colleague was carrying out research in a school in East Africa. The colleague wanted to observe a teacher's class and then interview her about her teaching and the challenges she faced. The colleague explained the research in detail to the teacher, who was happy to take part. However, when the colleague produced the consent form to sign, the teacher became anxious. She spent some time discussing with her colleagues whether she should sign or not. Eventually, she acquiesced. But she remained uncomfortable with the decision.

For this East African teacher, signing one's name is a significant act, and usually reserved for extremely important documents of a legal nature. There was a mismatch, therefore, between the value she ascribed to signing and the value ascribed to allowing a researcher to observe her class. For this reason, she spent some time coming to a decision, signing reluctantly when she realised how important it was to the researcher. In this case, oral agreement should have been acceptable (for a full discussion, see Agar, 2008) but was not discussed. Instead, both researcher and participant felt uncomfortable going into the observation: the researcher as she had brought into play a set of procedures that were alien to the teacher with whom she was working and the participant because she had signed her name and was worried about the consequences.

This ethical dilemma clearly illustrates another central tenet of medical ethics: *autonomy*. In research, participants have the right to take part or not take part: the consent form in this case, as in many others, provided the evidence that the participant was behaving autonomously. However, the purport given to the consent form (often by institutional ethics boards) can mean, as in this case, that the evidence becomes more important than the consent. We will return to this point below in the discussion of institutional ethics boards.

The Tuskegee medical experiment revealed another issue that has influenced how informants are treated in research: *anonymity*. It is not hard to find online photographs of the men who unwittingly took part in the experiment, while Tuskegee is easy to find on a map. Not only were these men, therefore, subjected to an experiment which neither respected the value of their lives nor prevented or alleviated suffering (in fact doing the opposite), their identities were not kept secret. Today, anonymity is taken very seriously. Every effort is made to protect the identity of informants, for example, through generalisation (e.g. 'a school in East Africa' rather than 'Government School Kidiri in Kenya'), pseudonyms (which informants might be invited to choose for themselves) and pixellation (when video or photos are part of the research). Although some informants state that they would like their real names to be used in the research, it is generally advisable not to agree to this for a number of reasons, not least because they may change their minds at a later date (for a full discussion, see Copland & Creese, 2015).

Informants also have the right to *confidentiality*. In endeavouring to ensure confidentiality, researchers keep informants' personal details in a secure environment where others cannot access them. These days, the secure environment is often a data storage facility in a cloud administered by the researcher's institution. However, if researching in remote areas, access to a virtual storage space may not be possible and so data must be protected in other ways, for example, through locking it away or by using passwords known only to the researcher. Despite protections that researchers may put in place, it is difficult to guarantee confidentiality and so informants should only be told that every effort will be made to protect them.

Information about anonymity and confidentiality is generally included in the information sheet that accompanies the consent form (see Figure 14.1).

Informants have the right to withdraw from a research project even when they have agreed to take part, a core principle of autonomy. In the case of Tuskegee, informants were not afforded this entitlement. In reality, withdrawing can be a difficult issue as this next ethical dilemma shows.

Ethical dilemma 2

During a study of international workers, a field researcher began to believe that one of the informants, Peter (a pseudonym), was suffering from depression. After Peter became very upset one day when other researchers were present, his case was discussed in the research team. The project leader felt that Peter's health should be protected by removing him from the project. The field researcher, however, believed that Peter's self-esteem would suffer if he were asked to withdraw. So, she decided not to broach the subject with him.

In this case, both researchers were concerned for the health of the informant but each had different beliefs about how his health could be protected. The project leader advocated withdrawing him, not least because the interests of the project might be compromised by continuing with a participant with mental health issues. On the other hand, the field researcher, who had developed a relationship with the participant and realised how important taking part was to Peter's confidence and esteem, felt that the project's well-being was being put before the informant's. Although we will never know if the decision to retain the informant was the right one, the researchers acted with ethical integrity, with both advocating for the well-being of the participant.

As discussed above, the Tuskegee men did not give informed consent. They believed that they were taking part in an experiment designed to develop drugs for blood disease: instead, the researchers were examining how syphilis developed over a period of time if not treated. As such, the research could be classified as *covert*. Covert research, where researchers pretend to do one thing but do another, or where researchers go under cover and pretend to be a bona fide member of a group they are researching, is no longer condoned by learned groups such as BAAL (if indeed it ever was):

Covert research and deliberate deception are unacceptable to the extent that they violate the principle of informed consent and the right to privacy.

(BAAL, 2016, p. 5)

However, there is an ethical issue that muddies the water to an extent. As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, linguistic ethnographers often take human interaction as a unit of analysis, studying people in their natural environments. They may be concerned, therefore, that 'natural' behaviour may change if participants are told of the focus of research. In these cases, BAAL suggests:

One defensible option would be to withhold the specific objectives of the research without deliberately misleading or giving false information (for example, by informing doctors and patients that the research concerns the structure or progress of doctor-patients interviews without specifying that the aim is to study pause phenomena as an index of power)...After the event, informants should then give their permission before the data can be used.

(BAAL, 2016, p. 5)

Of course, this approach would not have been acceptable in the Tuskegee case as treatment (or non-treatment) could not be revised. However, it seems a sensible way forward for linguistic ethnographic work, as long as researchers are stringent about their responsibilities to informants and destroy data collected in this way if permission is later withheld.

Before we leave this section, we turn to the final medical ethics principle, that of *justice*. Justice ensures that everyone is treated fairly and equally (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). In the Tuskegee case, men were not treated fairly although it could be argued that they were treated equally. In linguistic ethnographic work, issues of fairness and equality tend to focus on voice and voices: who gets heard? Consider the next ethical dilemma from this perspective.

Ethical dilemma 3

A linguistic ethnographic researcher wanted to publish a paper which focussed on two participants disagreeing about decisions made in the research site. One participant was the group leader and the other a case worker. The linguistic ethnographer showed the paper to both participants in the interests of disclosure and membership (see Richards, 2003). The group leader vehemently objected to the paper as she felt that the case worker, and by implication the linguistic ethnographer, had misrepresented the discussions at the site. The group leader had the power to stop the research from continuing. Reluctantly, the researcher redacted some sections and changed others, which gained the approval of the group leader.

The researcher in this scenario had to deal with competing claims on the text for publication. From her perspective, she was describing the research site and the debates within it. As an ethnographer, she was aware that this perspective was one of many, but it had a contribution to make to understanding the site. The group leader disagreed with this perspective, which she believed misrepresented the site and demanded that it be deleted, thereby denying both the case worker and the linguistic ethnographer their voice in describing what happened. It could be argued that the case worker was treated much less fairly than either the researcher or the leader as not only was her disagreement made known through the writing, but it was then silenced through the editing. However, despite the fact that she invoked her powerful position to silence others, the group leader's actions could also be defended. She believed that she was acting in the best interests of the research site and the workers in it. She had a duty of care, in her own view, to protect both. The researcher, for her part, had to pit her desire to continue at the research site against a recognition that her work was compromised because of the group leader's agenda. She chose the former but remained uncomfortable with the decision.

The dilemma demonstrates that issues of fairness and equality are rarely easily resolved. It also shows how promises made to gain access to research sites can later come back to haunt us, making us wonder if we were naïve in our negotiations. In terms of ethnographic work, the dilemma highlights the issue of the contingent nature of working in the field where it may be necessary to reach compromises we may not have imagined when we first begin our research plans.

This section has examined historical perspectives on ethics, drawing on a medical ethics framework and BAAL's Good Practice guidelines, and illustrating how the medical principles of beneficence, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, overtness, autonomy and the right to withdraw, and justice affect decision-making for those working in LE. I now turn to examining critical issues and debates in the field.

Critical issues and debates

As described above, demonstrating that they are researching ethically has increasingly become a concern of social scientists. As a result, critical debates have emerged. The first concerns what has been called ‘ethics creep’, that is, “a dual process whereby the regulatory structure of the ethics bureaucracy is expanding outward, colonizing new groups, practices, and institutions, while at the same time intensifying the regulation of practices deemed to fall within its official ambit” (Haggerty, 2004, p. 394). The workings of ethics creep are illustrated in the following ethical dilemma.

Ethical dilemma 4

Recently, a university in the UK decided to centralise its ethical approval processes by creating one board that would provide approval for all staff and doctoral research projects across the University, with members of the board being nominated by each School. (Previously, each School had convened its own board and had been able to enter into dialogue with researchers about their research in a timely manner.) A doctoral student carrying out a linguistic ethnographic project applied to the new Board for ethical approval to carry out a pilot project which involved recording and taking field notes in her research site. The Board objected to the recordings, which drastically reduced the scope of the study. In addition, it requested that the researchers shared her field notes with the participants. It took nearly three months to reconcile the research design with the Board’s demands, by which time the activity the researcher was interested in observing was nearly over.

In this example, both aspects of ethics creep are present. In centralising ethical approval processes, the institution has in effect colonised localised ethical approval processes, which previously responded to ethical approval requests with agility. Centralisation also led to a de-personalisation of ethical approval, creating a situation where the researcher and the board do not communicate except through formal documents. The intensification of the regulation of practices can be seen in the Board’s specific demands with regard to recording and field notes. These practices common in LE work are essential in many cases for supporting researchers in answering Heller’s two questions, cited above:

What is it about the way we use language that has an impact on social processes? What is it about social processes that influences linguistic ones?

(Heller, 1984, p. 54)

The Board not only questions these research tools but through suggesting that the researcher shares her field notes with participants, it attempts to regulate a practice which has served ethnographers for many years. It is highly unusual to share field notes with participants for all kinds of reasons, chief amongst which is ensuring integrity (see Copland, 2018), but either the Board does not understand ethnography or it does not approve of ethnographic work; both are concerning for linguistic ethnographers.

This institution is not alone in its attempts to standardise ethical procedures. However, as can be seen, the process has created “tensions between centralized professional standards and local practices” (Jaspers et al., 2013, p. 311). It threatens to impinge on the academic freedom of the researcher and in doing so damage the ethnographic tradition within which she is working. What is more, the protocols of the Board – which in this case required the researcher to complete a form, submit it, respond to queries, rewrite the form, re-submit it

and then respond to further queries, all over a three-month period – seemed to be more important than the professional judgement of the researcher and her supervisors.

One more point before we leave this critical issue. The researcher at no point was asked to discuss her project with the Board or to speak with a Board advisor face-to-face (or even on the phone) to fully understand the Board's position or to argue her case. The Board seems to have become what Guta et al. (2013, p. 307) call a “faceless bureaucracy”, an apparatus that appears to control and obstruct research. As I will suggest below, given the importance of context to much linguistic ethnographic work, researchers would be best served by having the opportunity to discuss their research with members of ethical approval boards. In the case above, such a discussion would have helped the researcher to understand the Board's concerns about recording at the same time as the researcher having the opportunity to discuss the role of field notes in ethnographic research.

A second critical issue involves sensitivity to ethics in the field. There is no doubt that writing an ethical approval form can be very helpful for researchers as it requires them to concentrate on what they want participants to do and how they will store their research data, amongst other things. However, the increasing dominance of ethical approval boards in the research landscape tends to focus attention on research planning. Because of the nature of linguistic ethnographic research, it is likely that many ethical decisions cannot be anticipated and therefore an ethical response will not have been developed in advance. Researchers, therefore, should be alert throughout a study to situations that require an ethical response. This brings us to our fifth ethical dilemma.

Ethical dilemma 5

A colleague was researching novice teachers in their first year of full-time teaching in country in East Asia. The linguistic ethnographic research project involved observing and recording classes and interviewing teachers after class. One of the teachers in the study, Izumi, found it difficult to cope. She was considered a weak teacher by the educational authorities and was subjected to an observation regime which eventually resulted in her resigning from her post. In one of the interviews with the researcher, Izumi said that she found the observations stressful and she mentioned that the researcher's presence was also stressful. When the researcher was making his interview transcripts, he came across this admission. He admonished himself because he had not tuned into the participant when she had made this comment and so therefore had not acted in her best interests by withdrawing her from the study.

The interview in this research project produced what Guillemain and Gillam (2004), cited in Kubanyiova (2008), call an “ethically important moment[s]”. These are moments in the research when the researcher is called upon to alter his/her gaze from the research project itself to the actors in it. To do this, researchers must remain attentive to potential clashes between the well-being of the research and the well-being of participants (beneficence). The researcher in this dilemma failed to do so. As he explained to me at a later point, he was so focussed on deconstructing the lesson in the post-observation interview that he failed to respond to a covert plea from Izumi to stop the observations. Typing up the transcripts, the ethically important moment reared up and challenged his actions, accusing him of insensitivity and myopia. It is impossible to turn back the clock to rectify the action, but the researcher learned a lesson from this experience about the importance of centring attention on people rather than on the processes of data collection.

Ethically important moments might not necessitate an immediate response. Often, the realisation that something is not quite right takes a little time to reveal itself. Kubanyiova

(2008) describes one such example. In her research project, she asked teachers to write diaries and to attend interviews to collect data about their experiences and beliefs. One teacher was especially excited by the project and keen to take part. However, Kubanyiova began to notice that the participant seemed tired and was struggling to complete the tasks. This went on for some time. Through talking to her and monitoring her contribution, Kubanyiova came to realise that taking part in the project was adversely affecting the teacher's health and gradually counselled her off the project.

Ethical dilemmas 4 and 5 take us to another critical issue: balancing the needs of participants with the needs of the research project. Researchers have a duty to protect participants, but they also have a duty as academics to create knowledge. Kubanyiova (2008, p. 515) argues, if the welfare of the research participants is always prioritised above the contribution to knowledge that the research might make, "there is a risk that this type of situated research... could never contribute fully to the advancement of theoretical knowledge in any discipline". This is an important concept to bear in mind when research requires participants to engage with tasks in addition to their normal work/study, such as writing diaries, giving interviews or, in the case of ethical dilemma 5, allowing the researcher to observe classes. While engagement with such tasks may be an imposition, it can also eventually result in the greater good. In this case, the researcher used the findings to make suggestions to authorities about how to support novice teachers, particularly those who are struggling. The data evidencing the teacher's distress were particularly powerful in this regard. On a practical level, because linguistic ethnographic studies are often quite small-scale involving only a few participants, it is wise when planning to include more participants that a project requires in case of withdrawals, thereby maintaining the integrity of the project in all aspects.

Concern with responding to ethically important moments has resulted in changes to how research projects are instigated in fields such as feminist research (Pillow, 2003). Instead of researchers designing projects and researching 'on' participants, research focusses on areas of interest to participants, who help design the projects and draw up the research questions. Researchers then research 'with' participants, who, it is argued, are more interested and involved because of the relevance of the research. Ethical decision-making in these projects is also shared between participants and researchers thereby reducing the responsibility of each. This is not to say that ethical abuses will no longer take place but it is likely there will be fewer of them.

Researching with participants has another tangible benefit: it is much easier to map and evidence research impact when researcher and participant roles merge as the focus is generally on how life can be improved. The impact agenda has made a huge impact on how research is funded and regarded in the UK at least. Impact can be defined as "an **effect** on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" as a result of the research (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFimpact/>). Funded research projects must generally have a pathway to impact plan which outlines the steps researchers will take to both disseminate research and collect evidence of change. Change can be manifested in a number of ways, for example, as change in the way the subject is discussed (discourse change) or in the way people act (behavioural change). Researching with participants can support both ethical working and ensuring impact and it is likely that in the future, such an approach will gain in popularity.

Current contributions and research areas

Perhaps understandably, as ethical approval boards have become more powerful as overseers of research throughout the academy (Foucault, 1995), articles and chapters about ethics have

proliferated. A recent collection of chapters focussing on ethics in applied linguistics research (De Costa, 2016) is an example of recent interest. In this section, I will discuss current contributions and suggest areas which would benefit from further research.

Copland and Creese (2016) examine macro- and micro-ethics in linguistic ethnographic research. They argue that researchers in LE should pay attention to both macro regimes represented by ethical approval boards and ‘the micro ethics of care’ (Kubanyiova, 2008) which requires researchers to be open to ethically important moments. They suggest that the reflexive imperative of LE provides “the tools for responding to and bridging the micro and the macro ethical domains” (Copland & Creese, 2016, p. 161). They also open out the traditional concerns of ethics – usually stated in relation to participants – to researchers as well, specifically those who work in teams where power comes in to play. Through a case study, they show that in teams, researchers face issues of vulnerability and social justice to which all team members need to pay heed.

Linguistic ethnographic researchers working in digital domains are also considering ethical issues. Blogs, tweets, fora, chat rooms and so on all provide seemingly limitless linguistic data, while participant observation and participation in these arenas can be easy to arrange, requiring the researcher neither to gain access permissions nor to go through other bureaucratic processes. However, this does not mean that linguistic ethnographic research in these fields is without ethical dilemmas. In a Special Edition of *Applied Linguistics Review* dedicated to ethics, Mackenzie (2017) reports on online interactions in a talk forum on the popular UK *Mumsnet* site. She explains that in online cases, scholars advocate for a “case-based, context-sensitive approach to the issue of privacy, ethics and internet research” given the wide variety of work that can be undertaken. While sympathetic with this position, Mackenzie suggests that this advice provides little explicit guidance, “leaving researchers unsure how to proceed ethically in increasingly complex and shifting research contexts” (see too Gao & Tao, 2016). One of the issues is that text in the public domain is often considered to be unregulated, unlike texts produced by participants in a study. Researchers therefore do not apply the same ethical scrutiny to them and their producers as they would to the texts of recruited participants. Mackenzie argues that ethics matter even with digital material, particularly when the researcher is lurking in the digital space. Like Copland and Creese (2016), her response is to adopt what she calls a reflexive-linguistic approach, where linguistic analysis supports the development of reflexivity. Reflexivity generally refers to “the researcher/writer’s ability to reflect on their own positioning and subjectivity in the research and provide an explicit, situated account of their own role in the study and its influence over the findings” (Paltridge et al., 2016, p. 12) and is a key tenet in linguistic ethnographic practice (see Copland & Creese, 2015, for a full discussion). In her blog, MacKenzie explains:

My understanding of the norms of information sharing, privacy and anonymity in Mumsnet Talk was greatly strengthened by my close linguistic analysis of participants’ interactions. For example, I found that some Mumsnet users achieve a degree of privacy when they construct and address specific in-groups of users.

(Jaimack, 2016)

There is an increasing number of researchers working in the medical field who identify with LE (Bezemer, 2015; Swinglehurst, 2015). Recently, Pelletier and Kneebone (2016, p. 270) describe their work in researching error in simulation-based medical education from an ethical perspective, suggesting that simulation teaching is not only identifying error “but also ... what constitutes right and wrong in a professional culture”.

As researchers increasingly work either in superdiverse settings (see Copland (b), 2018) or in communities or countries different to their own (Scheper-Hughes, 2000), cross-cultural ethics come into play. The ethical principles discussed so far in this chapter come from research and practice in (mainly) European/Western countries and have been developed by intellectuals and academics taking a philosophical approach to difficult issues. These principles, however, might not always be relevant to communities with a different approach to life, which might have developed a different set of ethical principles by which to live. This takes us to ethical dilemma 6.

Ethical dilemma 6

A researcher from a European country wanted to research how English language policy was put into practice in primary schools in Japan. The ethical review board of the researcher's European institution required consent from the parents of the children who were in the classes he would observe. When the researcher broached this subject with the Principal of the first school he approached, he was shocked by the response. The Principal was indignant, and suggested that parental consent was not only impossible, it was also insulting. As the Principal, she was held responsible for the welfare of the children and therefore she was the person to decide what was in their best interests. Suggesting that parents should be consulted undermined her authority. She refused to engage any further with the researcher, who had to look for another school in which to conduct the research. After long negotiations with the ethical review board at the western institution, the researcher was given permission to seek *loco parentis* approval from subsequent principals.

This dilemma illustrates the damage that can occur when western ethical values are imposed on cultures which follow different moral codes. In the context described here, the school principal is not only responsible for running the school and ensuring the safety of children, he/she has a strong parenting role, particularly in the early years. He/she takes decisions on behalf of the parents and only consults them if there is a danger of physical harm to children, such as in the case of inoculations. There is a clash, therefore, between the expectations of the western institution and the eastern one. Caught in the middle, the researcher must not only endure the wrath of the principal, he must also spend time and effort explaining the differences in approach to the board and persuading it of a different way to deliver consent.

Duff and Abdi (2016) report on a similar scenario facing Abdi as she carried out research in a Chinese school. In her case, the principal objected to teachers being asked to distribute and then collect consent forms, which students and guardians would have to sign, believing it to be "time-consuming, unnecessary, and institutionally problematic" (Duff & Abdi, 2016, p. 131). They go on to suggest that:

The issue of negotiating formal research ethics protocols in transnational/transcultural research, and particularly in distant sites in other countries, has not been explored, theorised or reported on sufficiently in applied linguistics.

(Duff & Abdi, 2016, p. 131)

Lack of engagement with cross-cultural ethics is not a recent phenomenon. In 1995, Habermas suggested that researchers, participants and other stakeholders in the research should talk about ethical issues and make decisions based on these talks. He called this 'discourse ethics'. Like Habermas, Evanoff (2004) believes that talk is central to resolving ethical clashes, and argues for constructivist ethics in which each ethical issue is resolved locally by critiquing

existing standards and arriving at jointly agreed new ethical norms. More recently, Scherer and Palazzo (2009) have argued that discourse ethics should be supplemented by a culturalist perspective, whereby the mutual relativity of ethics is recognised and the macro-ethical principles of the researcher's institution are not allowed to dominate ethical decision-making. These perspectives deserve to be seriously considered by western institutions; they are otherwise at risk of being accused of ethical imperialism (see Robinson-Pant & Singal, 2016, for further discussion of researching ethically across cultures).

Future directions

It is right that ethical issues have begun to demand the serious attention of all researchers, whatever their field. However, it is rare for social issues to attract attention, whereas medical issues are often debated in the public arena (for example, stem cell research, abortion laws and so on). The steady focus on medical issues, in a range of print and virtual media, has the benefit of ensuring that there is currently a bank of ethical issues for natural science researchers to consult when they face a new ethical challenge. They can see how previous issues were discussed and resolved and this supports them in scrutinising their own practice and prepares them to prepare their own ethical cases. In the social sciences, such a bank does not exist; ethical issues have only recently taken a central place in research literature (de Laine, 2000; De Costa, 2016; Pelletier and Kneebone, 2016). Nonetheless, a bank would be useful, particularly as research in this area is coming under increasing scrutiny. It would also be helpful for when researchers make applications to institutional boards as cases could be cited by researchers making a case for their (linguistic ethnographic) approach. It would perhaps be beneficial for professional associations such as BAAL or LEF to consider hosting this bank to ensure access for social scientists using a range of approaches.

A further area that requires thought is how we train researchers in linguistic ethnographic ethics. Currently, there is little available training either in ethics in general or in LE in particular. Most research methods' modules on doctorate training programmes, and even on Master's programmes, include input on ethics, but these sessions have to cover the general global areas of autonomy, justice and beneficence, as described above, and there is rarely time or opportunity to focus on the particular ethical issues faced by linguistic ethnographers as they attempt to gather data by some of the most ethically fraught methods (participant observation, audio and video recording, and interviews of various sorts from 'go-alongs' (Rock, 2007) to membershiping (Richards, 2003)) and to make sense of the way language impacts social processes and vice versa.

There are a number of programmes that support researchers to take a linguistic ethnographic approach to their work, such as the well-established and highly regarded annual *Ethnography, language and communication* course at King's College London. Ethics should be on their syllabuses, of course. In addition, as online learning becomes increasingly popular, there is no reason why organisations such as BAAL and LEF could not develop materials to support learning in this important area. Guidelines are important, but they do not allow for dialogue. Neither do they offer a range of real-life issues for consideration. Online materials could perhaps do so.

Coupled with the issue of inadequate ethical training in LE is the composition of ethical approval boards. As described in ethical dilemma 4, there is often a lack of understanding of the basic tenets of ethnography on institutional ethics boards. In addition, boards often lack experience of cross-cultural ethics, as ethical dilemma 6 suggests. Given the relative infancy of LE as a research field, it is reasonable to surmise that the ethics of LE will be even

less understood. There is an opportunity here for the LEF to educate both researchers and panellists in the kinds of ethical dilemmas faced when carrying out our work. Dialogue with researchers in other research fields will both enrich linguistic ethnographic projects and at the same time educate colleagues about our (emerging) approaches.

Conclusion

As LE continues to grow, and our understanding of contextualised ethics develops, it is likely that the focus on ethics in research work will come under even greater scrutiny. The ethical dilemmas presented here provide examples of the range of issues that researchers may have to resolve in linguistic ethnographic research projects. The dilemmas also recognise that ethical decision-making is a contingent and inexact process, and that it is rare to come to a decision with which all would be in agreement. Nevertheless, working ethically requires us to recognise ethical issues as they occur, consider a response based on the needs of both the participants and the project, and implement the decision sensitively. I hope that this chapter will support researchers in doing so.

Further reading

- Copland, F., & Creese, A. (2016). Ethical issues in linguistic ethnography: Balancing the micro and the macro. In P.I. De Costa (Ed.), *Ethics in applied linguistics research* (pp. 161–178). London: Routledge. (This chapter provides an introduction to general ethical considerations in research before examining how researchers can meet macro- and micro-ethical expectations.)
- Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and “ethically important moments” in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10, 261–280. (Guillemin and Gillam highlight the importance of reflexivity in ethical decision-making, particularly when in the field. Introducing the concept of ‘ethically important moments’, they show how ethical work is a process with which all researchers should constantly engage.)
- Mackenzie, J. (2017) Identifying informational norms in Mumsnet Talk: A reflexive-linguistic approach to internet research ethics. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 8(2–3), 293–314. doi:10.1515/applirev-2016-1042. (In this paper, Jai Mackenzie examines the ethical issues researchers who work online need to confront.)

Related topics

Participant observation; Collaborative ethnography; The ethnographic interview; Reflexivity.

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