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**This is a pre-print version of the chapter “Ethics in Language and Identity  
Research” by Anna Kristina Hultgren, Elizabeth J. Erling and Qumrul Hasan  
Chowdhury**

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# **The Routledge Handbook of Language and Identity**

**Edited by Sian Preece**

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**Ethics in Language and Identity Research**

*Anna Kristina Hultgren, Elizabeth J. Erling and Qumrul Hasan Chowdhury*

## **Introduction**

It is unlikely to have escaped anyone's notice that ethics – which we will define initially as “the ‘right’ thing to do” – is a key part of the research process. There is no shortage of handbooks, edited volumes and dedicated journals devoted to the issue and most professional organisations, such as the British Association for Applied Linguistics, the Linguistic Society of America, the British Educational Research Association and the British Psychological Society have ethical frameworks as do many funding bodies (Oates 2006; Rice 2011). Most universities in an Anglophone research context also have their own ethical guidelines and processes for monitoring the adherence to ethical codes. In English-dominant settings at a national level, the United Kingdom and Australia have Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs); the United States and Canada have Research Ethics Boards (REBs) and New Zealand, Ethics Committees (Wynn 2011). Although ethics codes are probably most elaborated in the field of medicine, few researchers today, irrespective of the discipline in which they work, can avoid reflecting on ethical issues in their research. So for scholars working in applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, TESOL, ELT, applied language studies or a related field, ethics has become an inescapable and intrinsic part of conducting research.

Aimed at applied linguists whose research projects focus on aspects of language and identity, this chapter sets out to encourage researchers to reflect critically and constructively upon ethics when doing language and identity projects. We recommend thinking of ethics, not as a checklist that needs to be completed and never returned to again, but as something that is intrinsic to the research process. The chapter is not meant as a replacement for ethical guidelines offered by institutions or professional

organisations, such as the British Association for Applied Linguistics. Such guidelines are certainly relevant to those conducting language and identity research and they should be consulted. Rather, the chapter supplements established guidelines by providing real-world examples of the complexities involved in making “ethical” decisions in the research process. A key concept is “ethical literacy”, which is

[...] more than learning how to achieve a favourable opinion from an ethics committee, it is a matter of research quality and integrity. It means encouraging the development of an attitude to research where ethical issues are foregrounded and one where attention to ethical issues is given throughout the process of conducting research (Wiles and Boddy 2013: 1-2).

Striving to become “ethically literate” is a way of reflecting carefully about ourselves and our relationships and responsibilities to each stakeholder who is directly or indirectly involved in or affected by our research: from research participants and collaborators to colleagues, funders, employers, the discipline and society itself. Becoming “ethically literate” is a continually evolving process in which there is no end point. No scholar can ever claim to be fully “ethically literate” as, for every ethical dilemma resolved, new ones will invariably emerge. As a reflection of this, it is becoming increasingly common to establish advisory boards as a condition of funding so that a continuing ethics review can be conducted throughout the project (Hammersley and Traianou 2012). Moreover, in each project, we can try to think of and build on ways to “do better” in future. In order to

do so, we need to continually ask ourselves questions about our research, e.g.: “Am I making the best use of the data I have gathered? Is my study fairly and accurately representing the participants it has engaged with? What do I need to do besides simply put the results out there? Whom should I be talking to about this research, and how?” (Eckert 2013: 25). Other questions include: “Are the people involved in the project being harmed by the research? Are they benefiting from it? Would it be possible/desirable for me to try to enhance that benefit?” (Bond and Tikly 2013: 437). Striving to become “ethically literate” is a way of making researchers reflect carefully about their responsibilities to everyone who is indirectly or directly involved in or affected by their research: from research participants and collaborators to colleagues, funders, employers, the discipline and society itself.

In what follows, we explore some of the reasons why ethics has become such a crucial issue to researchers today and argue that this should be seen against a backdrop of a wider set of sociopolitical changes as well as intellectual shifts which have taken place in the social sciences, including applied linguistics, over the past decades. We then illustrate some ethical dilemmas in practice through a case study of a research project on attitudes to English language learning in rural Bangladesh before we summarise the chapter. Equipped with the concept of “ethical literacy” (Wiles and Boddy 2013), we hope the reader will feel empowered to tackle any ethical dilemma that might emerge in the research process. Before we begin, we want to echo the American sociolinguist Penny Eckert that “no discussion of research ethics can be comprehensive” and that “all one can hope to do in a chapter on research ethics is raise issues” (2013: 11).

## Overview

### *Ethics: why now?*

It is tempting to ask if the increased concern with ethics over the past few decades is a result of humankind generally becoming more “ethical.” Certainly, there may be some evidence to support this when one considers the rise of transformative and emancipatory projects such as feminism, queer theory and Black Power (Punch 1994) and a general increase in concerns with diversity and equality in many organisations and societal domains. Since the end of the Second World War, there has been a growing consciousness of the rights of the individual (ibid.), with the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948. This came only a year after the drawing up of the Nuremberg Code in 1947, the first research ethics code of conduct, aimed at the medical profession, which had been the source of widespread public condemnation after a revelation that doctors had secretly experimented on inmates in concentration camps in the period around the Second World War (Oates 2006).

However, there are also less altruistic and more critical explanations for the increased concern with ethics. These are to do with the general growth in “ethical regulation” and the “audit culture” (Hammersley and Traianou 2012; Shore 2008). Pels suggests that the increased “legalism” since the 1990s has shifted the emphasis in ethics “away from research practice to the practice of rulemaking” (2005: 82). More specifically, organisations, including universities and other research institutions, are increasingly

obliged to demonstrate that they have protocols and regulations in place and that these are abided by to avoid reproach and litigation. In a questionnaire study exploring academics' perceptions of ethics protocols, only 8 per cent of those who had made an application to their institution's ethics committee believed that the proposed changes would protect informants, while 32 per cent believed that the modifications were "detrimental to the welfare of the informants or research participants" (Wynn 2011: 99). A common perception among these respondents was that ethics regulations existed more for the purpose of protecting the university than the research participants (Wynn 2011). Critics also argue that ethics codes compromise the researcher's "sense of personal accountability" (Payne *et al.* 1981: 249), potentially leading to ethical complacency once their project has been formally approved.

Notwithstanding such criticism, it is hard to imagine that some of the research undertaken in the past could be undertaken today. Gone are the days when researchers had carte blanche to treat their research participants as they liked as in the Milgram human obedience experiment where research participants were led to believe that they would give severe electrical shocks to fellow human beings when pressing a button – and still pressed it. In reality, the person they believed to be subjecting to electric shocks was an actor who only pretended to be in pain. The psychological and sociological impact on those "super-obedient" research participants when realising that they were capable of imposing such harm on fellow human beings have been the subject of much discussion. Another example of research that would be unlikely to happen today is the appalling experiments conducted as part of the Tuskegee project undertaken in southern US from

1932 to 1972 where African-American men with syphilis were withheld treatment and kept unaware of their disease in order for doctors to study its development. In this respect, then, it does seem that some societies have advanced in a positive way; at least as far as human research participants are concerned.

Irrespective of whether societies have become more or less ethical over time, there are other reasons why attention to ethics has increased. An important one is a change in research funding structures. In order to receive funding, researchers must ground their project in an issue that helps solve a key societal issue. For instance, as part of their priority to tackle “societal challenge”, the current Horizon 2020 framework (the European Union’s joint framework for research funding) lists among their fundable topics: “health, demographic change and well-being”, “secure, clean and efficient energy” and “climate action, environment, resource efficiency and raw materials” (EU 2014). Buzz words such as “impact”, “knowledge exchange”, “outreach” and “public engagement” all reflect this contemporary concern with paying back society for the funding it has invested in research. As far as ethics is concerned, the involvement of additional stakeholders in the research process adds complexity, as there are then more interests at stake.

Another reason, which is particularly relevant to the case study described in this chapter, is globalisation. Transnational research collaboration has become much more widespread over the past decades, and may even be a condition for obtaining funding. The funding for the project described below, for instance, was contingent on building an international



research partnership. Such funding structures may privilege projects that are composed of international teams, which raise further challenges of how to conduct research ethically (Robinson-Pant and Singal 2013). We will consider some such issues below.

### *Epistemology and ethics*

The increased concern with ethics is not only a result of sociopolitical changes such as those briefly outlined above, but also of epistemological and ontological shift emanating from within the academy. Epistemology has to do with how claims to knowledge are made and how researchers can be certain that what they are observing is a true and faithful account of their object of study. Ontology, in turn, relates to the nature of things and how concepts should be understood. Of course, the extent to which sociopolitical changes are distinguishable from academic changes is questionable, but we keep them apart here for analytic purposes.

Within the social and linguistic sciences, the concept of “ethics” has not escaped the poststructuralist turn to complexity, fluidity and relativism which has reconceptualised other key concepts, such as “identity”, “language”, “gender”, etc. (for a fuller discussion of such shifts, see Baxter; Benwell & Stokoe and McAvoy & Jones this volume). As far as “ethics” is concerned, one outcome of the epistemological shifts which have occurred over the past few decades is an increased realisation that researchers need to move away from thinking of ethics as a set of items to tick off on a checklist as may happen when they seek ethical clearance for their research project from their institution’s ethics

committee (a prerequisite in most UK and US universities). Instead ethics is viewed as an intrinsic part of the epistemology, theory and methodology of a research project and is embedded into every step of the research project, from the questions asked to how the findings are reported (e.g. Stutchbury and Fox 2009). There has been a shift from absolutism to relativism and a realisation that this opens up “a new landscape of ethical dilemmas” (Kubanyiova 2008: 503).

One concrete outcome of the reconceptualization of ethics within applied linguistics is the well-thought-out guidelines for practice by the professional organisation for applied linguists in the UK: The British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL). The guidelines were first published in 1994 because it was felt that applied linguists had specific needs and interests that were not adequately covered by the then existing guidelines (Ben Rampton 2015; Joan Swann 2015). The guidelines, first produced in 1994, and revised in 2006, are representative of the “social turn” in the social sciences (Rampton 1994). The aim of the guidelines is declared as such:

In a changing climate of teaching and research, its suggestions are intended to help applied linguists to maintain high standards and to respond flexibly to new opportunities, acting in the spirit of good equal opportunities practice and showing due respect to all participants, to the values of truth, fairness and open democracy, and to the integrity of applied linguistics as a body of knowledge and a mode of inquiry. (BAAL 2006: 2)

Recognising the multiplicity of stakeholders directly and indirectly involved in a research project, the guidelines are structured around a set of responsibilities that the applied linguistic researcher has to the various stakeholders in research: informants, colleagues, students, applied linguistics scholars in general, sponsors, their institution and the public.

Another seminal work in ethics which was published around the same time is the book *Researching Language: Issues of Power and Method*, co-authored by key figures in applied linguistics including Deborah Cameron and Ben Rampton. Despite it being published more than twenty years ago, this book continues to be relevant because it views ethics as an intrinsic part of methodological choices. Cameron *et al.* (1992) distinguish broadly between “positivist” and “non-positivist” epistemologies, and make a further sub-division in “non-positivism” between “realist” and “relativist” epistemologies. Each epistemology is associated with different aims, methodologies and types of relationships between the researcher and the researched upon, and, consequently, with different orientations to ethics. These orientations to ethics are referred to as “ethics”, “advocacy” and “empowerment” research and the accompanying relationships with the researched upon are, respectively, “research *on*”, “research *on and for*” and “research *on, for and with*” (Cameron *et al.* 1992: 14-22). Examples of each will be provided below.

A positivist epistemology subscribes to the idea that there is an objectively identifiable truth “out there” for the researcher to uncover and the aim is to describe this truth as accurately as possible without it being contaminated by confounding variables. Research

in the natural sciences is typically located within this epistemology. An example from linguistic research where a positivist approach might be most appropriate can be drawn from the sub-discipline of phonetics, where physical and acoustic factors shape the object of inquiry. A phonetician would therefore control the study for potentially intervening variables such as speaker sex and age, which distort the pitch and other phonetic factors. The type of ethics associated with such a positivist epistemology is referred to as “ethical” because the ethical dimension of the work is explicitly acknowledged. There will typically be ethics codes or frameworks in place to protect the anonymity and privacy of participants, to ensure that they are not abused or exploited and to make sure that they are compensated for any inconvenience and discomfort (Cameron *et al.* 1992). However, despite ethical considerations being explicitly acknowledged, the relationship between the researcher and their participants still rests on a model of “research *on*” (Cameron *et al.* 1992). In other words, “[h]uman subjects deserve special ethical consideration, but they no more set the researcher’s agenda than the bottle of sulphuric acid sets the chemist’s agenda” (Cameron *et al.* 1992: 15).

Not all applied linguists and sociolinguists committed to a positivist epistemology subscribe to a “research *on*” model. The work of William Labov, who is often credited as the founding father of sociolinguistics, has been cited as an example of an advocacy-oriented positivist conducting “research *on and for*” his participants. Labov’s positivist commitment is evident in his coinage of the term “observer’s paradox”, which captures the idea that sociolinguists’ preference for studying naturally occurring speech uncontaminated by the research process is hampered by that very research process. In

other words, it rests on an idea that there is an objectively identifiable ontology “out there” for the researcher to uncover and subsequently report on. Yet, Labov also felt that sociolinguistics had to be socially responsible, a view clearly expressed in his statement on *Objectivity and commitment in linguistic science* (Labov 1982), which was published as a retrospective account of a law suit known as the Ann Arbor case in which Labov acted as an expert witness. In this case, which was raised by a group of African-American parents in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA, the parents claimed that their children were being disadvantaged because they were classed as having learning difficulties by the teachers who were unaware of a mismatch between the standard language used in the classroom and the particular linguistic variety AAVE (African American Vernacular English) used by the African-American children. Labov’s role in the case was to show how AAVE is just as regular and rule-bound as standard English, contrary to popular belief that it was “sloppy” and “lazy.” Labov was also driven by another principle, that of “debt incurred”, which meant that he saw it as his obligation to pay back to the community in return for the data and ensuing knowledge that they had provided him and the science of linguistics with. Cameron *et al.* (1992) refer to this as advocacy research, i.e. the linguistic expert speaks on behalf of a disadvantaged community because they have privileged expert knowledge of things.

The third type of researcher-researched relationship is “research *on, for and with*”, which would place the researcher under even further obligations. This type of research involves researchers in empowering their participants so that they can speak for themselves. Empowering research is different from an advocacy approach in which an academic

expert acts in the interests of a particular community to defend their rights. So, for instance, where an advocacy approach might be adopted by researchers in language documentation and revitalisation who collect data on threatened languages with a view to documenting and preserving them for future generations of speakers (e.g. Rice 2011), empowering research would not assume that such documentation was in the interest of the participants themselves. Some might prefer to bring up their offspring in a non-indigenous language, which will increase their life chances and might even actively oppose attempts to preserve the indigenous language (e.g. Manatowa-Bailey 2007). As Eckert observes about such cases, “[t]here is an awkward distinction between the interests of speakers and those of science, and it is one that linguists often ignore” (2013: 12). Empowering research is meant to shape every step of the research process from generating a research question, which places the participants’ wishes and needs at the heart of its concerns, through to ongoing consultation on analysis and possibly even reporting.

It is probably fair to say that most research conducted in applied linguistics could be described as being “*on and for*.” Indeed, it is not entirely surprising that a discipline like applied linguistics is by definition concerned with *applying* the knowledge it generates to some sort of real-world context. Norton’s (2013 [2000]) research on the identities of migrant communities in Canada is an example of this. By shedding light on the narratives of struggle and achievement in learning English both at home and in their workplace, she brings attention to their plight with the hope of improving the experiences of people like them and benefitting the community (see also Andrew 2012 and this volume). All the

participants involved in these projects could be said to being researched “*on and for*,” but probably not *with*. In the report of our own research project below, we will show some of the complexities we encountered in making our research a project “*on, for and with*” our participants.

### **Ethical dilemmas in action**

In this section, we will illustrate some ethical issues that can arise in conducting research into language and identity by reflecting on a research project that we were involved in rural Bangladesh. We will consider some ethical dilemmas that arose in practice and how these relate to the frameworks laid out by BAAL and Cameron *et al.* 1992. Before going into the ethical issues that arose, it is first necessary to describe, in brief, the research project.

#### *The research project*

The research was designed to investigate the attitudes and aspirations of community members in rural Bangladesh to English-language learning and its potential to transform their social prospects, communities and cultural identities (see Erling *et al.* 2012; Seargeant *et al.* forthcoming)<sup>1</sup>. The study was conducted in two rural communities (Toke and Shak Char) in Bangladesh, a low-income country that ranks extremely low on the human development index. Two Bangladeshi researchers – one a co-author of this paper – conducted semi-structured interviews during field visits of five days in each site. In total, 28 people were interviewed, 23 male and 5 female participants, aged between 22

and 62. They were chosen to represent a broad cross-section of people in terms of profession, age, social class, religion and gender. However, despite aiming to have equal participation of women in the study, this was not possible due to familial and social challenges that women face when taking part in research in rural Bangladesh. The participants included a banker, college teacher, politician and religious leader, as well as self-employed workers such as a barber, fisherman, farmer, rickshaw driver, cleaner and housewives. There was great variation in the education levels of the participants, with a large number of them reporting very limited formal education and virtually no literacy skills apart from the ability to sign their names.

With regard to English in the research setting, it functions as a foreign language for the majority of the population in Bangladesh, and as a second language only for the elite (Banu and Sussex 2001). English is a compulsory school subject from Grade 1 through 12, and passing of high-stakes assessment in the subject is a requirement for entry into higher education. The language is also strongly perceived as a requirement for employability and economic gain (Sergeant and Erling 2011). Several national curriculum reforms, supported by international development projects, have taken place over the last twenty years to enhance the quality of English language teaching and the proficiency level of the society in English (Hamid and Erling in press). A recent example is the *English in Action* project, a £50 million English language development project funded by the UK Department for International Development (2008-2017) (see Walsh et al, 2013). It was in the context of this project that this research project was conceived.



In a sense, the research was ethically inspired, as it aimed to explore whether there was evidence to support national language education policy discourses, as well as international development discourses, which frame English language skills as having the potential to positively benefit the lives of millions of people (Seargeant and Erling 2011). It was also aligned with aspirations to gain a broader understanding of education in the postcolonial world and to attempt to devise an “emancipatory, situated and dialogical view of research ethics appropriate for the postcolonial era” (Bond and Tikly 2013: 430). However, given that local communities often have very severe material development needs (e.g. need for clean water, access to the community via reliable roads, and accessible healthcare), we wanted to explore the extent to which our own ethically driven commitment to the provision of quality ELT in low-income countries cohered with the interests of the communities themselves.

Several ethical dilemmas arose while conducting fieldwork that were not predicted when filling out the required ethical protocol. In the following we will explore some of the most pertinent dilemmas that occurred in three phases of the research project: 1) in developing a research focus; 2) in selecting the research team and collecting the data; and 3) in reporting on the research. By engaging with these issues honestly, and highlighting the complexity of the decisions we faced in just these three stages of the process (while admitting that there were others that we are not going into detail on here), we aim to demonstrate that ethical issues emerge all the time and that no checklist can substitute the need for researchers to be “ethically literate” in order to manage unforeseen ethical concerns in language and identity research.

### *Developing the research focus*

In a previous section, we outlined BAAL's range of responsibilities to the various stakeholders in applied linguistics research. A multitude of stakeholders with potentially conflicting interests was reflected in our own project. The project was sponsored by the British Council under their English Language Teaching Research Partnership, whose mission is to "create international opportunities for the people of the UK and other countries, and build trust between them worldwide" (British Council 2014). It is no secret that the British Council views the establishment and provision of English Language Teaching (ELT) programmes as key in creating such "international opportunities." As such, it might be said to reinforce hegemonic relations between western powers and "developing" nations (e.g. Appleby 2010). Despite their openly declared interests, however, the representatives of the British Council with whom we collaborated were themselves admirably set on fostering honest findings. Like ourselves, they were more than open to the idea that ELT may not be perceived by the communities themselves, particularly in the poorer, rural areas, as enhancing their life opportunities or as a priority for poverty alleviation and that other issues might be more pertinent to them. We were also aware of the potential unethical idea of perpetuating the hope that learning English will offer unrealistic opportunities for the majority of Bangladeshis to escape poverty (Imam 2005).

As the BAAL (2006) guidelines on good ethical practice in research also point out, relationships between researchers and their sponsors also play a crucial role in how research projects are played out, as our example shows. Although we were uncertain about whether participants would view English as useful, one requirement of the funding was to ensure that the research had practical applications, and this of course put us as researchers under the obligation to come up with something that would be useful for the British Council and, consequently, applicable to ELT. The same situation applied to The Open University, the institution to whom the funding had officially been awarded and with which we are affiliated. The Open University has well-established ELT and teacher trainer projects in several low-income projects around the world, and is funded externally for their work on these. Thus, we felt under obligation not to paint a picture that would be damaging to the funder's – and our employer's – core activities. Luckily the findings complied well with what the funder and our institution would have expected, and do have practical implications for the implementation of ELT initiatives in low-income contexts.

Given our obligations to our funder and employer, it was a challenge for us to also ground our project in the interests of the local community. We had to make an assumption that this research area was worth exploring: the research focus was therefore driven by the researchers and not the participants. Using Cameron *et al.*'s (1992) terminology, the project represented advocacy research, conducting “research *on and for*” the community with the assumption that the outcome would benefit the participants, for instance by enhancing opportunities for learning English, or the quality of English language provision provided.

We were also mindful of the fact that any attempt to empower participants by involving them in the project might, in fact, result in a potentially unethical disempowering. The mere fact of taking part in the interview meant a potential loss of income for these participants, several of whom were rickshaw-pullers, fishermen and cleaners, who lived at or below the poverty line. On the other hand, compensating them for taking part in this research might have resulted in participants being overly eager to take part in the research or reproduced common notions about institutions from the “Global North” (i.e. economically developed nation states, mainly in Europe, North America, and Australia) being the benefactors of communities in the “Global South” (less economically developed countries outside of the aforementioned continents). In an attempt to resolve this dilemma, it was decided that a) the research would not be participatory (i.e. *on* and *for*, but not *with*), and b) the participants would be provided with a small, yet significant, token of appreciation in return for being interviewed. The researchers decided that food items would be the most appropriate tokens of appreciation. It remained uncomfortable for the researchers, however, that no matter what they told the participants about them not receiving any direct benefit from taking part in the research project, they were unable to shake the impression that they were creating false hopes and being perceived as potential donors or benefactors. This constituted an ethical dilemma to which there was no easy answer.

### *Composing the research team and collecting data*

Although our research question was grounded in our own and our funder's interests, we did want to involve local people as much as possible in the research project, and this intention was also welcomed by the funders. In fact, one of our intentions was to "bring to the fore the voices and experience of those who have been historically marginalised by the colonial encounter", as suggested by Bond and Tikly (2013: 435). The majority of the funding was therefore used to employ two Bangladeshi researchers, who were to conduct the fieldwork in Bangla, and also transcribe and translate the data into English so that it could be analysed by the non-Bangla speaking UK-based academics. While this decision may at first seem purely altruistic, it also has its strategic advantages. The funding applied for was rather modest and could not have covered the necessary flights to Bangladesh to conduct the research; it was thus financially necessary to employ local researchers. Furthermore, this decision was beneficial for the research being undertaken: in order to gain access to and develop rapport with the participants, the researchers needed to carry out the research in Bangla, a language in which none of the UK research team had ability. Given that the sites of research were rural areas in Bangladesh that were not easily accessible and rarely receive foreign visitors, it was felt that foreign researchers would significantly disrupt the research environment. While disruption of the research environment cannot be avoided altogether, attempts were made to minimise it by using local researchers.

While attempts were made throughout the project to negotiate its direction with the Bangladeshi researchers and to involve them as much as possible, it was impossible to

escape the power asymmetries that arise from this set up: Bangladeshi researchers from a low-income country (albeit affiliated with arguably the most prestigious institute of higher education in Bangladesh) were undertaking research with Bangladeshi, underprivileged communities, under the direction of academics in the UK. So it was the institution in the Global North who conceptualised and defined the research questions and who “owned” the data, and the researchers from the Global South that were brought into the project to offer, primarily, linguistic and cultural expertise. This highlights that working in a Global South context poses particular challenges because it involves an inherent power asymmetry (cf. Robinson-Pant and Singal 2013). We attempted to negotiate this asymmetry by “clarifying the roles, rights and obligations of team members” (BAAL 2006: 8) and by explicitly recognising and discussing the workings of power among the research team (cf. Tikly and Bond 2013: 437). We also tried to embrace any opportunities for capacity building and deeper academic collaboration provided through the project – for example by offering research methods training and exploring further opportunities for research exchanges and co-authoring.

We also recognised that power asymmetries remain even when the relationship between the researcher and the researched does not transcend cultural or ethnic divides. In this project, this was manifested in the fact that the field researchers are both highly educated university employees, living in the capital city of Dhaka, and have high levels of competence in English. While they both have familiarity with and personal connections to the rural contexts they visited, it is very likely that they were viewed by people within the communities they were researching as outsiders with a different social and economic

standing, especially in Shak Char, where literacy levels are lower than the national average and poverty levels higher. They thus had to use resources such as local guides and engage in community activities, like participating in cricket matches and drinking tea in the central market place, to establish rapport with participants and gain their trust.

Attempting to embrace the spirit of capacity building, it was the intention of the directors of this research project to enable opportunities for women, who tend to be underrepresented in Bangladeshi society and academia. Therefore, we wanted women to be both represented in both the research team and the participants, ideally making up at least 50 per cent of the research team and the participants. This, however, turned out to be an unreasonable expectation. The project only had adequate funding for two researchers, who would travel to the research sites together and work as a team. In rural Bangladesh, however, it would have most likely been deemed inappropriate for a woman to travel and work closely with a member of the opposite sex to whom she is not related. Moreover, women might be less inclined to undertake fieldwork that would require them to be away from home for an extended period of time. Thus, we made the choice to engage two male researchers. This posed an ethical dilemma in that our wish to elicit the voices and ultimately improve the prospects of rural women, a marginalised group, had to be overridden by other ethical and more practical considerations to protect our research participants from harm and comply with local norms (in order to navigate this in any subsequent research we would seek to have a three-person research team made up of two female and one male researcher). The involvement of male researchers also meant that it would be even more difficult to recruit female participants for the research, as women in

rural communities generally prefer/are preferred not to interact with men they do not know. In the cases where women were interviewed, the interviews were generally conducted in the women's homes, often with a male family member present, which, again, may have had an impact on the data collected.

Finally, issues arose in this project around obtaining "informed consent", the process by which participants were made aware of the conditions of their participation in the research. Bryman (2008) identifies informed consent as one of the cornerstones of being ethical, and this consent forms one of the most important aspects of the relationship between researchers and participants (BAAL 2006: 4). It was a goal of this research (and a requirement of the ethics protocol) to obtain informed consent from participants. The BAAL Guidelines highlight that participants "are rarely familiar with the nature of academic activities such as publication or conference presentations, making it difficult for them to give fully informed consent to the use of data" (2006: 4). This concern was exaggerated in this research because many of the participants had very low education and literacy levels. The researchers were concerned that asking participants to sign formal documents would intimidate them from freely expressing their opinions. Moreover, signing or giving a finger print is a practice viewed with much suspicion in rural areas, particularly since there is a history of feudal lords taking advantage of people in these areas by asking them to sign documents that they do not understand. Therefore, all statements of informed consent were explained orally, in Bangla, and oral agreement to participate in the research was sought. However, given the educational backgrounds of the participants, and the fact that many of them seemed to be unfamiliar with the concept



of research, it cannot be stated with confidence that these participants were fully informed about what they were being asked to be a part of (cf. Batra 2014). As Shamim and Qureshi (2013) note, there is a need to develop ethical regulations that are appropriate for researchers undertaking research in low-income contexts.

### *Reporting research: ownership and giving back*

An important part of the research process is writing up the results for different audiences, and there can be particular requirements for outputs stipulated by institutions and funders as well as a wish to report back to the community. The power balances that were mentioned above with regards to the composition of our research team became particularly heightened with regards to publication. Being a named author on an internationally recognised publication in English is a highly prestigious accolade for those working in Bangladeshi academia, and can be used to support promotion and build up the status of the academic for further research consultancy, for example. Therefore, the Bangladeshi researchers were both surprised and challenged by the initial assumption of the UK-based researchers that they would be the sole authors of any publications related to the research. This assumption was formed, in part, by training materials on research collaboration that featured in an Open University research leadership course. The guidance on authorship attribution in research collaboration stipulated that “authors are generally expected to make significant contributions to the design, interpretation and drafting. Contributing to only one of these tasks is sometimes accepted for authorship credit” (Open University 2015). It also explicitly states that “if a collaborator simply

collected data – for example, a field worker in another country – that role would normally be acknowledged but would not deserve authorship credit” (ibid).

However, in projects such as this one that have capacity building of researchers as part of their ambition, it is unclear how capacity can be built in terms of authoring international, peer-reviewed publications, with all their implicit codes (Lillis and Curry 2010), without having the Global South academics involved in the process of writing. At the same time, this experience of co-authoring (as enacted in this chapter) allowed the Bangladeshi researchers to become more familiar with research norms in the Global North and encouraged them to develop their understanding of intellectual ownership and exercise their critical agency in further projects. The gap in expectations regarding authorship between the Bangladeshi and UK-based researchers highlights the contextually contingent nature of what counts as “ethical” behaviour. While the training materials on research collaboration had fixed ideas about this – which in itself can be seen as a product of acting “ethically” and setting out fair and regularised protocols for authorship attribution – the particular context seemed to call for an exception, as otherwise it would arguably have been “unethical.” As a result, the Bangladeshi researchers have co-authored a number of publications stemming from this work – including this one.

A further ethical dilemma that faced us concerned the research findings and their interpretation. Because of the critical discourses about the spread of English as “linguistic imperialism” (Phillipson 1992) and established perceptions among the Bangladeshis about English being the displacer of a Bangla-mediated national identity (Imam 2005) we

were surprised, when it came to doing the analysis, that the research participants were overwhelmingly positive about English and saw it as an important part of their own, or their children's, potential development. There was virtually no concern expressed that English should be perceived as an imperialist force or a usurper of local identity (Erling *et al.* 2012; Seargeant *et al.* forthcoming). This posed ethical dilemmas in that the findings seemed to have the potential to perpetuate global power divisions between a globally powerful North and a relatively less powerful South. It also caused us to wonder whether the participants were perhaps naïve in their perceptions that English had a generally benign presence in their communities, or that by learning it they may be able to change their situation or status for the better. However, at the same time, in wondering this, it also became clear to us that we were imposing a “we know better” attitude. Ethical literacy forced us to ask ourselves: who are we to tell people what they do or don't need, or what they should or shouldn't value? If English is part of these people's real or imagined development, who are we to quash those dreams?

Other ethical issues arise around liaising with the participants in reporting on the research. In “empowering research” this is meant to ensure that the participants' voices are accurately represented. However, in this particular context, where participants are of low educational backgrounds and from rural, hard-to-reach areas, keeping up a liaison with them would be logistically challenging – if not impossible. Moreover, as the project data was translated into English, and the findings were also reported solely in English, this would make it virtually impossible for research participants to access. It is perhaps then an ethical weakness of this project – or a failure in the project design – that

participants were given no opportunity to assess how they and their views are represented, or attempt made to convert the research into a format or language that the participants could access (presuming that it would be of value or of interest to the community).

## **Summary**

In this chapter, we have given an overview of some of the key issues related to ethics in applied linguistics research that apply to language and identity projects. We have also illustrated some of the ethical dilemmas that applied linguists may come across in the field. The example of the research project highlighted here shows that despite original intentions, it may become necessary to make changes to how research is conducted due to contextual demands. Similarly, there may be times when, in the process of conducting research, we have to respond in a way that was unforeseen in the planning and ethical guidelines, in order to act more ethically. This requires flexibility and reflexivity.

Therefore, the most important conclusion to take away from this chapter is not to think of ethics as a checklist that needs to be completed and never returned to again. Rather, ethics is something that is part of each phase and aspect of language and identity projects, and should inform every decision made. It is also something that is inextricably wound up in the epistemological and ontological choices made from the outset of the project (Cameron *et al.* 1992). To conclude, a researcher needs to demonstrate “ethical literacy” (Wiles and Boddy 2013) by practising sound judgement, being explicit and reflective

about epistemological assumptions, being guided by well-established frameworks, and considering the impact on all stakeholders of each decision made in the research process.

### **Related topics**

[Please place at the end of your article and before the references a list of chapters in the volume which you expect that readers might find it useful to refer in connection with your article.]

### **Further Reading**

British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) (2006). *Recommendations on good practice in applied linguistics*. Available online at [http://baal.org.uk/about\\_goodpractice\\_full.pdf](http://baal.org.uk/about_goodpractice_full.pdf). These are the official ethical guidelines set by the British Association of Applied Linguistics.

Cameron, D., Frazer, E., Harvey, P., Rampton, B. and Richardson, K.

(1992). *Researching language: issues of power and method*. London: Routledge.

Published more than two decades ago, this co-authored book by key linguistics scholars remains an accessible must-read for understanding the interrelationship between ethics and epistemology.

Hammersley, M. and Traianou, A. (2012). *Ethics in qualitative research: controversies and contexts*. London: SAGE. This book offers a valuable and critical account of the rise of ethics in the modern era.

Stutchbury, K. and Fox, A. (2009) 'Ethics in educational research: introducing a methodological tool for effective ethical analysis'. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 39(4): 489–504. Written by educational researchers, this article offers the reader a comprehensive and detailed framework to reflect systematically on ethical issues they are likely to come across in their research.

Rice, K. (2011). Ethical issues in linguistic fieldwork, in N. Thieberger (ed.) *The Oxford handbook of linguistic fieldwork*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Rice is a linguistic anthropologist and her fieldwork centres on language documentation. Her chapter discusses some of the ethical issues that abound in linguistic fieldwork.

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