

# How should I care: Ethics and its tensions in participatory action research

*A response to “Why should I care? Research ethics in the field of adult L2 literacy”*

Amber Bartlett<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Radboud University*

## Article history

Received: October 8, 2025

Accepted: December 3, 2025

Online: March 23, 2026

## Corresponding author

Amber Bartlett, amber.bartlett@ru.nl

## Response article

This article is a response to Shepperd, L. and Dalderop, K. (2026). ‘Why should I care? Research ethics in the field of adult L2 literacy’, *Dutch Journal of Applied Linguistics* 15: DOI 10.51751/dujal60196

## Author contributions

## Funding information

## Statement of interest

## Statement of technology use

## Supporting information

See p. 4

In Shepperd and Dalderop (2025)’s viewpoint *Why should I care? Research ethics in the field of adult L2 Literacy*, the authors make three important assertions regarding research ethics with so called vulnerable participants. This response considers the tensions explored by the authors, in light of my experience conducting a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project with refugee women in the Netherlands.

Shepperd and Dalderop (2025) draw on their experiences of conducting research with so-called ‘vulnerable research populations’ to argue that standard institutional macro research ethics procedures are not always appropriate for working with specific populations; ethics procedures do not prepare researchers for micro-ethical decision making and can create barriers for inclusive research practices; and that ethics procedures and practices should embrace an ethics of care framework. Based on my experience of designing a research study on digital literacies with adult refugee women living in the Netherlands, I fully support all three arguments.

In this response, I consider the tensions the authors articulate between macro-level ethical frameworks and situated micro ethical decisions that arise with regards to my own experiences designing a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project with refugee women in the Netherlands. Shepperd and Dalderop (2025, p. 13) suggest participatory approaches

offer a promising route towards embedding care ethics when working with migrant language learners as they focus on how participants and their wider communities may benefit from research participation. While I share this view and embrace PAR as a tool to advance the ethics of care ethos, I encountered many of the same frictions outlined by Shepperd and Dalderop (2025). While action-oriented and transdisciplinary approaches are gaining popularity – seen as having the potential to mitigate the power asymmetries prevalent in much of the research on ‘vulnerable groups’ – current institutional ethics procedures often lack the tools to fully support these projects. Finally, building on Shepperd and Dalderop’s (2025) call for an embrace of care in ethical procedures, I argue some of these tensions can be remedied by incorporating participatory action logics into institutional ethical procedures.

## 1 ‘Vulnerable’ research populations

The authors speak to their respective research populations and make their argument in the context of LESLLA. My research focuses on digital literacy rather than language acquisition, but there are several important similarities between our research populations. Refugee women too experience lower levels of literacy (Liebig & Tronstad, 2018); are underrepresented in research samples due to gender-based barriers (Hennebry & Petrozziello, 2019), and similarly; there is a tendency to rely on highly educated participant samples. Due to these characteristics, among others, refugee women are often characterised as ‘vulnerable’ by macro ethics procedures. Therefore I, like Shepperd and Dalderop (2025), embrace a move away from this characterisation of inherently vulnerable, and move towards understanding vulnerability as a relational interaction between participants’ characteristics and the nature of the study. Like the authors, I see the ethics of care as a tool to manage this relation and employ co-creation and participatory action as important methodologies to incorporate this into my research practice.

## 2 Participatory Action Research (PAR) and care

Care ethics moves away from universal moral rules toward a relational and situated understanding of ethics that prioritises interdependence, responsibility, and the cultivation of care within networks (Held, 2005; Barnes, 2015). It recognises actors as embedded in webs of care relations, where ethical obligations arise within these relations rather than from abstract principles. This emphasis on reciprocity and relational responsibility resonates strongly with PAR, which foregrounds collaboration among researchers, community members, and activists to co-produce knowledge for action (Groot et al., 2019; Cornish et al., 2024). By centering lived experience and focusing on knowledge production as a process, PAR embeds care practices into research design and implementation,

ensuring that the needs and agency of research populations are integral to the process. In this way, care ethics provides a foundation for PAR's commitment to reciprocity, mutual responsibility, and emancipatory scholarship.

Despite the promising shift towards participatory and co-creative methodologies, macro-level ethical procedures present challenges for the implementation of these projects. In line with Shepperd and Dalderop's (2025) observation on the tensions between institutional guidance and realities of fieldwork – and the way these can produce relations of vulnerability for research participants – I discuss three examples from my own research below.

### 3 Layers of vulnerability and care

#### 3.1 Informed consent

Like Shepperd and Dalderop (2025), issues of informed consent presented challenges in my PAR project. Standard Ethical Procedures suggest giving participants with an information sheet prior to data collection, and, after reading (or, indeed, listening, as audio recordings are now more common practice with low literate populations) asking them to sign a consent form to confirm that they have been informed about the project and they consent to participating. However, this raises important epistemological debates in research approaches by suggesting that data collection starts in one fixed moment, rather than knowledge emerging gradually and relationally. Likewise, consent should be understood as a process throughout the research cycle, rather than a static moment in time.

#### 3.2 Voluntary participation

In an attempt to establish what your relationship with the research participant is, and thus, to establish if the participant is able to consent voluntarily without feeling that they have an obligation to participate, the research must have clearly established roles; for example, are they, in this interaction, a researcher, a workshop leader, or a volunteer at a third sector organisation. For participatory action research to be successful, the researcher must simultaneously embrace all of these roles, and therefore cannot only occupy one role in order to establish voluntary participation. Having multiple roles at once adds to the *messiness* of PAR.

#### 3.3 Minimising harm and maximising benefit

The Standard Procedure to obtain ethics approval means that each stage of the study and its content must be established beforehand. This is in direct tension with the principles of PAR, which encourage and require insights from community members – here

understood as participants – to be integrated into the research design, making it co-created. This ensures that the communities' needs are met by the research, and therefore the maximising of its benefits to the community is directly limited by macro ethics procedures.

#### 4 Conclusions

The examples discussed above illustrate how PAR, despite its alignment with an ethics-of-care framework, can be constrained in its implementation by standardised institutional ethics procedures. These cases underscore the tensions explored by Shepperd and Dalderop (2025). By extending Shepperd and Dalderop's (2025) call for a focus on flexibility and care in institutional ethics procedures, I argue that bridging this gap requires embedding participatory tools within micro-level ethical processes. Rather than relying solely on static, application-based frameworks of consent, ethics review could incorporate ongoing dialogue between researchers and ethics committee members, including iterative check-ins throughout the research process. Such practices would better accommodate participatory care-centred methodologies by enabling researchers to articulate and justify their approach in a way that reflects the evolving, relational nature of their work.

#### Author contributions

Amber Bartlett: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing..

#### Funding information

This research was funded by a Starter Grant awarded to Noemi Mena Montes by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), through the Centre for Language Studies (CLS) at Radboud University.

#### Statement of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

#### Statement of technology use

No AI-based generative technology was used in the preparation of this response.

#### Supporting information

None.

## References

- Barnes, M., Brannelly, T., Ward, L., & Ward, N. (Eds.). 2015. *Ethics of Care: Critical Advances in International Perspective*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Cornish, F., Breton, N., Moreno-Tabarez, U., Delgado, J., Rua, M., & Hodgetts, D. (2023). *Participatory Action Research*. 2023, 34(3).
- Groot, B.C., Vink, M., Haveman, A., Huberts, M., Schout, G., & Abma, T.A. (2019). Ethics of care in participatory health research: Mutual responsibility in collaboration with co-researchers. *Educational Action Research*, 27(2), 286-302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2018.1450771>
- Held, V. (2005). *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195180992.001.0001>
- Hennebry, J.L., & Petrozziello, A.J. (2019). Closing the Gap? Gender and the Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees. *International Migration*, 57(6), 115-138. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12640>
- Liebig, T., & Tronstad, K.R. (2018). Triple Disadvantage?: A first overview of the integration of refugee women. OECD. <https://doi.org/10.1787/3f3a9612-en>
- Shepperd, L. & Dalderop, K. (2025). Why should I care? Research ethic in the field of adult L2 literacy. *Dutch Journal of Applied Linguistics*