The fine balancing act: Tension between macro and micro ethics

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

Alex Ho-Cheong Leung[1]

[1]*Northumbria University*

Corresponding author
Alex Ho-Cheong Leung, alex.ho-cheong.leung@northumbria.ac.uk

Author contributions
Funding information
Statement of interest
Statement of technology use
Supporting information

There are increasing interests around research ethics which are reflected through the ongoing dedicated conferences, edited volumes and journal special issues. While there is no shortage of "formal" guidance, e.g. the *Singapore Statement on Research Integrity* (2010; Resnik & Shamoo, 2011), the British Educational Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA, 2024), and the British Association for Applied Linguistics' *Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics* (BAAL, 2021), the article "Why should I care? Research ethics in the field of adult L2 literacy" by Shepperd and Dalderop (2025) serves as a solemn reminder that the current ethics and governance structure in the "Global North" context is far from perfect.

Given that our field of applied linguistics and the wider field of social sciences have had our share of problematic if not unethical practices in the past, e.g., the Standford Prison Experiment and the Milgrim Experiment, very few readers (if any) of this journal would dispute the need of some form of research ethics scrutiny. Institutional (macro) ethics processes, i.e. ethical approval applications, overseen by Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Research Ethics Committee (REC), provide some assurance and account-ability. They can act as important gatekeepers to research integrity as well as contribute to mitigating against malpractices or questionable practices, if not completely rooting

them out. However, as an indirect and undesirable outcome of having to standardise practice, these macro processes can often be seen as compliance and regulations driven, where risk-adverse considerations, including the minimisation of reputational damage to the institution, can take priority over other matters. The blanket application of "justice ethics" and "golden standard" e.g. full inform consent, explanation of complaint procedures, which Shepperd and Dalderop (2025) have noted, can conflict with micro ethics considerations of what is situationally and contextually most appropriate. In relation to their studies around low/ non-literate learners (Literacy Education for Second Language Learning Adults (LESLLA)), full written consent was a non-starter for example. The frustration with IRBs/ RECs is indeed well-known (e.g. Kasstan & Pearson, 2025), but Shepperd and Dalderop's (2025) vignettes offer readers a window into how those dilemmas played out in their research journeys, which undoubtedly resonate with the experiences of some readers.

As someone who has a dual role as both a researcher applicant to RECs and a reviewer/ chair who has sat on the same committee, I too sometimes wonder whether the current practice (at least in my context in UK higher education) which operationalises ethics as a unidirectional workflow is fit for purpose. In such workflow, an applicant first applies for ethical approval at the project conceptualisation/ inception stage, the application is then considered by the IRB/ REC, afterwards the applicant receives requests for clarification or modification before making a revised submission. This workflow is complete once the application is deemed satisfactory and approval granted. The degree of which an applicant can push back in this process when queries are raised can vary, being an early career researcher can certainly be a disadvantage here. In fact, as noted by Shepperd, the lack of flexibility by the REC in her institution (though debatably well-intentioned) had in effect restricted her agency and autonomy in her own research due to a rigid conceptualisation of vulnerability. This unfortunately can exacerbate the vicious circle of our collective inability to incorporate voices and participation from those who are glaringly missing in our research and knowledge base. Once approval is granted, the IRB/ REC has little or no access to how the project unfolds, nor do researchers always have the opportunity to seek further advice from or engage in dialogues with the IRB/ REC.

Not only that, these "cold", standardised procedures, or rather administrative hurdles as seen by some, do not actually equip researchers with the tools to navigate the micro ethical challenges presented to them at later stages of the research which require reflexivity and care. As highlighted by the lived experiences shared by Shepperd and Dalderop (2025), these challenges vary in scope and range, from the issues around translation of participant information sheet, the power and trust dynamic in negotiating access, to the fundamental conflicts between the contractual and transactional nature of "western" style of informed consent and cultural/ value systems that emphasise the relational nature between human beings (and the environment). The obstacles encountered by researchers can once again be compounded by ones' status as early career researchers, and the perceived or actual need to adhere to the pre-approved protocols to the letter.

When the only ethical alternative is to disengage from data collection completely, as reported by Dalderop, the downstream consequence can be dire, e.g. incomplete data set, difficulty in publishing incomplete findings. Those side effects of "doing the right thing" unfortunately are something that my own PhD students have also experienced, one working in under-resourced contexts and another in a LESLLA context similar to Shepperd and Dalderop (2025). Both have received questions in relation to their incomplete data set in their attempt to publish, on one occasion, in a rather hostile tone if I may add.

In a way, I am heartened by the support that Shepperd and Dalderop (2025) must have received from their own supervisory team which would have helped them navigate some of the local challenges they documented and shared. It is also encouraging to see that the *Dutch Journal of Applied Linguistics* has offered them a space to discuss these issues (and kindly offered me the chance to respond). But at the same time, ethics support should not come down to chance-encounter or availability of local support network. Even though I as a reviewer and past chair of a REC alongside some colleagues in the reviewing college have offered ongoing support to applicants who actively seek them, we too have little idea about how others cope with the micro ethical challenges they encounter, and therefore unable to support them. These underscore that good will and well intention are perhaps necessary but not sufficient conditions to bettering the research ethics system. An ethics system that incorporates iterative and dialogic elements underpinned by ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006) is surely better positioned to support the emergent and organic nature of micro, lived ethics. Such a system will be costly to resource, and it will not ever be able to provide solutions to all challenges that can emerge at different phases of research, but it will no doubt be better capable of supporting researchers than the current form of governance, even if only as a sounding board for sense-checking purposes. At the moment, as reported by Shepperd and Dalderop (2025), researchers are often at a loss when events they face after ethics approval is granted seem to fly in the face of what "standard protocol" stipulates. Many of the suggestions provided by Shepperd and Dalderop (2025) in enhancing the awareness of the diversity of research contexts among the IRB/ REC are indeed important. The adoption of the ethics of care turns the framing about ethics from a check-box exercise to a lived experience of reflexive practice. I would also extend the call for enhanced ethics awareness to include other important gatekeepers at the publication end of the research cycle. Editors and reviewers' understanding of the ethics complexity and nuances and how they may play a role in what is and what is not manageable in specific circumstances will be useful when considering research for publication, as opposed to uncritical, regimental comparison with strictly controlled, laboratory-based studies.

Unfortunately, without concerted lobbying from the field, I am not optimistic that an iterative and dialogic ethics and governance structure will be implemented due to its resource-intense nature. I have witnessed the dialling back of support in relation to ethics in various institutions. This includes the reduction in hours allocated for review-

ing and supporting ethics application, the paring down of IRBs/ RECs, the hallowing out of subject/ disciplinary specific expertise in IRBs/ RECs. As a result, while macro ethics is arguably intact (thus covering the compliance driven perspective of ethics), in real terms, ethics is once again relegated to an "administrative function", a "tick-box" exercise, with little attention to micro ethics and lived concerns as projects progress to later stages. Compliance is indeed important, but ethics encompasses more than just that as we have read from Shepperd and Dalderop's (2025) article. The down-tooling and downsizing of ethics committee goes completely against the spirit of ethical practice and ethics of care, but unfortunately it is part of the reality of higher education across many contexts under neoliberal management and marketisation at the time of writing.

However, things are not all doom and gloom, there is an ongoing interest in research ethics as noted in the introduction, targeted events including one that my PhD student and I co-organised are good examples of that (Leung & Nguyen, 2025). But we cannot afford to be complacent, otherwise we run the risk of turning into an echo chamber where self-selected audience who champion the ethics of care are preaching to one another. Shepperd and Dalderop's (2025) contribution is a stark reminder that more work needs to be done. Acknowledging that "ethics does not begin and end with an application", to quote my colleague Laura Hutchinson from the Research Ethics and Integrity team at Northumbria, is only a start, to live and breathe ethics of care will require shoring up both the governance structure as well as enhancing ethical awareness and reflexivity among researchers, ethics reviewers, and at the publication end, editors and reviewers.

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