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Ethics of access in contemporary applied linguistics projects: New challenges in the researcher–practitioner relationship

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Abstract

Increasingly, contemporary research practice is taking place in complex, multi-agency projects with funding from various public agencies and high demands for social relevance. The researcher–practitioner, and especially the researcher–stakeholder, relationship plays a vital role in these kinds of projects, representing new challenges for many researchers. Within this field, issues relating to research ethics gain importance beyond established guidelines and institutional regulations. The aim of this paper is to contribute to a methodological debate on research ethics, highlighting the complex communicative practices that constitute the micro-ethics of the early stages of research in which access to research sites and empirical data is at stake. We discuss three such activities in a project studying professional practice in welfare: (1) joint problematization of key issues; (2) negotiation of the research topic with multiple stakeholders; and (3) collaborative response to emerging ethical dilemmas. By opening up the often-neglected micro-ethical practices of research, we discuss how reflexivity and critical engagement might support the researcher's ethical practices in complex project surroundings. By fostering increased awareness of ethically important moments in the early stages of the research process, researchers might be better prepared to negotiate the many communicative events that form an integral part of the practices of research ethics.

KEYWORDS: COMMUNICATION ETHICS; ETHICS OF ACCESS; MICRO-ETHICS; MULTI-AGENCY PROJECTS; RESEARCH ETHICS; RESEARCHER–PRACTITIONER RELATIONSHIP

1 Introduction

Within the Euro-Western context, research ethics has to a large extent revolved around developing guidelines and institutional arrangements that provide generic regulations of research practice, independent of research methodology or a disciplinary field (De Costa 2016; Kara 2018). The models supporting the social sciences have been adopted from the biomedical field and, consequently, are largely framed within a positivist epistemological paradigm (Tolich and Fitzgerald 2006). This frequently positions research ethics as a bureaucratic process, prior to or external to the research itself, which risks 'compartmentalizing ethical aspects of research' (Shaw 2008: 403). Within a qualitative, constructivist research paradigm, ethical research practice, like any social practice, needs to be considered as emergent and contextual, rather than as pre-defined and fixed. Ethical assessments take place in all stages of a project and ethical dilemmas are at the core of research ethics practice (Ryen 2011). Within a constructionist epistemology, reality is accomplished rather than revealed, and consequently, ethical issues are also social events that are subject to local, contextual negotiations.

In a recent piece, Sarangi (2019) points to the *communicative dimensions* of research ethics and calls for a heightened awareness of the complex communicative acts that are integral to the ethical practice of our research endeavours. This includes the often-neglected ethical considerations that take place in empirical research within our field of applied linguistics (AL), frequently in collaboration with practitioners and project partners. Multi-agency projects, with high demands on social relevance, intensify interactions across professional hierarchies, organisational boundaries and networks of stakeholders. These pose new challenges for research practice and call for reflections on what constitutes ethical research practice in contemporary AL projects. The researcher–practitioner relationship in the early stages of the research is particularly relevant, as project-based research with funding from various public agencies are becoming a norm in our field.

The current paper aims to contribute to a methodological debate by reflecting on the early stages of an ongoing project, as seen from a researcher perspective. The project that will be discussed here is particularly challenging in terms of ethical research practice, as it aims to study highly sensitive data within a complex, multi-agency and cross-sectoral welfare institution, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). The object of study is written interaction between service users and counsellors on a digital platform. The project is based on close collaboration with partners at multiple levels of NAV.

The path from project design to data access in this context has consisted of a number of communicative activities that are tightly interwoven with ethical research practice. In this context, we will not be discussing the legal guidelines and formal institutional regulations that were followed.[1] While acknowledging that all phases of the project necessitate ethical reflection in terms of various communicative activities, we focus here on the collaboration with practitioners and stakeholders in the early phases in which access to the research site and empirical data is at stake.

Before discussing the communicative dimensions, we first provide a brief overview of the movements that are taking place within the field of project-based research and review relevant literature on research ethics at the early stages of research, focusing on the researcher–practitioner relationship. We then present the Digital Dialogue project and discuss three communicative activities that were salient to the ethics of accessing research data in this project, namely joint problematisation, negotiation of the research topic and collaborative response to emergent ethical dilemmas. In our concluding remarks, we discuss the need for reflexivity related to the increased complexity in contemporary multi-agency projects and the challenges this might represent in terms of ethical research practice in the early stages of research.

1.2 Increased complexity in cross-institutional research collaboration

Politicians and bureaucrats in the neoliberal state have been calling for research-based knowledge for solving problems at a societal level (Nowotny 2001; Hessels and van Lente 2008). Part of this is a call for increased interaction between academic researchers and other social actors, such as government and industry. Alternative ‘modes’ of knowledge production (Gibbons *et al.* 1994) have been proposed, in which researchers and practitioners engage in dialogue and collaborate on ‘co-production’ or ‘engaged scholarship’ (Van de Ven 2007).

The ideal underlying these efforts is that cross-sector collaboration will produce knowledge that achieves both scientific rigor and practitioner value.

As a consequence of these trends, new collaborative formations are created for the funding of research, which in Norway, for example, is represented by the Centres for Research-Based Innovation scheme under The Research Council of Norway. This is funding that goes to 'long-term research conducted in close collaboration between research-performing companies and prominent research groups' (Research Council of Norway 2020). A similar funding collaboration has been created at the municipal level in our city, Trondheim, with a new cross-sector institution called the University City. This is a local innovation that parallels a structure that many are familiar with, the University Hospital. While the University Hospital combines health services with the education of medical students and medical research, the University City is aimed at doing the same within service areas that are important for the municipality, such as schools and childhood, urban development, innovation, health and welfare. In addition to the mutual gain of increased knowledge production in areas that are important for the municipality, the collaboration aims to increase research competence in the municipality units that work directly with researchers. This in turn might improve local research initiatives, enable recruitment of PhD candidates from local services and strengthen collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

These new modes of knowledge production offer great visions of what research and practice might achieve together, and many AL research projects can serve as examples of the benefits of the researcher–practitioner partnership. However, these cross-sector research collaborations also represent increased complexities in the researcher–practitioner relationship, with multiple agencies and multiple levels of hierarchy in the institutions involved. This has consequences for the practical accomplishment of ethical research practice, not least in the early stages of research when support for the project needs to be secured and collaborative relationships are being established.

2 The ethics of access: The researcher–practitioner relationship in the early stages of research

Within the field of AL, there is a tradition for close collaboration with practitioners and users of research. The researcher–practitioner relationship is a significant, perhaps even identifying, theme in our field, as we contribute with applied research with an interest in 'real-world problems' (Brumfit 1997). The practical relevance of research has been an ideal and a premise for many AL researchers, stressing the accountability that AL researchers have to academia and to lay communities (Bygate 2004). Within the subfield of applied linguistics and professional practice, this accountability extends to the professional communities and the professional practices that our research addresses. The interdisciplinary nature of research on professional practice is emphasized, and reflections in our field have revolved around issues such as reflexivity and relevance (S. Candlin 2003; Candlin and Candlin 2003; Sarangi and Candlin 2003; Sarangi 2007), contextualizing workplace research (Cicourel 2003), challenges of interpretation (Sarangi 2009, 2015) and the uptake of discourse research (Roberts 2003; Roberts and Sarangi 2003). These debates in our field have largely taken place within an epistemological or methodological framework, addressing the kinds of knowledge AL researchers contribute and how we go about designing and executing AL projects. They are not explicitly related to the topic of research ethics, but they shed light on the communicative aspects of research practice that involve a multitude of ethical considerations and practices.

As in other humanities and social science disciplines, research ethics in our field tends to be treated somewhat as a separate issue, to be managed and secured in the planning phase, before the collection of data and before the 'actual' research takes place (Shaw 2008). Sterling and Gass (2017) found, through a series of survey studies across different countries, that as a group, AL researchers tend to view research ethics in terms of macro-level, formal practices such as review boards and consent procedures. The ethical training that was reported was both limited and procedure-oriented. The early publications in research methodology and research ethics in AL were primarily concerned with the logistical and formal aspects of research (De Costa *et al.* 2021), but recent contributions address a greater diversity of practices. Differences in cultural backgrounds, between researchers and research participants as well as among researchers in global research teams is discussed as impacting the perception and practice of research ethics (Copland and Creese 2015; De Costa 2016; Copland 2018).

In managing complex roles and relationships, the concept and practice of *reflexivity* has been a recurrent theme in qualitative research. Reflexivity involves the self-aware analysis of the dynamics between researchers and participants and the explicit acknowledgement of the researcher's own sociohistorical positioning and its impact on the research process (Rampton 1992; Gobo 2011). The researcher role can take many forms, and has been described in terms such as outsider, insider, resource, befriender, target audience, assessor of performance, expert/consultant and agent of change (Sarangi 2005). These various role-sets and role-relationships that develop are also related to the researcher's status as uninvited or invited, a position which affects the expectations and involvement from participants (Sarangi 2009).

Reflexivity is usually perceived as a concept related to rigour and quality in research. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) propose treating reflexivity as a conceptual tool for understanding the nature of ethics in qualitative research and as a framework for reflecting on how ethical practice in research can be achieved. In the AL literature, reflexivity has been conceptualized as a 'necessary commitment through which researchers uncover their respective roles as key social actors shaping the very social processes they intend to study and analyze' (Pérez-Milans 2017: 2). The ethical dimensions of reflexivity have mainly been explored in relation to the research process itself (Roberts 2003; Sarangi and Candlin 2003; Starfield 2013; Lillis 2015), often in terms either of the researcher's positioning in relation to the participants or the work of writing representations of them (what Macbeth [2001] describes as *positional* and *textual* reflexivity). Pérez-Milans (2017) points to the risk of a *researcher-centred* angle to reflexivity, which might foreground the researcher at the expense of the issues or processes that matter to the participants. Roberts (2003) warns us to become distanced from self-reflexivity and insists on a reflexive understanding of research practices and engagement in relationship to practitioners and practical problems.

In order to reach these goals, the researchers need to acquire what Hak (1999) calls 'a sense of the context' (Hak 1999: 435) before identifying and isolating data for analysis. He cautions researchers against meeting the field of practice with preconceived research questions. In AL projects studying professional practice, researchers frequently rely on professional practitioners' insights and on developing a partnership for exploring the nuances of professional practice. This can be accomplished through the process of *joint problematization* (Sarangi and Roberts 1999; Roberts and Sarangi 2003) of research topics and research data with practitioners and partners. Joint problematization can also be seen as 'an acquisition of professional/organisational literacy that would provide a threshold for interpretive understanding' (Sarangi 2005: 377). Reciprocal socialization between researchers and practitioners, aiming for a reciprocity of perspectives, might contribute to framing the research in meaningful and relevant ways, while also ensuring reflexivity from the onset of the collaboration. Roberts and Sarangi (2003) point to challenges in discourse research in such interprofessional settings when different epistemological worlds meet: 'The challenge [...] is to find a way of working together in a dialogic mode so that our research could be used to inform aspects of [...] institutional life while acknowledging these epistemological differences' (Roberts and Sarangi 2003: 342).

In order to capture the diversity that exists, and open up the field of research ethics, two different dimensions of ethics have been proposed in qualitative research: *macro-ethics*, i.e., procedural ethics often imposed at an institutional level; and *micro-ethics*, or 'ethics in practice', which describes the complex dynamics between researchers and participants (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). Procedural ethics is no guarantee of actual ethical behaviour in project execution; rather, it is through the many collaborative tasks between researchers and participants that the micro-ethics of research practice and the integrity of the researcher come to expression. Kubanyiova (2008) favours an expansion of the ethical lenses with which we view our research practice in AL, and she calls for 'developing a more contextualized code of practice that would integrate both [macro and micro] perspectives' (Kubanyiova 2008: 503). The 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) that occur in the field are often difficult, subtle and unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research. In these moments, the approach taken or the decisions made by the researchers have important ethical ramifications.

Contemporary AL research crosses both cultural and institutional borders, and new levels of complexity have been added to our considerations of research ethics (De Costa *et al.* 2021; Maryns and Jacobs 2021). Consequently, there is an increasing need to explore the communicative dimensions involved in the micro-ethics of AL research and to raise awareness of the practical ways in which our ethical responsibilities can be upheld. Sarangi (2019) points to the need for exploring research ethics and communication ethics together. In this paper we focus particularly on the early stages of the research process and the many ethical assessments that are involved as the researcher–practitioner relationship forms and develops in the context of a complex, funded project with many interests and stakeholders.

3 The Digital Dialogue project

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) is at the forefront of the efforts to digitalize the public sector in Norway (Ministry of Local Government and Modernization 2019). One key digitalization strategy is to move service user–counsellor communication from the physical meeting room to written dialogue messages. This format resembles both email and chat, as it is asynchronous but takes place on a shared digital platform that displays the messages in a chat-like format. The platform for digital interaction has been launched as an alternative to face-to-face meetings with service users.

NAV is the result of a wide-ranging reform fusing three previously separate agencies (the national social security services, the national employment services, and the municipal social assistance services); hence it constitutes a form of 'one stop shop' for all labour and welfare services (Røysum 2013; Lægreid and Rykkja 2015). This gives NAV a complex organizational structure with a dual ownership between the national Directorate of Labour and Welfare (providing employment-related state services and benefits) and the local municipality (providing social welfare services and benefits).

Counselling in NAV serves the dual purpose of both assessing rights and obligations to public services while also facilitating an empowering process for service users with the primary goal of achieving employment and independence from public assistance (Hagelund 2018). The counsellors in NAV do not share educational qualifications, but rather have experience and training from a number of different disciplines and professions, from social work and counselling to law, economics, education and various health professions. Each local office has significant autonomy in terms of finding ways to meet the competence needs of their staff. In larger offices, selected counsellors have dedicated time in their work plan to initiate and run competence development activities, who might be designated as 'improvement counsellors' (*fagutviklere*).

The Digital Dialogue project was conceived in 2018 as a result of an initiative taken by one such improvement counsellor, prompted by the changes that frontline practitioners faced due to the increased requirement of providing digital counselling. The counsellor and his immediate supervisors were looking for research-based knowledge about digital, written counselling of adult service users, and they reached out to a research group that was studying client –counsellor interaction in physical meetings in NAV (Halvorsen *et al.* 2018; Halvorsen and Hammerstad 2021). On meeting the researchers, they pointed to a need for empirically based knowledge, preferably from the context of NAV, that might support the counsellors in their development of digital counselling. The research group had not been studying digital counselling but had some insights into the challenges related to digitalization from previous fieldwork and interviews in a number of NAV offices. A survey of existing research on this form of written client interaction revealed that there was a gap in the research literature, particularly within the field of labour and welfare services. Some survey- and interview-based studies were found on the digitalization of NAV, focusing on service user experiences (Hansen *et al.* 2018) and counsellor practices (Røhnebæk 2012; Zhu and Andersen 2021). The practitioners from NAV expressed an interest in collaborating with the research group on developing this topic.

A funding opportunity for the project presented itself in late 2018 from the newly formed University City, which encouraged applications from research groups that had established contact with dedicated practitioners in the municipality with the intention of collaborating on early-phase projects. The practitioners from the municipality were expected to have a key role in the projects. With the initiative and drive of the improvement counsellor and his immediate supervisors, and the understudied phenomenon of digital dialogues in NAV, we had the main ingredients for meeting the criteria. A project idea began to take shape, and the process towards defining a project and applying for funding began. The improvement counsellor now became our formal project advisor (hereafter referred to as PA), and together we started the work of creating a project for studying digital interaction. The funding was secured in 2019 and the following year was spent designing the project and gaining access to data.[2]

4 Communicative dimensions of the ethics of access

The research ethics of the early stages of the project involved a number of communicative activities that served important functions in establishing the goals and the scope of the project as well as with gaining access to the research site and to digital dialogues. Importantly, the ethics of access did not begin as a process of gaining approval from a university review board or ethical committee; rather, it was an ongoing process of events and interactions that involved a range of people and roles.

In the following, we reflect on three communicative activities that were salient in the early stages of the project and that form an integral part of the ethics of access: (1) joint problematization in developing research questions (what questions?); (2) negotiation of the research topic with multiple stakeholders (whose interests?); and (3) collaborative response to emergent ethical dilemmas (whose ethics?). These were all crucial communicative dimensions in the process of gaining access to the research site and to data, and they were tightly linked to ethical research practice as it emerges and evolves throughout the project. We draw on extensive resources from the early stages of the project, including meeting notes, telephone logs and field notes during and after workshops.

4.1 What questions? Joint problematization of key issues

In the initial meeting with the researchers, the PA raised several questions that came to represent the foundation for the project:

> Our professional practice is changing with the digitalization of NAV, but we do not really know what it means for the quality of our services. How does digitalization change the way we do counselling in NAV? How does it affect our relationship with the service users? (meetings notes, October 2018)

From our earlier studies of face-to-face interaction, we already had an understanding of the ways in which counselling in NAV was tightly interwoven with the physical meeting between the service user and the client (Halvorsen and Hammerstad 2021). In this meeting, it became clear to us that the shift towards digital counselling challenged this very core dimension of NAV counselling. The PA highlighted the need for more knowledge about what digital counselling actually looks like and how it might serve the needs of service users.

The initial contact was an important starting point that represented the perspective of someone with a particular interest in competence development in the organization. The continued dialogue involved a number of other counsellors as a means to gain a broader understanding of the challenges. With the PA, the researchers participated in several meetings and events that contributed to this early exploration of the context of digital dialogues, such as meetings and workplace learning activities (*fagdag*).

One such meeting took place very early on in our collaboration, arranged by the PA and involving a diverse group of frontline counsellors from different departments (for adults, youth, refugees, among others). With the goal of inviting diverse perspectives and experiences with digital dialogue, the counsellors were invited to discuss and reflect upon their own experiences. The counsellors reported that several service users experienced the digital format as useful, for example those struggling with anxiety or who prefer to communicate from home, without time pressure (e.g. due to limited language proficiency). However, the task of identifying the service users who might need closer follow-up in a physical meeting was described as challenging in practice. Simple clarifications were described as working very well online, whereas complex cases with many interdependencies were not (such as multiple service needs, co-morbidity, cases involving family members, etc.). Several counsellors, however, pointed out that it might be difficult to identify, based on digital interaction only, what is in fact a complex case. Critical issues that in a physical meeting might appear in passing, indirectly or by non-verbal means, might not be detectable in a written message. As one counsellor put it:

> We are dependent on what the service user has chosen to write. The question is, do they manage to write up what they want to communicate when they are facing a life crisis or struggle with health problems? (meeting notes, September 2019)

Some service users seemed to manage to write detailed and precise descriptions of their situations, while others did not. The counsellors made us aware of the potential information and counselling needs that might be *absent* in the digital dialogues.

The question of service user literacy was highlighted, both in terms of language and digital competence. How can counsellors provide written counselling that is correct and informative, while also keeping it understandable to the service user? What style and tone are appropriate for counsellors to use? As one counsellor asked: 'Should we mirror the style of the service user or not?'. The relational dimensions in written counselling were a recurring topic, i.e. how the written messages contribute (or not) to establishing and maintaining a good working relationship with the service users. Nonverbal resources such as smiles, nods and a friendly tone of voice were described as critically missing in the written format, and emojis as an alternative resource were a contested suggestion among the counsellors. The dialogues also serve a formal role as documentation in the service user's case file, which creates a number of questions about what is appropriate and what is not.

This early meeting provided a nuanced intake into the various experiences that the counsellors might have with digital communication with the service users. The range of questions they presented to us was broad and they opened up a series of possible directions for the project. By bringing in these diverse voices at an early stage, the potential scope of the project opened up and there was a genuine opportunity for the counsellors to influence the questions being posed in the project.

Another key event was a workshop, held twice for a larger group of counsellors (in total 40). These workshops were framed as an initial contact between the researchers and the larger group of practitioners, as an opportunity to explore the topic of digital dialogues together and as a chance for the researchers and the practitioners to learn from each other.

Based on the planning meetings with the PA and one department supervisor, the researchers presented a selection of concepts that served as an invitation to reflect and to share experiences with digital counselling. During the planning, the topic of relational work in written interaction was brought up, i.e., the counsellors' need to balance coming across as professional, factual and impartial, on the one hand, and as being supportive and personal, on the other. The researchers therefore chose to present the concept of *facework* (Goffman 1967; Brown and Levinson 1987) in interaction, as well as three modes of talk, *institutional*, *professional* and *personal*. These modes are inspired by Roberts and Sarangi's (2003) analytic distinction that aims to capture hybridity in professional discourse. The concepts were illustrated with examples from our data on face-to-face meetings in NAV, and we asked the counsellors to reflect on these concepts in light of their own experiences with digital service user interaction.

The concepts clearly resonated with the counsellors, and they contributed with a number of stories and examples from their own professional practice, which led to further exploration and development of these perspectives. One such contribution from the counsellors was the dual concept of *professional closeness*. This concept captured the balancing act that was described to us in several meetings, namely that of managing to create rapport with service users in writing, without becoming too personal or sounding unprofessional. This process resonates with what Sarangi (2005) underlines as an essential part of the working relationship between practitioners and researchers: categorization and interpretation, which are seen as 'both the object of study and the process through which we study the professional habitus' (Sarangi 2005: 378). We can see how already in the very early stages of the collaboration, the process of joint problematization might provide the seeds for categorization and interpretation that might be pursued in later phases.

Getting a sense of the context (Hak 1999), in other words, was a key activity for us in the process of gaining access. By inviting counsellor perspectives in this way, we gained a better understanding of the phenomenon of digital counselling, and the research questions that were later formulated were inspired and influenced by these dialogues. The process of joint problematization was a critical part of the process of gaining access and represented an essential part of what constitutes ethical research practice in this project. We developed a solid working relationship with the practitioners and gained increased understanding of each other's perspectives and concerns – a form of reciprocal socialization to each other's professional fields (Sarangi 2005).

4.2 Whose interests? Negotiating the research topic with multiple stakeholders

Researcher–practitioner collaboration is always a case of cross-professional communication, with specific challenges. However, in this project we had multi-agency collaboration as well as multiple levels within the institutions involved. The labour and welfare administration is a complex professional field, with many stakeholders and many interests. In addition to the dual ownership at the state and municipal levels, there is a regional administrative level that has specific responsibilities, including regional research and development activities. At the local office level, the daily operations and local competence development are managed. As regards the goal of achieving funding from the University City, this was a municipal initiative and so the municipality administration was also an important stakeholder. However, as most tasks and benefits in NAV are state-governed, the project also needed to secure support at the regional and national levels. Consequently, the institutional hierarchies and the range of people that needed to be involved in decision making regarding this project were significantly higher than for our traditional research projects.

The descriptions of the project needed to relate not only to the frontline practitioners' experiences, but also to speak to the strategic goals and interests of higher-level management. Even if funding were to be secured from the University City, the project would not be granted access to data without the support of key management levels; hence, the number of gatekeepers was high, some more formal than others (Reeves 2010). The early steps in this process involved collaboration at a strategic level, as we were working to define the overall goals of the project, negotiate descriptions of relevance and gain support from key stakeholders and decision makers. This required insight into the various roles and mandates that were relevant and an understanding of the institutional and professional hierarchies. Each level of hierarchy expressed expectations of relevance and applicability of the research, sometimes from different perspectives and with various motives and topical interests.

In discussing research ideas and knowledge needs with different stakeholders, there is a risk that the research becomes politicized, i.e. aimed at strengthening existing policies in the institutions. In our case, there is extensive work at the different management levels of NAV to develop strategies and measures that support the political goals of the welfare-to-work policies (for a description of this welfare ideology, see Dall and Danneris 2019). In the meetings and conversations with the researchers, some higher-level officers indicated that the research should contribute to improving the key performance indicators; in other words, the knowledge produced should easily be transferred into practice that will improve the services in line with welfare-to-work principles. Others expressed an interest in finding out the extent to which counsellors follow the requirement of work-oriented counselling, with an underlying agenda of evaluating professional practice in relation to the activation policies. Some officers met the qualitative methodological design with some scepticism, calling for randomized controlled trials, which are frequently seen as 'the gold standard' of knowledge production in fields such as medicine. These various knowledge interests and perspectives on the role and function of research were incompatible with the research methods and epistemologies of the project. This resembles the epistemological differences that emerged in collaboration with medical professionals reported by Roberts and Sarangi (2003).

Naturally, the different officers in NAV have specific mandates and responsibilities that they want the research efforts to address. The challenge for the researchers, however, is to manage to identify these different knowledge interests and epistemological positions and to respond to them in an open and transparent manner. It places the responsibility on the researchers continuously to clarify what kinds of questions the project might be able to answer and what topics are (not) within the scope of the project. A need to communicate the epistemological foundations of a qualitative project and the need to clarify what kinds of contributions can be made to the field surface in these situations (for example, transferability vs. generalizability of knowledge, see Lincoln and Guba 1985: 20–21). The layers of gatekeeping that have to be negotiated is also intertwined with the need for access and the sense of obligation that might follow from receiving it.

It is important to keep a keen eye on the foundation for the project and who the research is *for* and *with*, when officers across institutions and hierarchies offer ideas and suggestions. Some individuals/roles might have a great interest in the project but not have the expertise or the authority to make decisions for the project. Others might have significant leverage in terms of granting access but might not immediately see the relevance or usefulness of the project. Interestingly, the epistemological differences were most prominent at the higher management levels, rather than at the local office level. In our case, the research team was clearly committed to the local practitioners and their managers who had initiated the project, and we were careful to balance the input from the higher levels with the initial research interest. The unique contribution of universities to society is their independence, and this uniqueness must be preserved also within multi-agency funded projects. This becomes the responsibility of the research team, and it calls for a reflexive attitude to the relationships that are formed at various stages of the project. Expectations need to be managed, while still managing to secure support and access.

4.3 Whose ethics? Collaborative response to emerging ethical dilemmas

Once the support for the project was established and a detailed plan for data gathering had been approved through formal ethical procedures, the project moved into the data collection phase. The actual practical data harvesting of dialogues from the digital system was conducted by the PA who was in charge of collecting, anonymizing and transferring these sensitive data to the researchers. The process required a significant amount of work, including discussions with the research team. Throughout the process we had several conversations in order to clarify details and confirm decisions that were made. We were fortunate to have the PA in charge, a highly conscientious person who understood the importance of following the protocol and making sure to discuss any uncertainties. His role as improvement counsellor gave him an added motivation for collaborating on knowledge development in his field, and the fact that he had designated time in his day to work on the project was crucial. The ethics of access was, in other words, a process that extended into the data-collection phase, as dilemmas emerged and decisions had to be made.

One such dilemma presented itself as a particularly difficult situation, involving a piece of data that the PA and his supervisor wanted to exclude from the data set. As he was reading through the dialogues in order to anonymize personal data, he came across a sequence of interaction that he found troubling. Without revealing details about the problem, the PA characterized the interaction as ‘not ok’ in terms of the counselling taking place. He took the extract to his supervisor and on consideration they agreed that this data would be unacceptable to include as research data. They also considered it necessary that the supervisor consider action vis-à-vis the counsellor in question. However, before reaching out to the counsellor, they contacted the Principal Investigator (PI) in order to discuss the matter and solicit her opinion on the situation.

Clearly, the researchers did not want to see any piece of data being removed from the selected sample. All kinds and manners of counselling taking place in NAV was of interest to the project, whether it could be considered representative or not. However, the main concern for the PI at that point was the possibility that the specific counsellor might face negative consequences as a result of participating in research, which would be breaking the foundational ethical principle of doing no harm. This is a significant premise for the great majority of research projects, and a condition that would harm the research community significantly should it be broken. After joint reflection and discussion of the case, the PA and his supervisor decided not to confront the counsellor based on this finding. The supervisor would find other ways to assure that the quality of counselling was adequate in the future. She has a responsibility also to the service users and decided in this case to use her regular routines and procedures to assess the counsellor's work and not use the research project as a reason for the follow-up.

In terms of including the specific counsellor's dialogue in the data set, however, the PA and supervisor argued strongly for excluding it. At the forefront of the argument was their professional ethos of client confidentiality, and it was considered prudent to exclude the data in order to protect both the service user and the counsellor. This was a line of argument that the researchers felt obliged to respect. It was clear to us that we had to accept the exclusion of this dialogue and the selection of a new random sample to replace it.

This dilemma required a situational response that forced us to weigh the research ethics of the researchers against the professional ethics of the counsellors, and to find a response that could sufficiently consider both perspectives. In this case, the professional ethics of the practice field gained more weight in the response to this dilemma, and the working relationship with our partners was more important to us than upholding the selection criteria for data collection. However, we were glad to see the supervisor deciding not to confront the counsellor but meet us halfway on this very important issue. The communication around this dilemma illustrates that the assessments of what is ethical and what is not is both emergent and contextual (Ryen 2011), highly dependent on the communicative dimensions of the researcher–practitioner relationship. Research ethics does not exist in isolation, but is linked with other forms of ethics, in this case simultaneously social, professional and institutional (Kara 2018).

5 Concluding remarks

We have discussed three communicative dimensions of the ethics of access with illustrative examples concerning the elements of micro-ethics that we experienced through the activities of joint problematization, negotiation of the research topic and collaborative response to ethical dilemmas. Through the joint problematization with the counsellor group, issues such as service user literacy (linguistic and digital) was highlighted and nuanced, and the challenges of categorizing 'complex cases' through digital interaction was made evident to us. The process of joint problematization also represented a form of reciprocal socialization between the researchers and the counsellors, a reflexive practice that contributed to sharpening the researchers' 'professional vision' (Goodwin 1994).

While the researchers were invited by the local office based on the interests of the frontline counsellors, the research topic needed to be negotiated with multiple stakeholders. The ethics of access involved cross-agency levels of management that had not invited the researchers and that had other knowledge interests and other expectations of research collaboration. Securing access, then, included gaining insight into the institutional structures and hierarchies, and navigating the varying knowledge interests that existed among stakeholders and partners. In other words, getting a sense of the context (Hak 1999) includes understanding complex cross-institutional interdependencies, not only for identifying data for analysis, but also for managing the communicative dimensions of gaining access to data.

Managing emerging ethical dilemmas, such as the situation when the practitioners wanted to rule out some data, might be an assessment of whether to safeguard the relationship with the practitioners or secure the optimal data set. In our case, this was a balancing act between the norms and values of the professional practitioners and those of the research community. Kubanyiova (2008) calls for *virtue ethics* in AL, the ability to recognize situations that require an ethical response. She sees this ability as a core competence of AL. Being reflexive involves acknowledging the ethical dimensions of ordinary, everyday research practice. In Guillemin and Gillam's (2004: 277) words,

> the reflexive researcher will be better placed to be aware of ethically important moments as they arise and will have a basis for responding in a way that is likely to be ethically appropriate, even with unforeseen situations.

We have made an argument for drawing insights from foundational debates in AL concerning the role of the researcher and the researcher–practitioner relationship into the domain of research ethics, appreciating the communicative dimensions of ethical practice. We have here been concerned with the ethics of access, but the ethical issues in this stage are tightly linked to the phases that are to follow, both in terms of the continued researcher–practitioner collaboration and in terms of expectations that might exist for interpretation and dissemination in the project. As McAreavey and Das (2013: 126) state:

> Being ethical is closer to the profession of research than to the business of bureaucracy because it requires researchers to constantly reflect on their conduct and on the context of their research, rather than complying with a pre-determined blueprint'.

As AL researchers, we are often familiar with the processes of working with practitioners at various stages of a project, not least in the early stages of gaining access to data. But with current developments in research policies and funding, our professional practice is increasingly moving into complex, multi-agency projects that are driven by the interests and motivations of multiple agents across institutions and organizations. This represents new challenges for us as researchers in the field of AL. In the Digital Dialogue project, the communicative dimensions crossed multiple agencies and organizational hierarchies. This adds another layer of complexity to research ethics, which also impacts the practices of attaining access to research sites and empirical data. The many communicative events and ethical considerations that take place in the early stages of research deserve attention as an integral part of the practices of research ethics. This requires critical engagement on the part of the researchers and reflexivity in terms of the role communication plays in the realization of ethical research practice.

Endnotes

1. The macro-ethical and formal processes of securing access to data in this project involved several institutions and legal frameworks. For the purposes of this paper, we leave aside the processes aimed at meeting the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the national personal data regulations and also the institutional regulations of both the university and the welfare administration. The many interactions with advisors and decision makers in the legal domain might also be conceptualized in terms of micro-ethics, but that will not be the topic for this paper.
2. Our partners in the local office were invited to read through this manuscript before submission. The PA contributed with comments on the descriptions given of the project process and of our collaboration.

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