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Ethical Issues in the Study of Second Language Acquisition:
Resources for Researchers

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Abstract

Two recent books provide varied resources for exploring ethical issues in the social sciences. Reflection on ethical issues aims to sensitize scholars to a range of consequences of their research, and to scholars' responsibilities to their discipline, their colleagues, and the public. This review article assesses the utility of these texts (and of other materials available in print and online) to research on second language acquisition.

Keywords: ethics; applied ethics; philosophy of second language acquisition

Review article

Ethical Issues in the Study of Second Language Acquisition: Resources for Researchers

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Baggini, J. and Fosl, P. S. 2007: *The ethics toolkit: A compendium of ethical concepts and methods*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. xvii + 254 pp. US\$19.95. ISBN: 978 1 4051 3231 2 (paperback).

Kimmel, A. J. 2007: *Ethical issues in behavioral research: Basic and applied perspectives (2nd ed.)*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. xxii + 405 pp. US\$59.95. ISBN: 978 1 4051 3439 2 (paperback).

I Introduction

Compared to the moral dilemmas that confront medical personnel, military strategists, political leaders, and business executives, the ethical challenges that face second language acquisition researchers are typically rather tame. Regardless of ambiguous the data bearing on Missing Surface Inflection versus Prosodic Transfer appear, or how extreme a position one takes on Full Transfer / Full Access, no international tribunal has

ever convened to assess the culpability of either side to these debates. Scholars of second language acquisition (SLA) do not, it would seem, work in an intellectual environment characterized by nosebleed-high ethical tensions.

But this is not to say that those who study SLA confront no ethical issues. Scholars who gather data from language learners face the usual dilemmas entailed by empirical work: they must secure the requisite privacy and freedom from coercion for participants in studies of second language (L2) learning; avoid deceiving participants while at the same time protecting participants' capacity to respond without prejudice to the content of the study; and balance confidentiality with the need to present research results to the public in the fullest, most transparent, detail possible. Researchers also encounter the challenges of representing with scrupulous accuracy the scholarship of their colleagues, whether that scholarship is consistent or inconsistent with their own work. All parties must avoid unacknowledged adoption of the words and ideas of others, however slight or unintended, and refrain from exploiting the work of collaborators, especially students. As Ortega (2005) has argued, there are also powerful ethical consequences in the choice of what population ones studies as representative of L2 learners, and in how accessible research findings are made to teachers and policy makers. These are genuine and serious ethical responsibilities, if only rarely the stuff of high drama. They are also not unique to scholars of SLA. Rather, garden-variety ethical decision-making enters into scholarship on SLA in ways that largely conform to how it infuses scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

However, even insofar as SLA research appears to be at low risk for ethical catastrophe, and even insofar as those ethical issues that do emerge are mostly ones

familiar to other disciplines, it is still worth surveying the moral-philosophical landscape of the field. This review article first summarizes existing discussion of ethics in SLA, and surveys ethical guidelines and codes relevant to SLA research. It then introduces new materials available to scholars who would like to develop their sensitivity to ethical issues. I employ these new materials to speculate about how a sharpened ethical consciousness might (in one example) raise new questions about familiar research and (in another example) find value in research that has generally gone unappreciated.

II Existing literature relevant to the ethics of SLA research

Not much has been published specifically on ethical issues in SLA research. Some neighboring fields, however, have amassed extensive literatures on ethics. These fields include language testing; language pedagogy, especially teaching English as a second language; critical linguistics; and the superordinate discipline of applied linguistics.

The concern with ethics exhibited by scholars in these areas has taken varied forms and addressed various issues. Following a symposium on ethics at the 1996 meeting of the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée, Alan Davies guest-edited an issue of the journal *Language Testing*. The issue is comprised of ten papers that explore the ethical dimensions of language tests, including test administration, content, validity, test ‘backwash’, and the social and political roles that language tests play (Davies, 1997). Like language testers, language teachers (especially teachers of English as a second language) have a fairly developed tradition of reflection on

professional ethics. For example, Silva (1997) discussed what counts as adequate academic support for ESL learners, and Dufon (1993) called on the field to expand the scope of what it recognizes as its ethical responsibilities. The papers collected by Hafernik, Messerschmitt, and Vandrick (2002) explore a wide range of situations where ESL teachers face ethical choices. The book addresses nitty-gritty matters such as classroom management dilemmas, student gift giving, and responding to plagiarism. It also discusses matters where an individual teacher's actions may have less immediate but potentially more pervasive consequences, such as in the construction of equitable relations with colleagues and with educational institutions, and in the responsibility a teacher assumes (or not) for the effects of the spread of English world-wide.

Another stream of work that is characteristically highly self-conscious about ethical matters is 'critical linguistics', sometimes called 'critical applied linguistics' (Rajagopalan, 2004; Davies and Elder 2004: 9–10). Critical linguistics examines specific practices and assumptions about language that sustain an uneven distribution of social or economic power. Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson (1992) present case studies of research on dialectology, bilingualism, gender, and race in the vein of critical linguistics. They model how scholars can establish relationships with people whose language they are studying, relationships that go beyond passive collection of data. Cameron *et al.* urge researchers to assume, as part of the ethical burden of doing research, the responsibility of helping empower people to resist social and economic inequity.

In these ways, language testing, TESOL, and critical linguistics may have the liveliest traditions of reflection on ethical issues. There are also other sub-fields within applied linguistics where ethics is the topic of at least occasional discussion. For a

special issue of *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, Carolyn Temple Adger and Jeff Connor-Linton (1993) collected essays on ethics across a range of applied-linguistic concerns. Each essay narrates an applied linguist's actual experiences grappling with ethical matters, with contributions from forensic linguistics, language testing, speech-language pathology, social dialectology, computational linguistics, and conversational analysis.

The concerns discussed in this body of literature, however, are not exactly those most relevant to SLA research. Two resources where one might look for explicit reflection on ethical issues in SLA—textbooks, and survey-of-the-field handbooks—turn out to be curiously devoid of such content. Textbooks, even those of panoramic scope and that tutor readers in SLA research methods and practices (e.g. Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Ellis, 1994; de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2005; Sanz, 2005; Gass & Selinker, 2007), typically do not advert to ethical matters. For textbooks with a narrower remit, like White (2003) or VanPatten and Williams (2007) the absence of ethics is less surprising, while the same gap is conspicuous in Jordan (2004), a book that focuses on SLA theory construction. In addition, despite a recent publishing boom in 'handbooks' that has yielded massive, mosaic-like, collections of essays about SLA by leading figures, none contains a chapter on ethics (e.g. handbooks edited by Ritchie & Bhatia, 1996; Kaplan, 2002; Doughty & Long, 2003; Hinkel, 2005).

Comparing linguistics to the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, Newman and Ratliff (2001: 9) remark on how little awareness the former exhibits of ethical matters. SLA seems to share this orientation with linguistics in general. Ortega (2005: 429) attributes the absence of ethical self-awareness in SLA research to an 'illusion that somehow neutrality is inherent in the concerns of the field'. She counters this stance by

asserting, in concert with most of modern philosophy of science, that ‘value-free research is impossible’ (p. 432).¹

III Guidelines and codes of ethics in research on SLA

The contrast between the sparse attention paid to ethical issues within SLA, and the relatively high ethical self-consciousness of applied linguistics, is reflected in the production of professional guidelines or codes of ethics. Several organizations of applied linguists have disseminated statements that define adequate and inadequate ethical practices. On its website, the International Language Testing Association has posted a nine-point Code of Ethics for professional language testers, largely taken up with explication of abstract principles like ‘Language testers shall have respect for the humanity and dignity of each of their test takers’, and ‘Language testers shall share the responsibility for upholding the integrity of the language testing profession’ (ILTA, 2000). In addition, the ILTA has established a Code of Practice that specifies the rights and responsibilities of test designers, administrators, takers, and those who interpret test results, all worked out in fine detail (ILTA, 2005). Boyd and Davies (2002) argue that language testers need both such a profession-wide code of ethics, and context-specific codes of practice tailored to the different social and cultural niches where language testing takes place; each code of practice constitutes a ‘local gloss on the universalist principles’ (p. 312) that a code of ethics supplies.

In a smaller, earlier, initiative that seems to promise greater relevance to SLA research, the Research Committee of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. published a text ‘Guidelines for ethical research in ESL’ (TESOL, 1980). However, this document turns out to address only a single (albeit important) issue, namely, how to ensure the privacy and rights of research participants. The article’s greatest utility probably lies in its inclusion of modifiable sample consent forms for use with adult and child participants in research on L2 learning. The Linguistic Society of America, in a rare contribution to discussion of ethics, raised a different matter regarding the ethical treatment of research participants. A short text entitled ‘Human subjects in linguistic research’ posted on the LSA website (LSA, 1992) points out a key difference between linguistics and the social and natural sciences. In the study of language (especially as carried out in a fieldwork setting), researchers may develop sustained, personal, relationships with specific consultants, whereas in other sciences researcher-subject interaction may be fleeting and narrowly defined. Therefore, the anonymity that protects participants in natural or social-scientific research may sometimes be out of place in linguistics. According to the LSA statement, ‘not to disclose [linguistic consultants’] names would do them a disservice’, since at least some ‘may wish to be known for their contribution.’

The concern for participants in linguistic research displayed in the TESOL and LSA statements (and as much more fully developed in the context of critical linguistics by Cameron *et al.*, 1992) is certainly pertinent to scholarship on SLA, but that issue alone does not exhaust the definition of ‘ethical research.’ A broader and more ambitious attempt to define ethical standards has been undertaken by the British Association for

Applied Linguistics. In 1994 BAAL released a text, now accessible online, entitled ‘Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics’ (BAAL, 2006), through which the organization aimed to ‘provide guidance for [its] membership on relations with the wider community, and the ethical conduct of their own applied linguistics research’ (BAAL, 1997: 14). The BAAL Recommendations comprise 17 painstakingly-groomed pages of guidelines for professional practice, framed as definitions of the responsibilities of applied linguists in various domains: responsibilities to informants; to colleagues; to students; to the field of applied linguistics; to the public. In addition, there is advice and commentary on the ethical dimensions of the relationships applied linguists form with their own research, with sponsors, and with their home institutions.

The BAAL Recommendations are presented as an outline comprised of numbered entries, with detailed matters expanded as bulleted subpoints. In an unusual step, the Association has also posted a much shorter second version of their Recommendations addressed to students, entitled ‘Recommendations on good practice in Applied Linguistics student projects’ (BAAL, 2000). This comprises a lucid, minimally elaborated, six-point text that reminds students of the core responsibilities they bear in working with informants. For example, the BAAL document advises students point-blank to avoid deceptive or covert research, while conceding the acceptability of distraction.

In summary, there exists a precedent for reflection and debate about ethics in disciplines that neighbor the study of SLA, played out in conference proceedings, journal articles, and freestanding books. There also exist models of carefully-wrought

professional codes and explicit standards of practice that address, at various levels of resolution, issues that bear on some of the concerns of scholars of SLA.

Should researchers in SLA emulate these initiatives, for example, by creating their own ethical code? Conventionally, ethical codes have been produced and ratified under the aegis of professional organizations. The relationship between ethical codes and professional organizations is not accidental: among the effects of articulating a code of ethics is that it builds up, as well as reflects, a research community's identity and its sense of its own boundaries (Coady & Bloch, 1996). As one scholar wrote:

A profession's code tells practitioners who and what they are. In describing the defining interest of the profession and its implications for practice, it supplies a vocabulary for intra-professional argument, self-criticism and reform. Similarly, its terms support broader public discussion of the profession and its practices, privileges and duties. The role of a code in stimulating moral self-understanding is important. It not only supplies a vocabulary but it helps *create* the community of users. (Fullinwider 1996: 83)

Scholars of SLA probably do not have sufficient coherence as a group at present to warrant drafting a code of ethics: there is too much creative dissent, too much divergence in the public roles research on SLA assumes, and too heterogeneous a lexicon of self-description, for SLA researchers to try to converge on a single 'vocabulary for intra-professional argument, self-criticism and reform'.² Not coincidentally, there is no

obvious institutional superstructure that might undertake the task of creating a code of ethics for scholars of SLA, since research on SLA lacks a centripetal professional organization within which scholars working in the various domains of the field find common ground. Perhaps even more importantly, there is no one clamoring to use such a code of ethics. That is, no clear consensus exists that a professional code would resolve immediate and threatening problems that SLA researchers face.

But even without a formalized professional code, and even in the absence of obvious demand for it among SLA researchers, there may still be benefits to the field if scholars raised their consciousness of ethical issues. The task could be accomplished informally, incrementally, outside of any institution or professional association, by anyone who cared to do so. Over a number of months I have attended to or initiated conversations with colleagues from North America, Asia, and Europe about the ethical dimensions of their research. Such conversations make it clear that ethical issues sometimes play central roles in scholars' experiences, and moreover that many find discussion of such experiences worthwhile. What kinds of resources are available to help scholars of SLA develop their understanding of ethical issues in research?

III Two recent resources for thinking about ethical issues in SLA

Kimmel (2007) is the second edition of a book addressed to social scientists and social scientists in training. Allan J. Kimmel earned a doctorate in Psychology, but is affiliated with the Paris campus of the European School of Management as a Professor of

Marketing. Aside from a long-sustained interest in research ethics, Kimmel has written about marketing communications and about the effect of rumors on consumer behavior. His book is a comprehensive survey of how ethics enter into the conduct of social-scientific research, both explicitly and implicitly.

Herbert C. Kelman, a renowned social psychologist and Harvard's Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics, Emeritus, provides a Foreword to Kimmel's book. Kelman sketches the emergence of systematic ethical awareness in the behavioral sciences since the 1960s, and anticipates the conceptualization of ethical concerns 'as an integral component of the research process itself, on a par with theoretical and methodological concerns—based on the proposition that what we learn through our research is intimately linked to how we learn it' (Kelman, 2007: xiv).

Kimmel (2007) is comprised of ten chapters, the combined effect of which is to communicate a sense of the power and pervasiveness of ethical decision-making in modern research. Chapter 1 reviews notorious cases of ethical misadventures that either undermined research results or that resulted in damage to participants, to researchers' reputations, or to public tolerance for social-scientific research. Kimmel uses these cautionary tales to define the scope of research ethics and to introduce factors—personal values, professional standards, legal constraints—that influence how people make ethical decisions. With that overview in mind, and taking the field of psychology as an example, Chapter 2 reviews the evolution of professional ethical codes from 1953 to 2002, and the evolution of governmental regulation of research, the latter mostly but not wholly in reference to the United States. Kimmel then turns to ethical concerns specific to particular contexts: laboratory research (Chapter 3), field and ethnographic research

(Chapter 5), therapeutic and organizational research (Chapter 6), marketing and survey research (Chapter 7), and research that involves animals (Chapter 9).

The remaining three chapters address overarching issues whose relevance crosses the boundaries of specific research contexts. Chapter 4 focuses on the methodological difficulties inherent to research that employs deception. Deception is also treated in Chapter 3, in the context of laboratory research, but Chapter 4 looks more broadly at the efficacy of methodologies entailing deception, their effects on participants, and ways in which deception can either be mitigated or avoided outright. Chapter 8 discusses the ethics of recruiting and selecting research subjects. A long Chapter 10 examines the processes of ethical review of research. Kimmel gives most extensive attention to institutional review boards—their composition, role, operation, and adequacy—and suggests how to increase the efficacy of institutional review. He also comments on local departmental review boards, and on ethical review of student research. Chapter 10 concludes the book with an important analysis of scientific misconduct and fraud: its varieties, extent, and the impediments we have in place against it; and finally, with discussion of ethical problems that arise in the publication of research, including the assignment of authorship, assuring the anonymity of research participants, and prevention of the misuse of research results.

Kimmel's book ends with three appendices: an annotated list of ethical codes available on the Internet³; a survey of ethical codes in the field of psychology organized by their country of origin; and examples of forms, either forms researchers complete in seeking approval from institutional review boards, or forms participants complete to

signal their consent to serve as subjects in psychological research. A 38-page list of references, and subject and name indices, rounds out the text.

Despite reader-friendly touches like an abundance of illustrative and explanatory ‘Boxes’ set off typographically from the main text, *Ethical issues in behavioral research* is not entirely inviting to read. The book’s organization is sometimes puzzling, as Kimmel doubles back to revisit issues and examples mentioned earlier, breaking the flow of his exposition in ways not fully compensated for by chapter-initial lists of ‘Chapter Topics,’ chapter-ending ‘Summary’ sections, or a decently well-articulated index. Nevertheless, Kimmel’s book is rewarding in its broad-ranging, thoughtful, and patient treatment of the many ethical dimensions of modern social-scientific research. The author even-handedly assesses the tradeoffs that confront researchers concerned with ethical issues. He displays both keen sensitivity to the necessity that researchers hold themselves to very high ethical standards, and a realistic sense of how those standards can sometimes limit the scope and rigor of scientific inquiry.

Kimmel aims to raise readers’ consciousness of the ethical challenges research presents, and then to suggest ways for social scientists to either overcome those challenges, or redesign their work so as to avoid having to face them. The book makes no reference to research on SLA. However, Kimmel’s practical orientation is easy to extend to another field. For example, Chapter 5 discusses ethnographic research, on a spectrum between that which is ethically innocuous, to work that raises serious ethical concerns. Many of these studies have parallels in research on SLA. For example, consider longitudinal studies of child bilingual development that entail repeated observation and recording of child speech in naturalistic contexts. A researcher carrying

out such a study would, of course, secure the informed consent of parents or guardians, and of the child being observed as well. But having provided formal consent (either once, or iteratively) does not protect participants from negative consequences, however slight, that they might experience in playing a role in this kind of research. Those consequences might include material inconvenience; increased self-consciousness and artificiality; subtle distortion of complex human relationships; the introduction of disequilibrium into family dynamics (especially where only one among several siblings is being studied); and even, at a more abstract level, advance of the commodification of behavior and experience into the early years of life. In fact, a signed consent form might magnify such negative consequences, insofar as participants perceive it as a kind of contract that inhibits them from withdrawing from a study that has become awkward or burdensome.

These consequences, if indeed they do affect participants in naturalistic studies of SLA, may be heightened or lowered according to how accommodating and self-aware a stance the researcher takes. The fact that a researcher perceived no obviously ethically-disturbing consequences resulting from one longitudinal study of child bilingual development should not lull that same researcher, or his or her colleagues, into belief that none exist. The point is not that longitudinal studies of child bilingual development should be abandoned. Rather, the point is that researchers should, as clearly and in as much detail as possible, anticipate and acknowledge the ramifications of their activities, weighing their ethical complexities 'as an integral component of the research process itself, on a par with theoretical and methodological concerns' (Kelman, 2007: xiv).

Kimmel's discussion of the ethical challenges of field and ethnographic research might, in this way, lead one to reconsider certain SLA research practices. As another example, re-thinking the ethics of ethnographic research shines new light on one famous study of language learning. Neil Smith and Ianthi-Marie Tsimpli have written extensively about Christopher, a man born in Britain in 1962 who displays extraordinary talent for language learning against a backdrop of depressed cognitive abilities (Smith & Tsimpli, 1991; Tsimpli & Smith, 1991; Smith, Tsimpli, & Ouhalla 1993; Smith & Tsimpli, 1995). Smith and Tsimpli argue that Christopher's capacity to learn new languages despite impaired general cognition supports the modularity hypothesis (Fodor, 1983), and moreover that the profile of skills Christopher has achieved in the 15 to 20 second languages in which he has some competence sheds light on the role of Universal Grammar in SLA (Smith & Tsimpli, 1995: 190–191). Throughout their writings about Christopher, Smith and Tsimpli provide detailed information about him, covering his birth, family, education, social skills, medical status, intellectual, psychological, and emotional capacities, social-welfare service history, and his experiences at home, school, and in the sheltered community where he now resides. Smith & Tsimpli (1995) reproduce drawings created by Christopher; display his solutions to arithmetic problems; communicate the results of cognitive and perceptual texts he has taken; and quote passages from his spontaneous and elicited speech. The book opens with a full-length photograph of Christopher.

In addition, there are five 3- to 4-minute videotapes available on the Internet showing Christopher interacting with Neil Smith (archived by the Linguistic Society of

America at <<http://www.uga.edu/lava/Smith/Smith.html>>). Other video footage of Christopher, replete with viewers' commentary, has been posted on YouTube.

The materials about Christopher available online identify him by his full name—given name plus surname—whereas Smith and Tsimpli refer to him exclusively as 'Christopher'. The difference is telling, in that this small but studied remnant of privacy Smith and Tsimpli provide to Christopher has been, apparently casually, stripped away online. Christopher was already an adult when he became the object of scientific inquiry. He seems to have agreed to some extent of public exposure in that, at age 30, he appeared on television in The Netherlands to display his linguistic talents (an appearance that may in fact, be the source of the video clips posted online). Public fascination with Christopher is evinced by citations of Smith and Tsimpli's work in popular as well as specialist literature. That fascination is magnified by the indiscriminate access that Internet posting of video materials provides, which has probably sustained and intensified scrutiny of Christopher beyond what anyone imagined when he agreed to appear on television in 1992. Is there an ethical issue here, centering on the question of how much privacy the public owes even a person who does not demand privacy, or at least did not demand it at the crucial moment when public curiosity was being materialized in print and on videotape? And how does the answer to that question balance the rare scientific contribution that Smith and Tsimpli's work makes, against the fact that Christopher's cognitive status warrants special accommodation?⁴

Kimmel's book leads readers to raise questions like these about research on language learning. Moreover, it prepares them not to expect those questions to be answerable in any simple or obvious manner. Turning now to a different kind of

resource, Julian Baggini and Peter S. Fosl's *The Ethics Toolkit* can also contribute to discussion of ethics in SLA, although it belongs to quite a different genre of text.

Baggini is an editor and writer who has made a career out of bringing philosophy to the general public. In the last decade he has published in rapid succession a number of books with titles such as *Philosophy: Key Texts*, *Great Thinkers A–Z*, and *What's It All About?: Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*. Fosl is a professor at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky and a specialist in British philosophy and the history of philosophy. *The Ethics Toolkit* contains 96 lively essays, each around 1000 words, introducing readers to core terms and concepts in ethics. Baggini and Fosl state their goal in a short Introduction:

Rather than trying to determine a single, complete ethical theory that answers all the relevant moral questions that may arise, and defeats all its competitors, perhaps one might instead (or also) try to gain a kind of mastery or at least facility with some of the many different theories, concepts, principles, and critiques concerned with ethics that moral philosophers have produced over the ages. [...] By placing a selection of insights from different moral theorists and theories side by side... [w]e hope to show how many of the concepts and ideas collected under the umbrella of ethical theory have a wider and more complex range of application than can sometimes appear. There are many voices composing the moral discourses of our age, and these different voices address many different problems in different ways. Many tools are necessary to hear

them and to respond properly to them, not a single voice or a single tool.

(Baggini & Fosl, 2007, xvi)

The authors organize their book into five parts, each subsuming about 20 independent short texts, ordered alphabetically. Part I sketches ‘The Grounds of Ethics’, including entries on ‘Aesthetics’; ‘Conscience’, ‘Natural law’, and ‘Revelation’. Part II, ‘Framework for Ethics’, evenhandedly depicts the positions of a wide range of ‘isms’: ‘Consequentialism’; ‘Deontological ethics’; ‘Hedonism’; ‘Particularism’; ‘Rationalism’. A long Part III, ‘Central Concepts in Ethics’, explores classic ethical watersheds, such as ‘Absolute / relative’; ‘Facts / values’; ‘Individual / collective’ and ‘Means / ends’. Part IV, ‘Assessment, Judgment, and Critique’, examines the varied grounds on which ethical thinking is criticized: ‘Authenticity’; ‘Fairness’; ‘Impartiality and objectivity’; ‘Proportionality’; ‘Sex and gender [bias]’. Finally, Part V concedes ‘The Limits of Ethics’, with entries on ‘Amoralism’; ‘Nihilism’; ‘Skepticism’. Each entry includes a short list of cross-references to related entries, and a miniature bibliography of three further readings (mostly by modern thinkers), some marked as especially recommended to beginners. An appendix connects readers to additional resources relevant to the study of ethics, including websites, professional societies, institutions, and journals (a list that is almost entirely non-overlapping with that provided by Kimmel). An 8-page index concludes the book.

Baggini and Fosl have a gift for demonstrating the relevance of complex and provocative material. They provide many engaging examples of actual or hypothetical contemporary ethical dilemmas, and then show how one approach or set of assumptions

versus another makes a substantive difference in that context. The result is a stimulating demonstration that, to repeat the famous saying attributed to psychologist Kurt Lewin, there is nothing as practical as a good theory.

Like Kimmel (2007), Baggini and Fosl (2007) never advert to SLA. But the terms, concepts and principles they introduce do, as they hoped, serve as useful tools. Returning, for example, to the problematic celebrity of Christopher, Baggini and Fosl's discussions of 'Agency' (pp. 3–6), 'Consequentialism' (pp. 56–59), and 'Moral subjects / moral agents' (pp. 149–152) are pertinent. In the videos of Christopher posted on the Internet, his eye rarely meets the camera. His movements are tentative, hurried, and anxious; his posture and gaze communicate avoidance of the viewer. Granted that these are traits characteristic of autism (one of several proposed diagnoses in his case), is it ethical to play and re-play at will a tape of someone who appears to retreat from, or at least be unnerved by, scrutiny? Once these tapes are in existence, one might argue that to view them results in no new material damage to anyone portrayed in them. But insofar as they are voyeuristic, they disturb community standards of privacy and in doing so exact a toll on those who view them as well as those who are portrayed in them. One might also ask whether the videotapes differ in their substantive consequences from Smith and Tsimpli's overall research initiative (comprising words, data, stories, still photographs, drawings, etc.), directed as it is at probing a single highly identifiable individual's mixture of competence and disability. Or does Christopher's consent to be studied, taken along with the manifest scientific value of Smith and Tsimpli's work, legitimate whatever profit we might take from these images (and words, data, etc.)—even if one senses that they proved costly to their protagonist?

Baggini and Fosl's tools for probing ethical issues might likewise be applied to a unique document that, as far as I can tell, has received little attention from SLA researchers (but cf. Perdue, 1984: 266–267). Buried at the back of the 1978 *Papers from the First Scandinavian–German Symposium on the Language of Immigrant Workers and Their Children*, is a two-page text entitled ‘What foreign workers think about...’ by Saeed Anjum (1978).⁵ Depicting himself as the only foreign worker who attended a conference of research scholars, Anjum writes that:

I am not satisfied with the prevailing situation of foreign workers in Europe. I want to be part of the forces that are struggling to change it. I believe that foreign workers themselves should struggle for such a change and that they should recognize their intellectual friends as well. (Anjum, 1978: 283)

Anjum canvassed an unspecified number of educated foreign workers, male and female, from unspecified language backgrounds, who were then living in Norway (the latter fact communicated by implication). He asked them three questions:

1. What do you think about the researchers?
2. Are they doing something good for you?
3. Do you want to suggest something to them? (Anjum, 1978: 283)

Anjum recorded 19 responses to these questions, including: ‘I do not like to meet any research person. They sell my feelings’; ‘They exploit us’; ‘They do not listen to what I say’; ‘The[y] come and meet us nicely, we treat them friendly and then we become friends. After friendship, an inquiry starts. They ask us about things they already know’; ‘Those who want to rise in their professional status become sympathetic to immigrants’; ‘They sell our ideas’; ‘I always cheat them because they cheat us’ (Anjum, 1978: 283). None of responses Anjum included represents the experience of participating in research as positive.

Unfortunately neither Anjum nor the editors of the *Papers from the First Scandinavian–German Symposium* provides commentary or discussion that might help elucidate these arresting, and very raw, data. It is not obvious, for example, that the research to which Anjum’s interviewees reacted was research specifically on SLA, although at the very least the inclusion of Anjum’s work in the proceedings of the Symposium implies its relevance to the study of language learning. Overlooking this difficulty, however, and treating these data at face value—as evidence that at least some immigrant workers take umbrage at participating in western-style research, and distrust those who carry it out—Anjum’s text raises complex ethical issues for many parties: those who resent being the object of research; those whose resentment finds an outlet in undermining the research (‘I always cheat them because they cheat us’); those who carry the research out; those who interpret and build on its findings; those who fund it.

Baggini and Fosl provide a vocabulary for beginning to sort out some of these issues: ‘Intrinsic / instrumental value’ (pp. 137–139); ‘Liberation / oppression’ (pp. 142–144); ‘Casuistry and rationalization’ (pp. 211–213). Kimmel (2007) can help, too.

Chapter 8, on the recruitment and selection of subjects, discusses both the rights of research participants and their responsibilities (pp. 225–226). The men and women Anjum polled do not fall under any of Kimmel’s categories of ‘Vulnerable participants’ per se (i.e. prisoners, children, institutionalized individuals; pp. 234–243). However, Anjum’s informants perceive a large power differential separating themselves from the researchers. That perception suggests that Kimmel’s discussion of the special status of ‘Vulnerable participants’ in social-scientific research might be a good place from which to start trying to understand, and to redress, the ethical challenges Anjum presents.

It is also worthwhile returning to Baggini and Fosl’s assertion that ‘There are many voices composing the moral discourses of our age, and these different voices address many different problems in different ways’ (2007: xvi). The statements Anjum recorded are difficult to interpret, in part because in content and presentation his text does not conform to the familiar conventions of western scholarship. Those statements were gathered *within* as well as *about* a socio-cultural and linguistic context where other moral discourses prevail, and where other voices express other problems in other ways than those familiar to modern social science. This makes the comments of the men and women whose opinions Anjum solicited all the more valuable—even as they present a highly unflattering portrait of western behavioral science, calling painful attention to some of its ethical blind spots.

IV Conclusion

As Baggini and Fosl emphasize, we do not have a ‘single, complete ethical theory that answers all the relevant moral questions’ (2007: xvi)—nor even one that will help us decide what counts as a relevant moral question. Therefore it would not be surprising if some of the examples discussed in this review article do not appear to readers to constitute genuine ethical problems. Kimmel (2007: 5–6), in fact, tries to help readers figure out how to identify an ethical problem—although of course that act of identification is itself an exercise of ethical decision-making. Howsoever one recognizes what counts as an ethical issue, the capacity to consider ethical issues carefully is worth developing. This is true even in second language acquisition research, where ethical choices typically carry lighter burdens than in some other professional and academic fields.

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[6716 words]

Notes

- ¹ Ortega supports this assertion by analyzing two facets of current L2 research. First, she adverts to Cook's (2002) evidence that L2 learners cannot be viewed as deficient native speakers. What she sees as a striking absence of debate about Cook's 'multicompetence' counts as a value-laden evasion of the responsibility of taking this idea seriously. Second, Ortega is troubled by the disproportionate reliance on college-educated, middle class, adults as participants in studies of SLA. Their involvement may seem merely expedient. But insofar as it results in investing in the experiences of educated adult learners as normative over the experiences of child, elderly, immigrant (etc.) learners, to favor them infuses research with a researcher's implicit values.
- ² In this sense, the study of SLA does not meet the definition of a 'profession', which Davies (2008) connects to the development of explicit ethical standards.
- ³ One valuable resource escapes Kimmel's review, the *Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Law and the Humanities* created by the National Committees for Research Ethics in Norway. This text, published in English in 2006, provides an unusually accessible and judicious discussion of ethical questions. Despite its pan-disciplinary scope, the *Guidelines* raise an important point regarding language in a subsection entitled 'The social, cultural and linguistic roles of research'. While conceding that Norwegian researchers, 'like researchers in other small language communities', should publish their work in English to make it accessible internationally, they also insist that researchers

...ought also to publish, teach, and report results in their own first language, thereby helping to maintain and develop their language as a full value means of perpetuating a society. Science is a key institution in society's common cultural and scientific language, and the first language ought to be maintained and developed as an important element in society's cultural reproduction. Important institutions should pave the way for a culturally sustainable language strategy and avoid making compromises that can marginalize or eliminate the first language from specialist activities. (National Committees for Research Ethics in Norway, 2006: 9)

⁴ Rymer (1993) takes a strong stand against the far more problematic social-scientific inquiry which took place in the 1970s into the language skills of the abused child 'Genie'—more problematic because of Genie's age and dependency; the severity of her cognitive deficiencies; and the apparent source of her impairment in the nature and extent of abuse she suffered (which contrasts starkly with Christopher's happy and wholesome family life). But regardless of the gap between Genie's and Christopher's experiences, Rymer's narrative deserves attention by anyone who would study Christopher's linguistic abilities.

⁵ The editors of the volume in which Anjum's text appears do not identify his background or interests. However, an article by Swetland (1982) that criticized Norwegian immigrant language programs and policies with particular reference to Pakistani migrant workers, may provide a clue. Swetland acknowledged 'Saeed Anjum' as a member of her research team and a 'bilingual teacher, Oslo Community School System;

Ministry of Social Affairs, project leader for the planning of free time activities for Pakistani youth' (1982: 112). It seems likely, but not certain, that Swetland's colleague Anjum is the author of Anjum (1978).