

**Minimising harm in research with multilingual parents –  
protecting participants through creating translanguaging  
space**

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## **Minimising harm in research with multilingual parents – protecting participants through creating translanguaging space**

Research ethics in HE institutions are increasingly led by the mantra: protect the institution, protect the participants, protect yourself. Mostly this is quality assured through increasingly bureaucratic processes involving form filling and standardised risk assessments. As ethics representative for SIOE this has caused me many sleepless nights thinking about whether the multiple ethics forms filled in by our students are enough to prepare them for the unpredictability of researching with people in the real world. Bureaucratic tick box approaches to ethics may protect the institution but do not guarantee the in-depth reflexive practice which working with participants requires. This is especially the case with qualitative research studies, where good research design is exploratory, involves on the ground decision making and is often unpredictable in nature. The ways in which the researcher needs to protect the participants are therefore similarly difficult to predict and often rely on reflective practice and in the moment noticing (Flewitt, 2022).

This issue is pertinent in my own research with multilingual participants – a group particularly vulnerable to othering and marginalisation. There is an increasing recognition in such research of the need for co-productive methodologies (Phipps, 2017; Karam and Oikonomidou, 2021, Thompson and Simmons, 2023), positioning the respondent as social actor rather than recipient, subject or object of research. Seen as essential to participant autonomy is also the responsibility to carry out research with participants not on them (Hammersley and Traianou, 2016). From a position of co-productive research practice, a research interview is framed as a dialogue, rather than driven by the researcher's questions.

Protecting the participants here means considering the ways in which we often over-rely on fluent articulation and how such over-reliance goes against the principle of co-producing knowledge with the participant. As Flewitt writes, an ethical approach involves considering how we allow for and 'respect inarticulacy' (2022, p. 211).

In research with multilingual participants in particular, where the dominant language is not always their comfort zone, Li's conception of translanguaging space (Li, 2018) has the potential for co-producing knowledge which is more fully embedded in the participants' own priorities as well as in their own linguistic practices. Translanguaging (the fluid movement between two or more languages) therefore becomes a research tool, and I would argue a space in which the potential for harm or danger of othering and marginalisation are less present.

In my research with multilingual parents, I noticed several phenomena which can be characterised as translanguaging or languaging (García and Li, 2013) and which pointed to ways of minimising harm. Parents were invited to take part in an artifactual literacies interview (Pahl and Roswell, 2010) - bringing resources and objects related to their children's early literacies. They engaged in an open discussion about literacy practices while referring to the significance of the resources. While parents discussed objects, they took fuller control of the conversation (noticeable by the few interjections of the researcher and the predominant focus on the participant's articulation). They chose to translanguange, frequently using their home language to illustrate their children's literacy journeys. Parents chose to use multimodal forms of articulation – playing sounds from audio books they had brought, writing in the home language script, playing video recordings of their young children speaking the home language, enacting parts of dialogue which had taken place in the past between themselves and their children. In these multimodal forms of meaning making, parents were less reliant on fluent monolingual articulation and drew on their full language and communication

repertoire, fluidly moving between languages and modes. This is a phenomenon which Li (2018) has described as creating translanguaging space.

I would describe translanguaging as one way of protecting the participants against the othering which they experience on a daily basis and avoiding replicating such othering in the research context. The ease and enthusiasm with which the parents communicated in the artifactual part of the 'interview' indicates a different status in the research situation – one of social actor, confident in drawing on their identity and linguistic repertoire while meaning making within the research space. In the process, they revealed much about the topics which I would have asked about as a researcher and which may have caused harm or resulted in inadvertent othering through my researcher framing and articulation and through my inexperience with each parent's linguistic background and understanding of early language learning practices.

To be clear, creating translanguaging space does not require the researcher to have close knowledge of the languages of their participants but rather to be open to hearing those and making them an active and living part of the data, by rejecting monolingual forms in interviewing practice, and empowering the participant to lead and shape the discussion.

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