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EDITORIAL

Mentoring ethically reflexive quantitative researchers in applied linguistics

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Introduction

High-quality researcher training matters. As Plonsky (2024) argues in his proposed framework for study quality, both graduate and ongoing professional training are key to ensuring study quality and therefore a continued development of cumulative knowledge across our field. In applied linguistics, researcher training takes multiple forms, ranging from structured research methodology courses to more individualized mentoring. Methods courses also serve as an introduction to the ethical dimensions of conducting research, often addressing procedural aspects of research ethics (i.e., navigating ethical review boards, such as the Institutional Review Board [IRB] in the US context). Courses in qualitative research methods may take their treatment of research ethics beyond the discussion of procedural concerns (e.g., by discussing researcher positionality and the ways in which the researcher's presence and behavior may influence the outcome of the study; De Costa, 2016). However, analogous offerings on the quantitative side tend to place more emphasis on the technical aspects of conducting statistical analyses (i.e., which tests to run and how) than on the day-to-day decision points, and ethical implications of these decisions, that accompany this type of research (Wood, Sterling, et al., 2025). This emphasis on ethics as a procedural consideration may leave students with the mistaken impression that obtaining IRB approval[1] is sufficient in ensuring that the study is ethical (Sterling et al., 2016).

Regardless of methodological paradigm, viewing the ethics review board as the only ethical consideration in research misses an important dimension of research ethics—the impact of the many decision points encountered throughout the research process (Yaw et al., 2023). In conceptualizing research ethics for applied linguistics, Kubanyiova (2008) distinguishes between *macro-ethics* (i.e., procedural ethics) and *micro-ethics*

[1]As one of our reviewers noted, the notion of IRB approval as a testament to ethical research practice is further complicated by the lack of consistency across IRBs at different institutions within the same country.

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(i.e., ethics related to day-to-day researcher decisions). The former refers primarily to compliance with ethics review board requirements, whereas the latter covers decisions at all stages of the research process, including research design and data collection (e.g., participant and instrument selection), data analysis (e.g., methods for handling outliers), and dissemination (e.g., authorship issues). While some of these micro-ethical decision points may be addressed in research methods materials (e.g., Egbert et al., 2020; McKinley & Rose, 2019; Phakiti et al., 2018), they are more often encountered informally as graduate students engage in research in collaboration with one or more mentors. We argue that these student-mentor interactions are particularly formative as students build their skills as researchers. In expanding the conversation on how researchers navigate micro-ethical decisions, Kubanyiova (2013) advocates for an *ethics of care* as a guide, yet how are we as a field ensuring that our researchers in training develop this ethical compass?

Before delving into the connection between mentors and ethical researcher training, we need to operationalize what we mean by the term *mentoring* in this context. Johnson and Griffin's (2025) definition for higher education serves as a useful starting point: "a personal and reciprocal relationship in which a more experienced faculty member acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a relatively less experienced student or faculty member" (p. 26). However, this may not capture the full range of informal mentoring relationships that exist in academic contexts, such as between more and less experienced students in the same program. Nor does it highlight that the same individual may find themselves in both mentor and mentee roles throughout their career, depending on context. Key to our understanding of mentoring is the reciprocity of the relationship—the opportunity for mentors and mentees to learn from one another to promote mutual growth. Indeed, rather than assuming a unidirectional flow of information from mentor to mentee, such relationships allow both parties to demonstrate their expertise and work together as they navigate the research process. This is particularly important for micro-ethical decision-making, which can involve weighing multiple possible paths forward without one prescriptively 'correct' way to proceed.

In this editorial, we invite readers to join us in a conversation regarding the crucial role that mentors play in training ethically reflexive quantitative researchers. We begin in Section 2 by unpacking what we mean by the term *ethically reflexive*, why this concept matters in quantitative research, and how our own positionality as researchers relates to our work in this area. In Section 3, we consider why ethical reflexivity is particularly relevant for mentoring, drawing on findings from our ethics-focused work on questionable research practices. We conclude in Section 4 by addressing how mentors can be more active partners in research ethics training, offering advice and resources. As we delve into this conversation around ethical reflexivity and mentoring, we acknowledge that this is just a start—this is a topic worthy of continued discussion and investigation beyond what we provide here.

Ethical reflexivity

In their edited volume on reflexivity in applied linguistics, Consoli and Ganassin (2023) introduce *reflexivity* as "[how] researchers locate themselves within the research processes whilst also attending to how their presence, values, beliefs, knowledge, and personal and professional histories shape their research spaces, relationships, and outcomes" (p. 1). This ongoing process of reflexivity as practice prompts researchers

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to (a) contemplate the impacts of their research on future participants and stakeholders, (b) consider potential researcher decision points that may be encountered in their scholarly work, and (c) develop the skills needed to respond effectively to "ethically important moments" in future research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This leads to what Woods (2019) terms *ethical reflexivity*, or "the active consideration by the researcher of the rightness or wrongness of their actions" (p. 462). In other words, ethical reflexivity involves researchers' awareness of and navigation through the ethical impacts of their decisions in the research process.

In practice, reflexive conversations can be structured to occur at each stage of the research process (Jamieson et al., 2023). For instance, at the research design phase, researchers can consider why they chose to study a particular group or population and their positionality in relation to the group. During data collection, researchers may consider how the study participants are impacted by collection procedures and how researchers' own actions may make the process more or less intrusive. When analyzing data, researchers are encouraged to remember that there are humans behind the data collected and thus researcher decisions about analysis and interpretation can also impact these humans beyond the scope of the research study. As researchers report their findings, they should be aware of how researcher biases can emerge in their use of evidence and what each stakeholder group (e.g., study participants, the broader community they represent, the research team) gains from the research study. For a more detailed guide to reflexivity, we recommend Jamieson et al. (2023).

As mentors, we are uniquely positioned to guide our mentees in cultivating ethical reflexivity together as part of the researcher training process. For those who take more qualitative orientations to applied linguistics research, the notion of reflexivity and its connections to research ethics is likely familiar. On the quantitative side, however, scholars tend to view work involving numerical data and statistical modeling as 'objective' due to the mistaken impression that the researcher's role does not influence the outcome of the study (Zyphur & Pierides, 2017). It is particularly in this context that we would encourage readers to consider why ethical reflexivity matters. Indeed, in their argument for reflexive quantitative research, Luoma and Hietanen (2024) state that an ethically reflexive mindset requires researchers to "question… [their] taken-for-granted methodological choices along with their practical and political underpinnings… considering not only individual idiosyncrasies or interests as a source of bias, but also how the individual's embeddedness in a community and its traditions conditions the scope of their actions as a researcher" (p. 2). It is responsible for each of us to ask ourselves, for example, whether our instruments possess sufficient validity evidence or whether we are simply using them out of convention or convenience (see Larsson et al., 2023; Plonsky, Larsson, et al., 2024). Researcher mentors must also, likewise, encourage our mentees to do the same.

Beyond encouraging mentees to engage in ethical reflexivity as practice, mentors also play an important role in explicitly training mentees to report on their ethical reflexivity. Indeed, this is an area where we as quantitative researchers can be more transparent in talking (and writing) about our reflexive practices. In a study on 322 mixed-method education-focused research articles, Cain et al. (2019) found that only 20.5% (n = 66) referred to ethics and 8.7% (n = 28) mentioned reflexivity. While it is possible that these findings underrepresent the degree to which authors engaged in ethical reflexivity, Cain et al. (2019) demonstrated that it is hard for us to know how prevalent ethical reflexivity is if researchers do not talk about this. Given the role that scholarly publications play in researcher training, both as sources of research findings and models for how to disseminate information, mentors have an opportunity to

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reinforce a culture of ethical reflexivity through open discussions of these practices in the work that we present and publish, as well as in our direct training of our mentees.

As a team of collaborators and co-authors, we see many connections between ethical reflexivity and our primary area of collaboration, questionable research practices in the quantitative humanities (see Larsson et al., 2023; Plonsky, Larsson, et al., 2024; Sterling et al., 2023, 2025). By *questionable research practices* (QRPs), we are referring to the ethical grey zone that exists between *responsible conduct of research* (RCR) and blatant scientific misconduct (e.g., fabrication, falsification, plagiarism; see Steneck, 2007). QRPs represent potential researcher decisions at all stages of the research process, from study design to dissemination of results, and their degree of ethicality is highly dependent on contextual factors (Sterling et al., 2025). We embarked on an investigation of QRPs in the quantitative humanities in response to a relative lack of work on this topic in applied linguistics (though see Isbell et al. [2022] and Plonsky, Brown, et al. [2024] for findings from the earliest field-specific studies). We all identify as applied linguists, although our primary areas of expertise cover many aspects of this field: corpus linguistics, second language acquisition, research methodology, community-engaged scholarship, historical linguistics, speech perception, and research ethics. We all work in academia and are at varying stages of our careers, from assistant to full professor. Two of us hail from northern Europe (Sweden and Finland), while the remaining three are from the US. Our positionality could also be approached from a number of other perspectives (e.g., age, gender, race) that may impact our research in different ways. Importantly for the purposes of this paper, we also have all had experience in academic mentoring from the perspective of both mentor and mentee. It is from this positionality that we now provide findings from our work on QRPs and mentoring.

Ethical considerations and QRPs in mentoring

As part of our larger project exploring QRPs in the quantitative humanities, we enlisted a panel of 10 experts (all researchers with a stated interest in ethical issues and researcher training) to provide input on potential QRPs across six research-related dimensions: 1) funding, 2) data collection, 3) data analysis, 4) dissemination of study results, 5) service to the field, and 6) mentoring/training of graduate students. Our previous work has delved into the first four dimensions,[2] but in this brief editorial, we would like to share three themes that emerged from the first round of responses to the item on mentoring/training of graduate students. We present this as a preliminary look at this topic while acknowledging that QRPs in mentoring deserve more systematic investigation in the future.

Mentors' roles in graduate student collaborations

The first theme related to the role of mentors in navigating collaborative research with graduate students. Each expert who responded to this item ($n = 8$) commented on the

[2]For more information, we direct readers to Sterling et al. (2023) for details of the Delphi process used to develop a taxonomy of QRPs, Plonsky, Larsson, et al. (2024) for the taxonomy of QRPs, and both Larsson et al. (2023) and Sterling et al. (2025) for quantitative and qualitative results from a survey of the prevalence, frequency, and severity of QRPs among researchers in the quantitative humanities (including applied linguistics). We also encourage readers to peruse the recent special issue on QRPs in the *Journal of Second Language Studies*, which was guest edited by our research team (see Plonsky et al., 2025).

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challenges of striking an appropriate balance between supporting their students and allowing them space to develop as independent researchers—searching for the 'Goldilocks' zone in terms of the amount of support they provide. Specific ethical challenges for the mentor's role include: 1) mentor-mentee relationships, 2) workload management, and 3) authorship.

In comments on mentor-mentee relationships, respondents noted that mentors can sometimes engage in preferential treatment among mentees. This can affect students' access to professional opportunities (e.g., grant projects, research assistantships, conference presentations, publications) and lead to students having very different training experiences with the same mentor. Another observation from respondents was the need to build a relationship of trust between mentor and mentees, especially given the potentially sensitive nature of ethical issues. As one respondent noted, mentors should "balance the need for closeness… and confidence with the equal need for distance and authority." When this balance shifts too far in either direction, there is potential for ethical issues to arise.

Another area of comment from respondents addressed the ethical dimensions of how mentors manage collaborative workloads with their mentees so that mentees are treated fairly and with respect. For mentors with research assistants (RAs), respondents noted that RA work assignments need to be considered critically in terms of their educational value. They pointed out that RAs are researchers in training, so their work assignments should lead to meaningful learning and skills development, rather than merely being grunt work that the mentor does not feel like doing themselves. While not all RAs may ultimately decide to pursue a career that involves research, mentors still have an ethical responsibility to ensure that work assignments offer some educational value to their RAs.

Finally, three respondents noted potential QRPs related to authorship, suggesting ethically questionable behaviors such as 1) including students as co-authors on publications they contributed to minimally, 2) creating a mismatch between the co-author who did the work and the one listed as first author (i.e., inappropriate ordering of authors), 3) not crediting students' authorial contributions (i.e., inappropriately excluding students as co-authors), and 4) advising students to publish mentor-mentee collaborations as the student's single-authored work. Respondents attributed these authorship issues to the impacts that publications have on academic careers, suggesting that mentors may be motivated to engage in such QRPs either to boost their mentees' scholarly profiles and give them an advantage on the job market or to boost the mentor's own scholarly profile by not/inappropriately acknowledging the work done by their mentees. Notably, many of these QRPs also appeared in the broader taxonomy (see Plonsky, Larsson, et al., 2024), indicating that questionable authorship practices persist beyond the mentor-mentee context.

Factors driving engagement in QRPs

A second theme was the factors that may drive students to engage in QRPs. Within this theme, there were two systemic issues. First was the limitations of the academic calendar, with students in the coursework stage having to complete a research study in one academic semester. This compressed research timeline can lead to students cutting corners in order to meet the deadline to produce a completed study at the end of the semester and may limit students in the types of research questions they can reasonably investigate within a shorter timeframe, or may even limit design-related

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choices. For example, collecting data from convenience samples may not be the most appropriate choice for many studies, but a student might feel compelled to do so given the constraints of the semester-based deadline. Second was the emphasis on publishing, motivated by a need for students to establish themselves as scholars and be competitive on the job market. Just as mentors need to seek balance in the relationships they establish with their mentees, they also need to be aware of the systemic factors that may drive students to engage in QRPs. There is an opportunity for mentors to address these proactively, such as by encouraging replication research for single-semester projects (see McManus, 2024) or allowing students to conduct studies that span across semesters (e.g., producing a research proposal with study design one semester and carrying out the research study in the next). Mentors can also model responsible conduct of research in collaborations with students while ensuring that they also receive professional recognition for their scholarly contributions.

Ethical considerations in broader mentoring responsibilities

The final theme in these responses relates to broader mentoring responsibilities involving not only mentors themselves but also graduate programs and professional organizations in the field. Respondents raised two key points in this theme: narrowness in the training of graduate students and mentoring support from the field at large. The former relates to graduate programs as a whole, focusing on how they prepare scholars who can themselves mentor students with a range of research interests and goals. One respondent expressed concern that graduate students are being encouraged to become so specialized in one area that they lack the breadth of knowledge needed to be effective mentors and teachers beyond their narrow area of expertise. This calls into question the ethicality of training for depth of knowledge in one area to the exclusion of breadth of knowledge across the field.

Beyond graduate programs, our respondents also pointed to the role that professional organizations can play in mentoring graduate students and faculty. This is an issue of equity, as individuals from less-established or less-resourced programs may have less access to robust mentoring within their own programs. Indeed, initiatives like the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) Conference Connections program, which connects graduate students with scholarly mentors for one-on-one and small-group sessions during the annual conference, are examples of ways that the field at large can support graduate student development. Organizations like AAAL could also provide more practical guidance to mentors and mentees concerning methods, ethics, and so forth.

Resources for those in a mentor role

Given the themes from our Delphi study presented above and an overall goal of empowering mentors as active partners in research ethics training, we recommend that mentors start by reflecting on the following questions:

1. How am I considering the ethical dimensions of the decisions I make in my own research? What am I doing to develop myself as an ethically-reflexive researcher?
2. How do I discuss ethical dimensions of researcher decisions with researchers who follow methodological paradigms that are similar to/different from my own?
3. In my approach to mentoring, how do I cultivate ethical reflexivity among my students? How do I model micro-ethical decision-making for my students?

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4. When collaborating with graduate students and junior researchers, how do I:
   a. Develop a plan for authorship in advance? Revisit this authorship plan prior to submission for publication?
   b. Ensure that I am giving collaborators an appropriate amount of credit?
   c. Remain mindful so as to avoid preferential treatment of students?
   d. Welcome feedback and two-way learning from my student collaborators?
5. In what way(s) can I extend my mentoring activities to support the field at large?

While preparing this editorial, we have also reflected on the mentoring practices we have found helpful in our own (ongoing) development as mentors. The following are a few practices that have been effective for us. We also thank one of our reviewers for recommending the final two:

- mentor-mentee compacts, which can be used to outline a set of expectations for both parties and which encourage accountability and discussion;
- research assistant contracts, which include the expected duties of an RA and a clause for how to initiate conversations if the RA feels they are being asked to do work that should give them authorship credit;
- advising to graduate students to observe and reflect on different styles of mentoring and collaborating;
- consideration and engagement in open dialog with graduate program faculty and societal stakeholders on mentoring-related issues and needs;
- conclusion meetings at each stage of the research process (i.e., design, data collection, analysis, publication) to reflect on what has been accomplished and learned, along with next steps;
- research journals, which can document learning and support accountability not only in the current project, but also for future collaborations

Finally, we have compiled several resources that mentors may find useful to support their efforts at mentoring ethically reflexive researchers.

- *Reflexivity:* For a guide to developing reflexivity in quantitative research, we recommend Jamieson et al. (2023), who offer a rationale for the benefits of reflexivity at various stages of the research process and a set of reflexivity prompts that individuals or research teams can engage with at each stage.
- *Questionable research practices (QRPs):* Our research team has developed a set of open-access training materials to support addressing QRPs with graduate students (see Wood, Larsson, et al., 2024). These include a taxonomy of QRPs with written and 1-minute video descriptions of each, plus some common research scenarios designed to prompt discussion of day-to-day researcher decisions and their ethical dimensions.
- *Research supervision and mentoring:* The Standard Operating Procedures for Research Integrity (SOPs4RI) project (https://sops4ri.eu/) has produced an online toolbox of resources to promote research integrity, including guidelines for supervision and mentoring of PhD students.
- *Authorship:* While mentors may have experience addressing authorship issues with students and collaborators, it is also common to feel unsure about the best way to handle authorship decisions. We recommend tools such as the American Psychological Association's Authorship Determination Scorecard (https://www.apa.org/science/leadership/students/authorship-determination-scorecard.pdf) or

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the Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT, https://credit.niso.org/), which foster transparency in the types of contributions that merit authorship. Many journals, including SSLA, have also adopted reporting practices from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE; https://publicationethics.org/authorship) to document that all authors listed on a publication have made substantive contributions. AAAL's (n.d.) research ethics guidelines, broken into three sections—research, teaching, and service—also provide a number of specific guidelines on authorship and related concerns.

We recognize that this list of resources is not exhaustive, and we welcome readers to share resources that they have found helpful with us as well.

Conclusion

Ethics is a topic that can make scholars defensive because it can feel face-threatening or judgmental, but it does not have to be this way. Mentors have an excellent opportunity to set a different tone by engaging in open, honest, ethically reflexive practices with their mentees. Opening dialogues about the ethical dimensions of researcher decision-making is a great first step. Our recommendation would be to combine two of our group's favorite customs: the Swedish *fika* (coffee break with baked goods) and regular conversations on research ethics. It's a surprisingly fun experience!

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