The ethics of digital ethnography in a team project

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Abstract

This article draws on researcher vignettes to explore ethical decisions made in the process of collecting and analysing mobile messaging data as part of a team ethnographic project exploring multilingualism in superdiverse UK cities. The research involves observing key participants at work as well as recording them at home and collecting their digital interactions. The nature of ethnographic research raises ethical issues which highlight the impossibility of divorcing ethics from project decision-making. We therefore take on board a reconceptualisation of research ethics not as an external set of guidelines but as being at the core of research, driving decision-making at all steps of the process. The researcher vignettes on which we draw in exploring this process facilitate a reflexive approach and enable us to identify and address ethical issues in our research. In this article, we focus on the potential impact that digital communication technologies can have on the kinds of relationships that are possible between researchers and research participants, and on the roles that both carry out within the project. In doing so, we explore the part that digital communications play in the co-construction of social distance and closeness in research relationships. Our discussions around these issues highlight the need for an awareness not only of how our participants' media ideologies shape their use and perceptions of digital technologies, but also how our own assumptions inform our handling of the digital data.

Keywords: blended ethnography, digital data, ethics, media ideologies

1.   Introduction

In this article we draw on researcher vignettes to explore ethical decisions made in the process of collecting and analysing mobile messaging data as part of a large team ethnographic project exploring multilingualism as a resource in superdiverse cities across the UK. In doing so, we take on board a reconceptualisation of research ethics not as an external set of guidelines implemented before commencing a research project but as being at the core of research, driving decision-making at all steps of the process (Markham and Buchanan 2015). The process approach highlights the impossibility of divorcing ethics from project decision-making and the limitations of prescribing one set of ethics to guide all researcher-participant relationships. Instead, the approach requires researchers to move from a reliance on informed consent to an acceptance that research participants need autonomy to reposition themselves in relation to the research as circumstances and perceptions shift. Our discussion of ethical issues emerging in the course of our research is based on analysis of researcher vignettes – short narratives written by team members during the research process – which, we argue, facilitate a reflexive and flexible approach to ethical decision-making. Unlike ethics approval sought prior to the commencement of a project or post-factum reconsiderations which can be detached from the research process, vignettes capture ethical considerations at significant junctures, providing insight into decision-making as a research project unfolds.

The article starts with an overview of ethical issues raised in the literature on linguistic ethnography, including that conducted in online spaces, before describing our project aims, methods and data, as well as the methodology adopted for this article. Drawing on four case

studies carried out in London and Birmingham, the article then focuses on the relationships that digital technologies make possible between researchers and participants, as well as on the identities they adopted within the research project, looking particularly at the co-construction of social distance and closeness. On the one hand, digital communication made relevant people and places with which our ethnographic research team had little direct contact, with implications for how we negotiated informed consent and for how we interpreted the data; on the other hand, mobile messaging apps appeared to heighten the levels of intimacy achieved between researchers and researched. We show how ethical issues emerging from these reconfigured relationships can be met through team reflection and discussion, and by being open to how research participants value and exploit digital interactions. We focus on the need for ethical researchers to take into account not only the ways in which their participants perceive digital technologies, but also how researchers' own media ideologies (Gershon 2010) shape our handling of the data and our negotiations with participants. Although we focus on digital data for the purpose of this special issue, we end the article by discussing implications for ethical team research across modes.

2.   Linguistic ethnography and digital data: implications for ethical research

2.1   Ethics in linguistic ethnography

Linguistic ethnography is an approach to research which seeks to understand social behaviour from an emic perspective by taking into account local actors' perspectives, immediate contextual features and wider power structures, with a focus on how language can be used to reproduce social structures through everyday acts of identity and relational work (Copland and Creese 2015a; Creese 2010; Rampton et al. 2004). Methodologically, linguistic ethnography combines ethnographic methods and principles with discourse analysis tools and with the assumption that language and interaction at a micro-level relate in complex and important ways to wider social structures.

For linguistic ethnographers (and others), the concern for ethics goes beyond compliance with university ethical procedures, which generally involve the completion of forms and their review by a central ethics board. These institutional "macroethics" (Kubanyiova 2008) have been criticised for imposing standardised regulations across diverse research contexts, challenging academic freedom, and removing ethics from the research process (Jaspers et al. 2013; Kubanyiova 2008). One problem with macroethics is that researchers are encouraged to assume they have addressed ethical concerns by gaining approval at the start of the research, therefore distracting researchers from the need to respond ethically to local dilemmas and decisions that arise during research; what Kubanyiova (2008) calls "microethics" or "ethics of care". In a microethics approach, differences in the perceptions, expectations, values and goals of all parties must be constantly negotiated in a responsive and contextually-sensitive process (Markham and Buchanen 2015). Such differences can usually be assumed in how researchers and their research participants perceive, value and enact a research project, not least because of the distinct roles they take on within the project, but in some cases also because of differences in education, socio-economic background, and life experiences (Copland forthcoming).

At the same time, the methodological and ethical principles of linguistic ethnography often involve close relationships between researchers and the researched, formed through the former's long-term involvement in the research field and their commitment to learning from research participants (Copland and Creese 2015b). As Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014) suggest, emotional attachment between researcher and researched is not inherently problematic but a potentially 'rich resource' (p. 284) enabling researchers to get to know their participants and to more accurately and sensitively represent their voices. Nonetheless, deep involvement with research participants can throw up ethical challenges for researchers.

One ethical issue documented by Bhattacharya (2007) is that close researcher-researched relationships can lead to research participants trusting the researcher to do no harm in ways which make the researcher uncomfortable and often lead to their having to make decisions that extend or contradict the consent granted by participants. Copland and Creese (2015b) describe an 'ethically important moment' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) in Copland's research – what Markham (2003) might call a reflexive or critical juncture – when Copland decided not to include in her research publications discussion of an emotionally-charged training session despite having consent from the participants to do so. The incident illustrates how informed and responsive consideration of participants as human beings – that is, ethics of care (Kubaniyova 2008) – can lead to different decisions than those required from institutional ethical procedures. In this case, although macroethical procedures suggested she could publish, Copland's emic perspective meant that she understood the wider implications of publishing and knew that the participants had likely not been able to take them into account when giving consent (Copland and Creese 2015b).

Such decisions highlight the unequal distribution of power between researcher and researched, despite the attempts of ethnographers to involve participants in decision-making. The case also highlights the importance of a reflexive approach to research in which researchers 'question our own assumptions, feel uneasy with our ethical decisions and remain unsure about our representations' (Copland and Creese 2015b: 166). This article constitutes part of our team's reflexive approach, whereby we aim to stay uncomfortably aware of decisions made at ethically important moments or critical junctures, in this case focusing on our collection and use of mobile messaging data, and to consider the implications for roles, power relations and friendships within the research process.

2.2 Blended ethnography and ethics

Our inclusion of mobile messaging data in the project further complicates relationships between researcher and researched. Our research might be described as "blended ethnography" (Androutsopoulos 2008) in that we seek to understand internet practices as part of individuals' everyday offline lives (rather than understanding "life on the Internet", as Androutsopoulos 2008 puts it). On the one hand, blended ethnography involves the same ethics of care as outlined above in relation to face-to-face encounters, particularly because the writers, rather than the digital texts they produce, are the primary focus (Markham and Buchanan 2015; Page et al. 2014: 60). On the other hand, as shown throughout this special

issue, digital communication presents somewhat reconfigured scenarios for which there are few ethically-informed precedents.

In this article, we are particularly interested in the potential impact of digital communication on closeness and distance, both in physical terms – the way that digital technologies make immediate contact possible between far-flung interactants; and socially – the fact that technologies can sometimes make people feel closer to each other and at other times more distanced (Jones and Hafner 2012: 7). A great deal of research has focused on the sense of co-presence and rapport achieved through digital technologies such as mobile messaging (Hua 2016; Lin and Tong 2007; Lyons 2014), as well as Skype (Miller and Sinanan 2014) and social network sites (Livingstone 2008). These feelings of intimacy are both reflected in and heightened by people's language choices through these digital channels (Tagg 2012). At the same time, another body of literature has focused on the potential distancing effects of digital communication, which has been put down to a relative lack of paralinguistic features (drawing on Kiesler and Sproull's [1992] reduced social cues model) and a sense of anonymity (Neurauter-Kessels 2011). The fact that interactants are physically separated and can hide behind their screens is seen to reduce inhibitions, which can in turn encourage aggressive behaviour (Coleman 2012), disclosures (Roberts et al. 2000) and the playful adoption of new identities (Danet 2001).

One way of conceptualising these seemingly contrasting effects of digital technologies (enhancing intimacy and creating distance) is through the concept of *affordances* (Lee 2007), which highlights the fact that technology does not determine behaviour but rather presents possibilities for change which may or may not be taken up by users. Drawing on the notion of affordances, Jones and Hafner (2012: 2-3) explain how digital tools can 'come to define us in some very basic ways … to do new things, think in new ways, express new kinds of meanings, establish new kinds of relationships and *be* new kinds of people'. In this article, we focus particularly on the 'new kinds of relationships' that mobile messaging apps make possible (that is, the impact of digital technologies on closeness and distance between researchers and participants); and on the identities that those involved in research can adopt (that is, the kinds of researchers and research participants they can *be*). Unlike studies cited above, our focus is not on research participants' relationships with each other, but on how participants relate with a research team.

3.   Research context

3.1   Project team aims and ethnographic approach

Our project, "Translation and Translanguaging: investigating linguistic and cultural transformations in superdiverse wards in four UK cities" (TLANG) is a large, four-year AHRC-funded project, led by Angela Creese (University of Birmingham).[1] The project explores how multilingual people adapt, exploit and extend their diverse linguistic resources when working and living in superdiverse wards in four UK cities: Birmingham, Cardiff, Leeds and London. The project is divided into four phases: business, heritage, sports and law. For each phase, the local city teams select a key participant (KP) who works in that area (e.g.

in business). Each KP receives £1000 in compensation for our intrusion into their lives, as well as for their active contribution as co-researchers in the project (a point we return to in the next section) and for participating in our Participant Research Programme (PRP), which is run by a Co-I on the project, Dr Lisa Goodson (University of Birmingham). During this programme, they learn about and can feed into the research process and methods, as well as gaining an official qualification. The PRP is indicative of our attempt to accord our research participants agency to shape the research process and outcomes. As we shall see, however, their agency can be limited when we as researchers choose to override their decisions regarding use of their data.

The ethnographic approach adopted in the project involves a range of datasets. KPs are observed at work over four months, and extensive fieldnotes are made. They are also audio-recorded and interviewed, photos are taken around the site, and KPs are given an audio recorder to take home and record their interactions with friends and families. KPs are also asked to select and submit examples of their social media posts and digital messages. The methods of digital data collection varies across the project, but in most cases involved screenshots being taken of KPs' phones, either by the KPs or researcher. KPs were instructed to only submit messages they felt comfortable sharing, rather than feeling forced to submit messages which they saw as sensitive or private. Data selectivity can be problematic but may be inevitable if research is to be conducted ethically and participants empowered to make decisions (Tagg 2012). It should be pointed out that digital data collection is a new element added to an established methodological approach, and as such the methods were exploratory and ethical issues hard to predict.

3.2   Exploring ethical issues: methods of analysis

Methodologically, analysis of ethical issues arising from the project is based on two sets of 'researcher vignettes', a reflexive tool developed by Angela Creese and Adrian Blackledge on previous projects (Creese and Blackledge et al. 2015; Creese and Copland 2015). Researcher vignettes are short narratives produced by team members in which researchers reflect on the research process, and which serve to make visible the research process and the ways in which researchers' experiences, backgrounds and values shape the co-production of knowledge. For this analysis, we draw on vignettes written at the end of the first two phases (business and heritage), for which team members were asked to focus on their relationships in the field and within the team (Goodson and Tagg, forthcoming). We also draw on a second set of vignettes in which researchers reflected specifically on ethical issues they faced in the first two phases. It was made clear to team members how their vignettes would be used and consent to use them was negotiated.

Both sets of vignettes were analysed thematically (Guest et al. 2012) by authors of this article in order to identify and categorise issues of concern that recurred across the case studies. That is, themes were highlighted across the data and recorded with supporting data extracts. Key themes were identified through comparing analyses, and the relative importance of each was further ascertained by focusing on the way in which the issue was discursively constructed by the vignette writer (Goodson and Tagg forthcoming). Although we approached the data with

an insider's perspective and existing ideas as to what we would find, we were careful to allow common themes to emerge from across the vignettes. The commonalities that emerged – namely, the role that mobile messaging played in mediating researcher relationships – had not been predicted, but were felt retrospectively to chime with team members' experiences.

In the following discussion, we focus on the reflections of researchers from two of the city case studies (Birmingham and London) to explore ethical issues that arose in the first two phases of the project (business and heritage), with particular reference to digital data. In Birmingham, the KPs speak varieties of Chinese (primarily Mandarin and Cantonese) among other languages, and Rachel Hu (RH) from mainland China is the bilingual researcher. For the business phase, RH worked with a married couple who run a butcher's stall in the Birmingham Bullring market; and, for the heritage phase, with a woman from Hong Kong who works at the Library of Birmingham. In London, the KPs are of Polish background, and Agnieszka Lyons (AL) was the bilingual researcher. For the business phase, AL worked with a couple from Poland who run a Polish shop; and, for the heritage phase, with a Polish community artist and actor. Analysis of their vignettes across these two phases highlight ethical issues raised by their close and complex relationships in the field and the particular role that mobile messaging played as the researchers carefully negotiated relations of intimacy and distance with their respective KPs.

4. Close and complex relationships in the field

Our relationships with KPs are characterised by the blurring of lines between researcher and researched. The project involves shifting responsibility onto KPs by asking them to select home recordings and digital data, to gauge the vulnerability of interlocutors and the sensitivity of their data, and to obtain informed consent from those they interact with. This applies both to the home and digital data, as we do not usually have direct access to either context. This lack of direct access (and the need to rely on KPs) is a result partly of the project design, according to which researchers are present in the workspace but not in the home or online spaces; and partly because of the care that is needed in managing our research relationships: the KPs agree to a degree of intrusion into their working and private lives which we do not wish to overstep by, for example, directly contacting their friends and family.

This arrangement is complicated because KPs, understandably, do not always share our ethical concerns, not only because they are distanced from the preoccupations of academia and of our research team and do not carry any personal responsibility for the ethics of the project, but because of their familiarity with their own context: they know their family and friends will neither mind nor read our academic publications anyway (as E, the London-based Polish shop owner pointed out). In fact, E quite reasonably considered our extended discussion of ethics during the PRP as simple 'common sense'. This is a view which many of our KPs share and which we return to later in this article.

In consultation with the team, the researchers addressed this misalignment by downplaying difference and emphasising sameness between themselves and their respective KPs. AL, for example, found herself walking mediating E's exposure to the academic world.

> I knew she thought there was a big divide between me – being quite academic – and her – being not academic at all. ... I found myself covering up behind a jokey, down to earth persona and did my best to shed this academic self. I felt very protective of E at the same time ... trying to cushion E's interactions in the academic context.

> (AL, business vignette)

These active attempts at relationship building enhanced the trust and rapport between researcher and researched, although it did not noticeably change their views on the need for consent. The level of trust between KPs and researchers in fact became another challenge in that their close relationships meant we did not feel able to assume that KPs had necessarily monitored the sensitivity of their data to the extent that we would have liked them to, an issue also detailed by Bhattacharya (2007). To our mind, KPs became increasingly comfortable with handing *back* the burden of responsibility for selecting and monitoring the data they gave us in ways that made us uncomfortable, and which led to lengthy team discussions over whether we could use certain transcriptions or digital interactions, despite the consent we had from KPs to do so. Although macroethics dictated that we could use the data, our attention to ethics of care often decreed that we could not (Copland and Creese 2015b). Any decision to negotiate our KPs' consent also constituted a careful rebalancing of the power between researcher and researched, and impacted on the extent to which the latter played a role in shaping the representation of their own voice.

5.   Ethics of digitally-mediated distance

5.1   Digitally-mediated distance and informed consent

Our inclusion of digital data created further nuances in this complex situation. These nuances emerged in part because digital technology affords a physical distance between interlocutors, which we noticed particularly in relation to the translocal interactions between KPs and their families in their respective countries-of-origin.

When collecting data at home in the UK, the act of recording is very prominent and immediate, and interactants are physically present to ask questions and potentially to object. They are also often immersed in the wider context in which the research is taking place, and they are more likely to be socially close to the KPs in a way that means they are familiar with their everyday lives. In contrast, when the KPs record webcam interactions, their interlocutors are based hundreds or thousands of miles away and they may sometimes find it harder to relate to the KPs' daily lives and thus fully appreciate their involvement in our project. Although the KPs' families are informed (by the KPs) that their virtual interactions will be recorded for research purposes (and they consent to this use), they do not necessarily ever see the recording equipment, as the KPs' face-to-face interlocutors do, and thus they are more likely to forget they are being recorded. For our KPs, this distance further reduced the

apparent need for informed consent. As KC, the Birmingham-based butcher, said of his family in China, 'They wouldn't even know about the research so why bother to tell them!' (as paraphrased by RH in her ethics vignette).

Where written interactions (the bulk of our data) are concerned, the data can be collected post-hoc because of the potential permanence of the exchanges – they 'persist' (boyd 2008) – which means that participants are often informed after the interaction takes place. The post-hoc collection of data appeared to further reduce the importance that KPs placed on obtaining informed consent and may also have influenced the extent to which interlocutors concerned themselves with the implications of being involved in the project.

At the same time, many of the digital interactions appear (to us) to be of a particularly intimate or sensitive nature, even where this perception does not seem to be shared by our KPs. For example, the team eventually decided not to use a lengthy WhatsApp conversation in which W (the Birmingham-based librarian from Hong Kong) and her siblings discussed openly and in detail a family issue which seemed to the team highly sensitive. Her siblings, who were based in Hong Kong, had been informed by W at the start of the project that their interactions would be submitted to our project and they had consented to this use, but we nonetheless felt uncomfortable including such potentially sensitive data. Again, our decision represents a complex realigning of the agency granted to the KP.

Another example was a Viber exchange between E and her 10-year-old daughter. The exchange unexpectedly included a message appearing to be from E's daughter's friend, who was with her at the time (Figure 1). It is not clear whether the friend dictated the message to E's daughter, wrote it herself, or whether E's daughter was pretending to be her friend, but either way G's participation in the project would need to be authorised by a parent or guardian. In this case, we decided after lengthy team discussions that we could use the message because of the apparently innocuous discussion topic, the extent of G's involvement (we collected only this one example from her), and the high level of anonymization. Our decision was also motivated by the fact that the exchange is valuable to us for illustrating the way in which two generations of Polish migrants in London negotiate their language resources, with E writing in Polish, her daughter and friend responding in English, and their shared use of stickers (Tagg 2015).

E: How are things Z everything ok *[transl. from Polish]*

E: [visual]

Z: [visual]

Z: just got internet

G: hi this is g___ we are having lots of fun.

Figure 1: 'we are having lots of fun' (London digital data, Viber, heritage phase)

On other occasions, WhatsApp exchanges between E and her contacts involved accounts or implications of content that could be potentially embarrassing for E's communicative partner, such as when a customer, perhaps jokingly, asks E to source some Viagra for him (which E indignantly declines). Since in written forms of digital discourse contextual information such as an inconspicuous tone of voice are unavailable, meaning must be carried primarily by the text (Georgakopoulou 1997) and so transactions conducted by WhatsApp tend to be more explicit than transactions we observed in the shop. Moreover, it appeared that our KPs (like other people) consider their digital interactions to be 'semi-ephemeral' – that is, although potentially permanent, they are generally not cherished and kept but are deleted or forgotten. These perceptions contrasted with our ideas about the data, perhaps because we were aware that, once submitted to the project, the messages would be saved, processed, and possibly redistributed, which makes them both permanent and potentially more visible, an issue we return to later in the article.

As well as highlighting the important role of microethics – the need for a team to work with participants to respond sensitively and in contextually-relevant ways to emerging issues – these experiences of collecting mobile messaging data also highlighted to us the importance of understanding, and taking into account, our participants' *perceptions* of digital interactions. That is, although KPs often used their mobile phones to discuss what appeared to us to be highly intimate and potentially sensitive topics, the KPs seemed to distance themselves and their interlocutors from deep involvement with or investment in the messages produced, treating them as semi-ephemeral and unproblematic. Other research points to people's similarly complex orientations towards the public and private (e.g. Mackenzie, this volume), chiefly centring around the observations that people often use public sites as though

they are private and that the public sharing of posts does not necessarily mean they should be "publicised"; that is, brought to the attention of those for whom they were not intended (Marwick and boyd 2014). Our experiences suggest that, to ensure we treat participants' digital interactions in an ethical fashion, researchers need to be sensitive to the particular ways in which these relatively new forms of communication are positioned, valued and used by the people they are researching.

5.2   Ethics of interpreting digital data

The distance afforded by digital technologies led to another ethically-important moment at the point of data analysis, as we interpreted the digital data and represented our participants' voices (Markham 2004). That is, the distancing effect that we felt in relation to KPs' digital interactions was not only an issue when obtaining informed consent, but also when we sought to accurately represent friends and relatives of our KPs with whom we had had minimal interaction. This was prompted by two factors.

Firstly, in our project, we immerse ourselves in people's offline lives in order to gain an emic perspective on participants' stories and to justify our role in representing them to others. However, given the nature of social media and other factors, we are not present in the contexts generated by KPs' digital exchanges. Online interactions have been described as inevitably involving a 'doubling of place' (Moore 2004) in the sense that digital interactions bring together people physically located in two (or more) places into one virtual space which has the effect of making relevant more than one context (Jones 2004; Lyons 2014). Our participants used digital technologies at home to talk to people in other contexts who we did not meet, including those in the same city (such as the butchers' WeChat messages to local Chinese restaurants) as well as family and friends in other countries (China and Poland in the respective case studies). As explained above, while it would not have been impossible to contact these people, our project design and ethics of care decreed that we would not.

The second issue, also discussed above, was the relative lack of paralinguistic features available in the digital transcripts. Missing are the tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions that helped us interpret face-to-face interactions while observing KPs in their workplaces. Instead, we found a range of emoticons, emojis, and stickers which are likely to carry in-group meanings and associations (see Figure 1, for example). Technological factors such as message-length restrictions also mean writers depend on shared knowledge to keep their messages short, and the abbreviated, unelaborated nature of many digital messages means they can often be difficult to interpret. Because of this, we could often make sense of KPs' online activities only in relation to the offline data; that is, through what we observed them doing at work and what they recorded at home, as well as what they told us in interview. Using offline data in this way can both enhance and limit our interpretations of what is going on in the digital data, but either way it draws attention to the need to consider the context of interpretation carefully. The ethical question for us here was whether we had sufficient insights into the digital contexts to accurately represent the voices captured in the dataset.

In terms of how the team responded to these ethically-important moments, we explored two options. In some cases, we decided not to use posts that were hard to interpret without further understanding of the context behind them. In other cases, we held team discussions in order to share different understandings of the data. Recognising the importance of discursive practices in construing meaning in disembodied digital interactions (Markham 2004), we drew upon our cultural, educational and research experiences to interpret the data in ways that we felt accurately and ethically represented the participants' intentions and experiences. On a couple of occasions, we returned to the KP to ask if they were happy with a particular use of a selected extract. However, in most cases, we made the ethically-informed decision not to do so, largely because we were at this stage no longer working with the KPs and they had completed their duties towards the project. We remain aware of the implications this decision may have for the involvement of KPs in the project and their power in shaping the representation of their voice.

6.   Ethics and researcher-researched relationships: performing closeness in social media

In this section, we move from the distancing effects of digital technologies to their role in heightening intimacy. In the London heritage data collection site, M – a Polish community artist and actor – was eager to provide data for analysis and there was a common interest between her and the researcher in language and cultural references from childhood and adolescence in Poland, as mentioned in AL's vignettes. Unlike the other KPs, M appeared to take on board the team's ethical concerns and to fully understand the importance that we placed on actions such as gaining informed consent. We felt this arose in part because of her work, which not only involved issues of consent but also made her sensitive to the performative aspects of her involvement in the project. We often felt she was "performing" the role of KP. At times, she repeated details about the project during a recording or after consent had been given, in case her interlocutors required more information. In this sense, she seemed to go out of her way to address our concerns and to embrace her role as KP; in many ways, she enacted exactly the kind of participant that our research design assumed.

However, critical junctures emerged around the relationship that developed between M and AL. Digital communication not only proves a fascinating source of data in the project, but also a useful means by which researchers and researched keep in touch. Both AL and RH use messaging apps on their mobile phones to make arrangements with their KPs, and to organise other details regarding data collection. This use developed naturally and fairly quickly from their initial reliance on voice calls, as WhatsApp and texting are seen by those involved as more convenient and less invasive than a voice call. On one level, this can be seen as an instrumental technology use – "microcoordination", in Ling and Yttri's (2002) terms – but on another level this use extends or transforms the potential ways in which KPs and researchers can relate to each other and the roles they take on within the parameters of the project.

In this section, we focus on one striking illustration of the potential for digital communication to make possible particular kinds of research relationships and identity performances. It came when, in her usual fashion, AL contacted M through WhatsApp to discuss possible

observation times. AL's message led to a conversation (on WhatsApp and in Polish) about M's participation in the project and the particular nature of their relationship.[2] M began by saying she was not keen on the researchers observing a meeting with her agent. As if justifying putting a boundary on the team's access to her professional life, she then explained that she had been stressed that week as she was not able to focus on what was important and that it was understandable that having to share her life with the researcher and wider research team would affect her. Writing in WhatsApp, she commented on the nature of her relationship with AL:

> On the one hand it's a *deal*, on the other, we're starting to become friends, we meet often – but as a *researcher* and KP or as friends? I rarely meet my friends – and when we sit in my office, we chat like friends and I feel I should be focusing on work etc.

> You know, the 'normal' life of every KP lol

She goes on to talk about her attitude to taking part in the research (Figure 2):

> I want to give you good data for the project +I have to rely on my instinct in the case of some people

> That's all – but that's obvious – isn't it?

> Because on the one hand it's very *flattering* that I'm being researched – I don't consider my life to be particularly interesting -

> And on the other, I don't want to get fixated on the fact that someone is interested in me – it's only research that has a defined time frame – then life will go on only without an 'audience' –

> The fact that I'm trying to formulate my thoughts here in the form of txts – becomes a research material…

> On the one hand maybe yes and maybe not and maybe I don't know

She finishes her sequence of texts with a short 'Ok – good night', probably as a way of finishing the conversation without asking for AL's reaction.
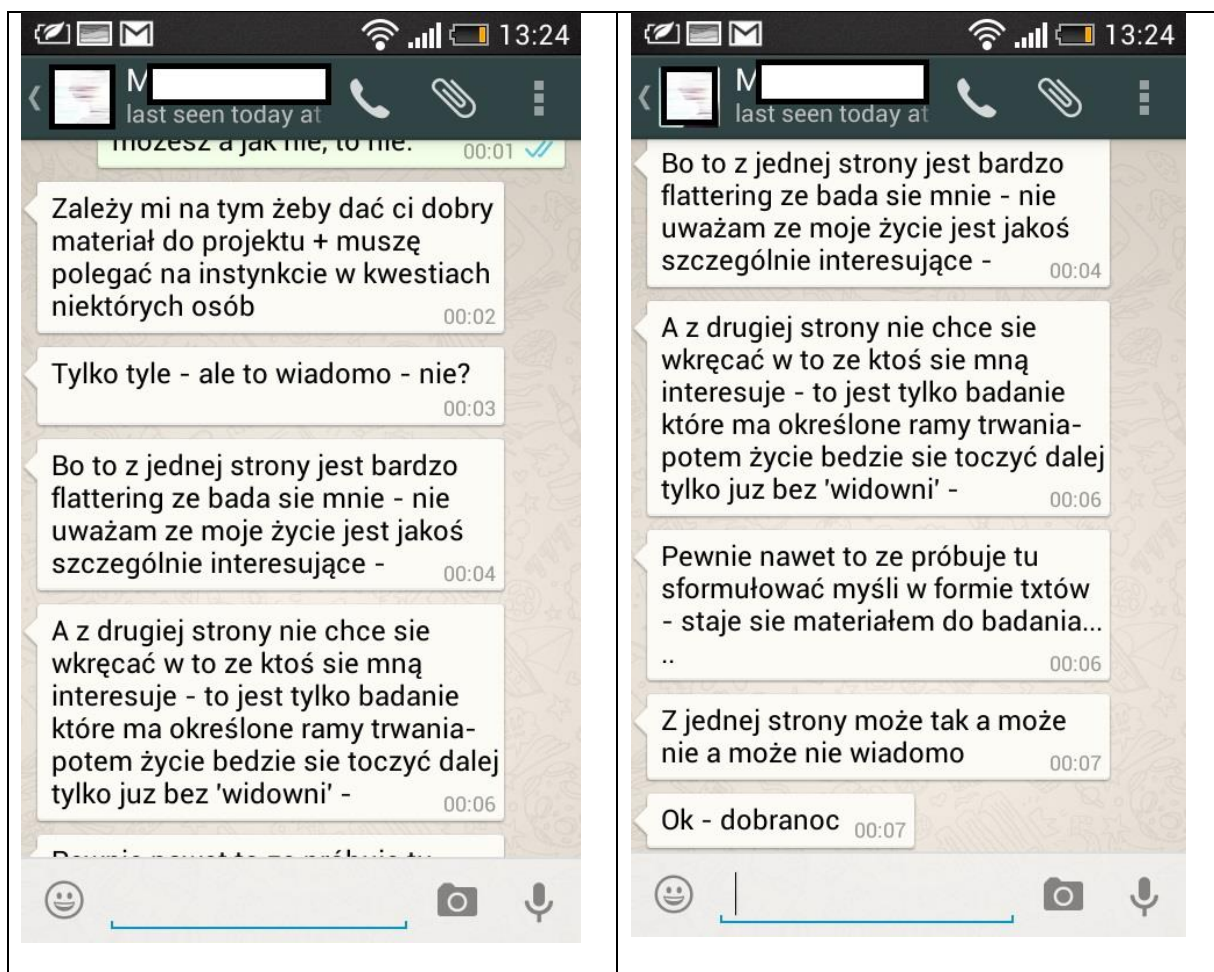
Figure 2: "Life will go on without an audience" (London digital data, WhatsApp, heritage phase) (translated in text)

There are different ways to interpret this series of messages from M. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, conversations conducted through apps like WhatsApp have the potential to become intimate, seemingly as safe as if conducted in the familiar corners of one's room and 'faceless' (Harrison and Gilmore 2012). Communication between M and AL via WhatsApp seemed to offer something for them that face-to-face communication did not. Being of roughly the same age and sharing a similar attitude to digital communication meant that KP and researcher found this form of communication acceptable for discussing deep(er) and (more) serious issues than they might discuss in person. For example, M indicates that she is defining herself in relation to her involvement in the project when she says 'I don't want to get fixated on the fact that someone is interested in me', a subject she never raised in spoken conversations or email exchanges. At the time, AL felt that she had moved into the KP's network of friends, albeit temporarily: examples of M's late-night WhatsApp exchanges with friends include similarly profound conversations concerning her private life. Methodologically speaking, in the context of the London heritage data collection, mobile messaging conversations might be seen as similar to interview data, only less formal or structured, with no pressures of face-to-face contact, visible audio recorders or video cameras: a kind of unforced self-reflexivity. Interpreting the interaction in this way, we might

ask questions about the ethics of how to leave participants after such an intense involvement (a question with which we concerned ourselves), and wonder about the role of mobile messaging in contributing to intimacy and potential dependency between participant and researcher.

However, we might also wonder about the performative nature of digital interactions, which often appear to facilitate linguistic stylisation and heightened identity performance (Tagg 2016). Early research into the internet focused on what was seen as inherent playfulness (Danet 2001) encouraged in part by physical separation and relative anonymity which, as mentioned earlier, was assumed to provide users with the freedom to try out new identities. Recent research also points to the ludic nature of online messaging and social network sites (Deumert 2014), even where users are recognised as building on offline identity work rather than playing with new personae. For various reasons, it seems digital interactions may encourage linguistic reflexivity or meta-awareness (Deumert 2014: 121); firstly, because they involve written texts which can be planned, edited and revised; and, secondly, because users knowingly exploit graphic resources (punctuation, emoji, images) and text-centred cues such as translanguaging to fulfil identity and interpersonal work carried out in spoken conversations through other modes: gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice (Georgakopoulou 1997). Seen in this light, we might reconceptualise M's performance as an instance of knowing stylisation as she reaches out to AL and expresses the contradictions of being both KP and friend. This interpretation may have implications for the balance of power between researcher and researched, as the latter exploits the potential of the technology not only to grant herself a greater voice but to reach beyond the traditional confines of the research site.

However we interpret these WhatsApp messages, they illustrate the potential of digital technologies to alter the roles researchers and research participants take on within a research project and their relationships with each other, apparently heightening intimacy and yet creating the space for carefully stylised self-presentations.

7.   Conclusion

In this article, we used researcher vignettes to explore the implications of digital interactions for the roles that different actors take on within a research project, the ways in which they can relate to each other, and the potential implications for power and agency within a research team. We looked particularly at how closeness and distance between researchers and researched are mediated and reconfigured by digital technologies, and at the ethical issues involved in negotiating consent with far-flung interactants, in interpreting contexts in which we are not present, and in managing the heightened intimacy achieved through mobile messaging between researchers and researched. In exploring these issues, we highlighted the important role that reflexive tools such as vignettes can play in making visible, and helping to contextualise and explain, key ethical concerns.

Our reflections on collecting and analysing digital data showed that, to be ethical, we needed to respond to our growing awareness of how our KPs perceive and value digital interactions,

or what we might call their 'media ideologies' (Gershon 2010): the set of beliefs that shape, and reflect, their use of digital technologies. As Gershon (2010: 284) reminds us, media ideologies are 'multiple, locatable, partial, positioned and contested, and this is evident in our KPs' technology use. We have discussed, for example, how it appeared to us that our KPs could use digital interactions to discuss personal or sensitive content and yet treat them (we thought) so lightly. In this case, our perception of these contradictions in the KPs' media ideologies led us to take actions that challenged their decision-making role in the research process.

Of similar relevance is the need to recognise our own media ideologies and how this shapes both our research and our relationships with KPs. The research team's perceptions and values were apparent in our discomfort at researching 'virtual' data when we were not immersed in 'a context'; they were also evident in our response to feeling positioned as a friend through a KP's particular use of WhatsApp; and perhaps, more generally, in the way in which we have singled out for consideration our KPs' use of digital technologies as something new and unpredictable. Ethical treatments of digital data may need to be based not only on emerging emic insights gleaned about participants' orientations towards social media, but on self-reflexivity; an awareness of our own assumptions as researchers and our ideas about the role and nature of digital technologies.

The messy reality of social research across modes and modalities highlights both the limitations of pre-planned ethics approval and the need for flexible mechanisms which can respond dynamically to change. In addition to having iterative conversations with ethics committees, this project addressed critical ethical junctures in two main ways: firstly, through deep reflexivity within the research team, for example through researcher vignettes (Goodson and Tagg forthcoming) as well as through both planned and ad-hoc discussions around emergent ethical issues; and, secondly, through prolonged and difficult conversations with research participants in order to move into deeper understandings of the meaning and significance of ethics on both sides. This process not only helped to work on the matters under discussion but also provided points of reference for future ethical questions. Although these are critical junctures which can only be addressed by the research team, researchers can build awareness and support others by writing openly about such moments, and vignettes can be a key research tool in this regard. This article also highlights the need to accompany all of this with support for team members when confronting unexpected ethical challenges. Our experiences suggest that reflexivity needs to be accompanied by an awareness of the potential emotional burden of relationship-building within an ethnographic project (Copland and Creese 2015b), as well as the provision of team support for those engaged in managing the complex research relationships that span field visits, private face-to-face encounters, and digital interactions.

Footnotes

[2] Please note that M has given us permission to treat this conversation as data and to use it in this article.

Acknowledgements

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