

Research Ethics in the Historiography of Linguistics

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Some Ethical Guidelines for the Historiography of Linguistics

(Derived from the statements of the Norwegian nasjonale forskningsetiske komité for samfunnsvitenskap og humaniora (NESH))

1 (1) The value of research¹

[...] research work is inevitably often influenced by the scholar's views of people and society – most often to the benefit of their research. This requires the researcher to consider and to try to explain how his or her own attitudes may colour choices of sources and the weighing of possible interpretations.

2 (10) The obligation to report research results back to subjects

Researchers are under a special obligation to report the results of their research back to those who participated in it, in a proper and comprehensible form.

3 (13) The confidentiality requirement

Persons who are made the subjects of research are entitled to confidential treatment of all information they give on personal matters [...]

Underlying this requirement is the need for freedom and the protection of privacy. [...] The methodological demand for verifiable information suggests that confidentiality cannot always be secured in historical studies or studies centred on persons. If consent has not been obtained, the researcher must exercise special care.

4 (16) Regard for posthumous reputations

Research concerning deceased persons must be carried out with respect.

Caution is called for when research is carried out concerning deceased persons. The fact that the deceased can no longer raise objections does not reduce the demand for painstaking documentation. Out of respect for those deceased and for their surviving relatives, researchers must choose their formulations with care.

5 (17) Regard for the values of others

The researcher must show respect for the values and views of those on whom the research is being carried out, even if they differ from those which are generally accepted.

Research is often concerned with the behaviour and values of minorities, such as religious groups, ethnic minorities, youth groups or political subcultures. These may feel that the research may make them more vulnerable to social disapproval. The researcher is under an obligation to take their self-image seriously, and to avoid descriptions which diminish their rights as minorities.

¹ The numbers in brackets are the original numbers in the English-language version of the NESH statement. Italic and non-italic fonts have been carried over from the original.

6 (18) Understanding the motives for action

Researchers should not attribute discreditable motives for actions unless there are very convincing arguments for doing so.

In the social sciences, law and the humanities, in which actions often form part of explanations, the motives of the agents figure prominently. But it is not possible to establish the motives of other individuals with complete certainty. Uncertainty often attaches to the results of research into motives. This is true not least of research into other cultures or historical periods than our own. [...] Explanations of acts which attribute discreditable motives to the agents therefore require especially sound reasons and documentation.

7 (22) Regard for under-privileged groups

Researchers have a special responsibility for safeguarding the interests of under-privileged groups throughout the research process.

Researchers are under a special obligation to shed light on the situations of under-privileged social groups.

8 (24) Preservation of historical monuments

Researchers should have due regard for the need to preserve historical monuments, remains, archives and traditional material.

The preservation of monuments, remains and information on earlier times is intended to enable present and future generations to learn their own history. Since the approaches and interests of research vary from one generation to the next, the needs of future generations imply not only that information on our own times is preserved so as to be available for research, but also that we carry out our research in such a way that future researchers are not prevented from learning what they may consider important. Research which destroys source material raises special ethical questions. The information value of the research objects must be weighed against the degree of damage or transformation which they suffer.

9 (25) Research into foreign cultures

In research into foreign cultures there are particular needs for dialogue with the representatives of and participants from the culture being studied.

The need for the consent of the individuals who are to participate in research must be combined with knowledge of and respect for local traditions and established hierarchies. In research into foreign cultures great care should be taken to avoid divisions or labels which can give grounds for unfounded generalisations and in practice lead to the stigmatisation of particular social groups. This also applies to distance in time. Researchers should avoid contributing to the under-estimation of people in earlier periods of history.

10 (29) Scientific adjudication

Persons engaged in scientific adjudication are under an obligation to apply reasonable standards and to seek to maintain an objective attitude.

All subjects are influenced by competing schools of thought and some by disagreement over fundamental questions of scientific theory. Not least for these reasons, it is important for a researcher to work according to generally accepted

norms for tenable reasoning. [...] They must also be prepared to give serious consideration to arguments and ways of thinking that are recognised by other schools of thought than their own.

11 (31) Obligations in collegiate relations

Scholars must contribute to reflection on research ethics in their scientific environments.

By means of mutual information and constructive criticism, scholars must see that research in their environments attains the highest possible standards.

Methodological standards must be upheld, and objective debate must be encouraged on the applications and limitations of various methods. [...] Criticism must not be stifled with reference to loyalty or the demand for obedience.

12 (35) The scholar's responsibility for the choice of research topics

A scholar has an independent responsibility for showing that the problems on which he or she is working may directly or indirectly benefit society.

The uses to which society puts research show that there are many different ways in which it can advance society's interests and meet its needs. Research resources are in short supply. Responsibility for their use rests partly with political authorities and clients, but partly also with the individual scholar. In so far as a researcher has a genuine choice of research topic, he or she inevitably also shares responsibility for the results, with regard both to the prevention of harm and to the promotion of welfare. The scholar must bear in mind that, for good or ill, research contributes to the legitimacy of its subject.

13 (41) Research permission and regard for the authorities in the country where the research is done

Every effort should be made to report the results of research into other countries and cultures back to the countries, cultures and persons who made the research possible.

14 (43) The need to present grounds for assertions and grounds for uncertainty [...]

Researchers should be particularly cautious about publishing results which have not been sufficiently discussed and evaluated in research circles.