

Conducting ethical research

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As a sociolinguistic researcher engaged in fieldwork, I sometimes collect data from participants by interviewing. I ask in-depth questions about their beliefs, but I also collect data to confirm their actions. Depending on the research project I am working on, the question may be a little personal or a little sensitive.

I have also worked on projects where my goals may be at odds with the objectives of the participants. I believe that is where some research can be interesting and conflicting and taxing. Ethics can be an issue, especially when the good of the project is not necessarily for the good of the participants. I have had to face that dilemma on more than one occasion and I am sure I am not alone—but I never see this in the textbook.

One project that fascinated me arose from the ethical dilemmas encountered in collecting data from elderly Black and White participants and the sensitive statements they made about topics that arose independently within a community that professed to be one unified community. This was problematic because the goals for documentation conflicted with the community at large. As researchers, we sometimes make decisions independent of the stated goal but still true to the overall project. As I have found before, what participants (and/or benefactors) believe is not always reality—and that conflict has consequences for documentation.

I will discuss ethical dilemmas in documenting research and choices researchers may need to make when conducting research in a community with data that is fluid, eclectic and ever rooted in sociocultural and historical contexts that are observed and analyzed.