

Ethical Issues in Recording Oral Literature

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It is the philosophy of the Firebird Foundation to foster productive and friendly relationships between field researchers and local communities. Therefore, we require those who have received Fellowships to adhere to our ethical guidelines both during their fieldwork and during any analysis of data that occurs later. Fellowship holders are not only representing the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research and themselves but also the fields of anthropology and linguistics.

Successful applicants for Fellowships are required to comply with all US laws. They must also comply with the customary laws of the society they are living in.

We have created the following guidelines based on academic standards and the research experiences of former oral literature researchers (see Bibliography). We have also listed several issues which may arise during your fieldwork, some of which may be unique to the recording of oral literature.

General Ethical Guidelines

- Do no harm
- Learn and respect the local cultural forms of politeness
- Establish trust; do not betray the trust you have established while in the field or afterward
- This requires no dissembling, no lying
- Do not add to the level of social conflict
- Do not attempt to tamper with the system of distributive justice. Distributive justice concerns what is just or right or fair with respect to the allocation of goods, duties, and responsibilities in a society
- Leave your sources in the field with a positive feeling of the experience
- Respect the limitations of use requested by your sources on the materials recorded
- Avoid being captured by any political segment of the society
- Be open and forthright about your project
- Be aware of the pitfalls in recording and publishing oral literature, such as:

1. *Making a scarce good a public good can create problems. It may erode the economic status of the practitioner so that he/she loses income.*
2. *Revealing activities occurring in a group that the government has been trying to repress. This could lead to punitive action.*
3. *Permitting the identification of individuals whose views the government sees as dangerous, which could lead to punitive action.*
4. *Revealing sources who may not want others to know what kind of cultural data they have passed on to the investigator. In fact, it could cause harm to informants.*
5. *Permitting the misinterpretation of data by laymen, government individuals, etc. who do not understand anthropology or the social sciences.*
6. *Exposing secrets that sections of the community may not want others to know, such as male initiation rites to females. This could bring harm to those who revealed the secrets and to those who learned of them.*

Bibliography on Ethics

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