



### **Ethical challenges of micro-level fieldwork**

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What are researchers' obligations to protect the identities and confidentiality of interviewees? How far should researchers go in their written work to disguise any identifying characteristics of time, place or person? Questions of protection and confidentiality are a central concern for Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) whose primary task is to protect their institutions from any unwanted legal consequences of research. Researchers working in post-conflict zones, however, know that the requirements imposed by IRBs are often far off the mark of what would constitute adequate protection of the identity and confidentiality of interviewees. In post-conflict settings, the words of interviewees can bring unwanted suspicion or attention from authorities and neighbors. The consequences can be quite serious: loss of work, imprisonment, or in some cases, even death. This paper analyzes these ethical questions using the authors' experiences conducting intensive interviews in two small communities in Rwanda in 2004 and 2008. The paper examines dilemmas and possibilities for protecting identities and ensuring confidentiality in published work. One dilemma the author analyzes in depth is that in small face-to-face communities, most people know one another. In such cases, researchers must wrestle with finding the right balance between staying true to interviewees' narratives while at the same time masking identities sufficiently such that most readers would not be able to identify the speakers. How to strike this balance is no easy matter. The extent of knowledge that neighbors have of one another will vary widely but at the same time, it would likely be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for any researcher to guarantee total anonymity, particularly when the researcher has agreed to distribute copies of her work. The paper examines these and other issues of collecting narrative data in post-conflict settings from an ethical and institutional perspective.