

Ethical Practices in Ethnographic Archival Representation

Nathan Brown

University of North Texas, USA

Nathan.Brown@unt.edu

ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine ethical challenges in ethnographic archival workflows, particularly how they intersect with decolonizing pedagogies, community agency, and archival practices. By drawing on participatory and collaborative archival methodologies, this study investigates how archivists navigate tensions between preservation, access, and ethical representation — especially concerning Indigenous and marginalized communities. This research also challenges hierarchical systems that privilege Western archival frameworks over community-driven knowledge by critically evaluating how archival structures reinforce dominant epistemologies. A qualitative case study approach is first employed by integrating sustained participant observation of daily archival workflows and semi-structured interviews with archival professionals. Fieldwork includes direct observations of processing, description, and preservation workflows, along with informal interactions with staff to assess how ethical considerations emerge in practice. Institutional policies on collection development, donor relations, and archival description will be examined to determine their alignment with ethical frameworks, such as those established by the Society of American Archivists. This study also explores efforts to restructure policies to promote equity, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness toward community participation in archival decision-making. To complement qualitative methods, a quantitative companion study provides statistically significant findings demonstrating strong public support for cultural heritage preservation and a willingness to engage in participatory archival events. This research incorporates reflexive archival considerations that account for power dynamics and positionality, and contributes to broader discussions on archival ethics, agency, and institutional accountability. It explores decolonizing pedagogies by critically examining how archives function as both instruments of institutional authority and as potential sites for community empowerment.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Archival arrangement and description; Information ethics; Community engagement; Social justice; Sociology of information.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Archival ethics; Archival decolonization; Ethnographic research; Quantitative research; Community archives.

Copyright 2025 by the authors. Published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2025.2096>

REFERENCES

- Azoulay, A. (2017). The imperial condition of photography in Palestine: archives, looting, and the figure of the infiltrator. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 33(1), 5-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/var.12117>
- Caswell, M., Cifor, M., & Ramirez, M. H. (2016). “To suddenly discover yourself existing”: Uncovering the impact of community archives. *The American Archivist*, 79(1), 56-81.
- Christen, K., & Anderson, J. (2019). Toward slow archives. *Archival Science*, 19(1), 87-116.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09307-x>
- Ghaddar, J. J. (2022). Provenance in place: Crafting the Vienna Convention for global decolonization and archival repatriation. In *Disputed Archival Heritage* (pp. 49-86). Routledge.
- Jimerson, R. (2007). Archives for all: professional responsibility and social justice. *The American Archivist*, 70(2), 252-281. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40294571>
- Prom, C. (2010). Optimum access? Processing in college and university archives. *The American Archivist*, 73(1), 146–174. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.73.1.519m6003k7110760>
- Reijkerkerk, D., & Reed, C. M. (2023). Archives, decolonization, and the politics of tribal sovereignty: An examination of accessibility barriers to Indigenous federal recognition research in the United States. *The American Archivist*, 86(2), 565-594.
- Roeschley, A. (2023). “They care enough to document people's stories”: Using ethnographic methods to understand collection day outreach events in participatory archives. *Library & Information Science Research*, 45(2), 101-234.
- Shadish, W. R., Cook, T. D., & Campbell, D. T. (2002). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for generalized causal inference*. Houghton, Mifflin and Company.
- Trace, C. (2020). Maintaining records in context? Disrupting the theory and practice of archival classification and arrangement. *The American Archivist*, 83(2), 322-372.