

RISE IRT Seminar Series – April 9, 2021, 4:00-5:00 p.m.

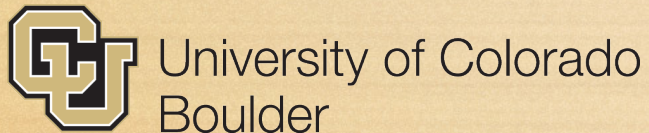
# **Stories from the Field: An Ethical Toolkit for Long-Term Disaster Research**

Lori Peek, Ph.D.

Professor, Department of Sociology

Director, Natural Hazards Center and Principal Investigator, CONVERGE

University of Colorado Boulder





**Beyond the IRB:  
An Ethical Toolkit for Long-Term Disaster Research**

**Katherine E. Browne**  
Department of Anthropology  
Center for Disaster and Risk Analysis  
Colorado State University

and

**Lori Peek**  
Department of Sociology  
Center for Disaster and Risk Analysis  
Colorado State University

Email: kate.browne@colostate.edu

*This article argues for expanding the ethical frame of concern in disaster research from the early phases of site access to longer-term issues that may arise in the field. Drawing on ethical theory, these arguments are developed in five sections. First, we identify the philosophical roots of ethical principles used in social science research. Second, we discuss how ethical concerns span the entire lifecycle of disaster-related research projects but are not fully addressed in the initial protocols for gaining Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval. Third, we introduce the idea of the philosophically informed “ethical toolkit,” established to help build awareness of moral obligations and to provide ways to navigate ethical confusion to reach sound research decisions. Specifically, we use the work of W. D. Ross to introduce a template of moral considerations that include **fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence**. We suggest that in the absence of a clear framework that researchers can use to think through ethical dilemmas as they arise, Ross’ pluralist approach to ethical problem solving offers flexibility and clarity and, at the same time, leaves space to apply our own understanding of the context in question. Fourth, we draw on six examples from our research studies conducted following Hurricane Katrina. Using these examples, we discuss how, in retrospect, we can apply Ross’ moral considerations to the ethical issues raised including: (1) shifting vulnerability among disaster survivors, (2) the expectations of participants, and (3) concerns about reciprocity in long-term*

Browne, Katherine E. and Lori Peek. 2014. "Beyond the IRB: An Ethical Toolkit for Long-term Disaster Research." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 32(1): 82-120.

*Perspective*

**Stories for Interdisciplinary Disaster Research Collaboration**

**Mithra Moezzi**<sup>1,\*</sup> and **Lori Peek**<sup>2</sup>

What if we used the stories that researchers and practitioners tell each other as tools to advance interdisciplinary disaster research? This article hypothesizes that doing so could foster a new mode of collaborative learning and discovery. People, including researchers, regularly tell stories to relate “what happened” based on their experience, often in ways that augment or contradict existing understandings. These stories provide naturalistic descriptions of context, complexity, and dynamic relationships in ways that formal theories, static data, and interpretations of findings can miss. They often do so memorably and engagingly, which makes them beneficial to researchers across disciplines and allows them to be integrated into their own work. Seeking out, actively inviting, sharing, and discussing these stories in interdisciplinary teams that have developed a strong sense of trust can therefore provide partial escape from discipline-specific reasoning and frameworks that are so often unconsciously employed. To develop and test this possibility, this article argues that the diverse and rapidly growing hazards and disaster field needs to incorporate a basic theoretical understanding of stories, building from folkloristics and other sources. It would also need strategies to draw out and build from stories in suitable interdisciplinary research forums and, in turn, to find ways to incorporate the discourses that emanate from stories into ongoing analysis, interpretation, and future lines of interdisciplinary inquiry.

**KEY WORDS:** Experience stories; folkloristics; hazards and disasters; interdisciplinary methods; storytelling

**1. INTRODUCTION**

This article is about the potential for using stories as a strategy to improve interdisciplinary hazards and disaster research. The main argument is that telling and paying attention to what we refer to as *experience stories* among research team members can provide a common ground that helps overcome disciplinary and institutional forces that might inhibit the consideration and communication of evidence, open-minded thinking, and translations that span disciplines and scholarly domains.

We define experience stories as stories that individuals tell about something that happened during the research process, generally combining descriptive observation, some level of interpretation, and embellishment. These can be first, second, or *nth* hand. They are usually oral and that is the form addressed here. These types of stories often do not make their way into formal published research accounts; however, because they can—and do—inform the trajectory of interdisciplinary research projects, we take their power and potential seriously.

Experience stories provide a naturalistic frame from which to view and make sense of the microincidents that constitute larger conditions or events. An experience story is a product of the teller but tends to have a character that is less processed, more alive, and more ambiguous than formal institutionalized or highly disciplinary accounts. Its liveliness provides

<sup>1</sup>OffForward, San Rafael, CA, USA.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO, USA.

\*Address correspondence to: Mithra Moezzi, OffForward, San Rafael, CA, USA; mmoezzi@offforward.com.

Moezzi, Mithra and Lori Peek. 2019. “Stories for Interdisciplinary Disaster Research Collaboration.” *Risk Analysis: An International Journal*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.13424>.



**What if we used the stories that researchers tell each other as tools to advance ethical practices and interdisciplinary disaster research?**





# Experience Stories

- “We define **experience stories** as stories that individuals tell about something that happened during the research process, generally combining descriptive observation, some level of interpretation, and embellishment... These types of stories often do not make their way into formal published research accounts; however, because they can—and do—inform the trajectory of interdisciplinary research projects, we take their **power** and **potential** seriously” (Moezzi and Peek, 2019, 1).

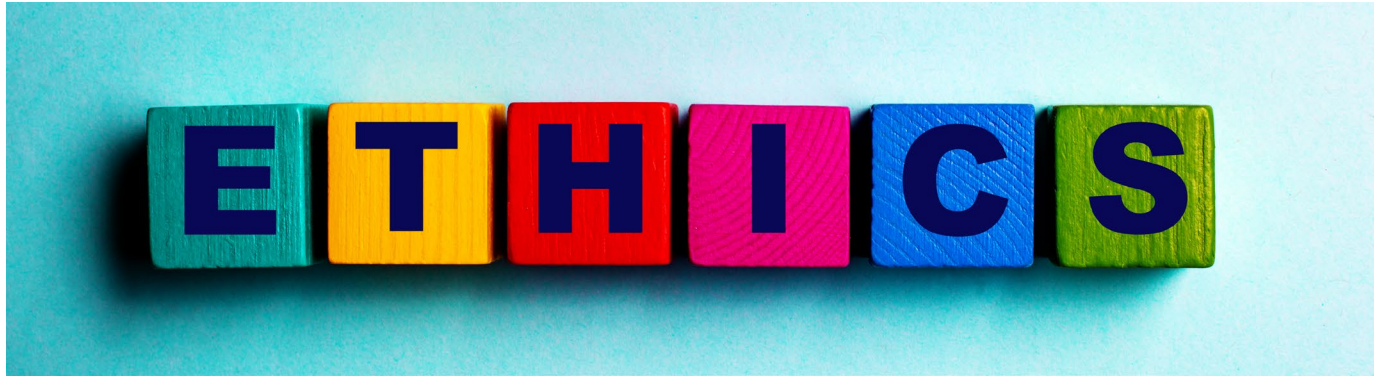


# Experience Stories



Gossip or  
Critique

- Experience stories are grounded in the research process itself and involve descriptive observation of what was **seen, heard**, or otherwise **experienced** as part of the project. These stories can serve as a compact and engaging shared platform for interdisciplinary **debate** and for the **discovery** of patterns and issues that can be missed in discipline-specific reasoning and data collection methods.
- Risks: stories can be personal and painful and lead to disappointment and distrust.
- Requirements: time, trust, and a willingness to listen to and honor experience stories.
- Possibilities: More effective **cross-disciplinary collaboration** and a chance to advance **ethical practice** in disaster research.



**Research ethics** encompass a set of principles, standards, and norms that **protect** the dignity, rights, and welfare of research participants and **guide** the entire research process.

---





Advancing  
Scientific  
Knowledge

Research  
Ethics



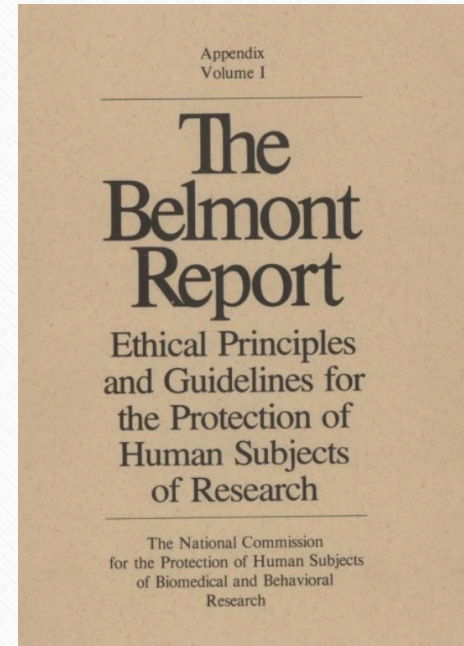
Contributing  
Back to  
Society



# Ethics in Human Research

---

- Evolution of ethical codes in response to
  - Nazi scientists and human rights violations
  - Tuskegee Syphilis Study
  - Other “ethical failures”
    - participant coercion; misrepresentation; risk; lack of benefits
- Belmont Report (1978)
- Institutional Review Boards (IRB) (NOT in every country)



# Ethics in Human Research

---

- Approaches
  - Utilitarian
  - Kantian
  - W.D. Ross



# Utilitarian Theory

---

- Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832); John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)
- Based on **outcomes** of one's actions
  - Most “good”
  - Least “bad”

*A moral act is one that results in the most benefits for the most people.*

# Kantian Theory

---

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
- Based on **sense of duty** to universal moral law
- Categorical Imperative
  - Humanity Formula: Treat people as ends in and of themselves
  - Autonomy Formula: Respect individuals' dignity and rational will

***A moral act is one that is a product of duty and reasoned moral good.***



# Principles of the IRB: A Combination of Utilitarian and Kantian Theories

---

- **Respect for Persons**
  - Recognize individuals' dignity and autonomy
  - Voluntary, informed consent
- **Beneficence**
  - Protect participants from harm
  - Minimize risk, maximize benefits of research
- **Justice**
  - Fair selection of participants
  - Fair distribution of the research's risks and benefits



# IRB Requirements

- Concerned with initial stages of research
- How will researchers:
  - Gain access to participants?
  - Recruit and interview participants?
  - Obtain informed consent?
  - Protect vulnerable populations?
  - Reduce risk and maximize benefits?





The diagram consists of two concentric circles. The outer circle is defined by a thin brown line and contains the text 'Research Ethics'. The inner circle is a solid light-orange color and contains the text 'Institutional Review Board Requirements'. The inner circle is centered within the outer circle, indicating that the requirements are a subset of the broader field of research ethics.

**Research Ethics**

**Institutional Review  
Board Requirements**

# Beyond the IRB



- Ethical Dilemmas
- Ethical Landmines



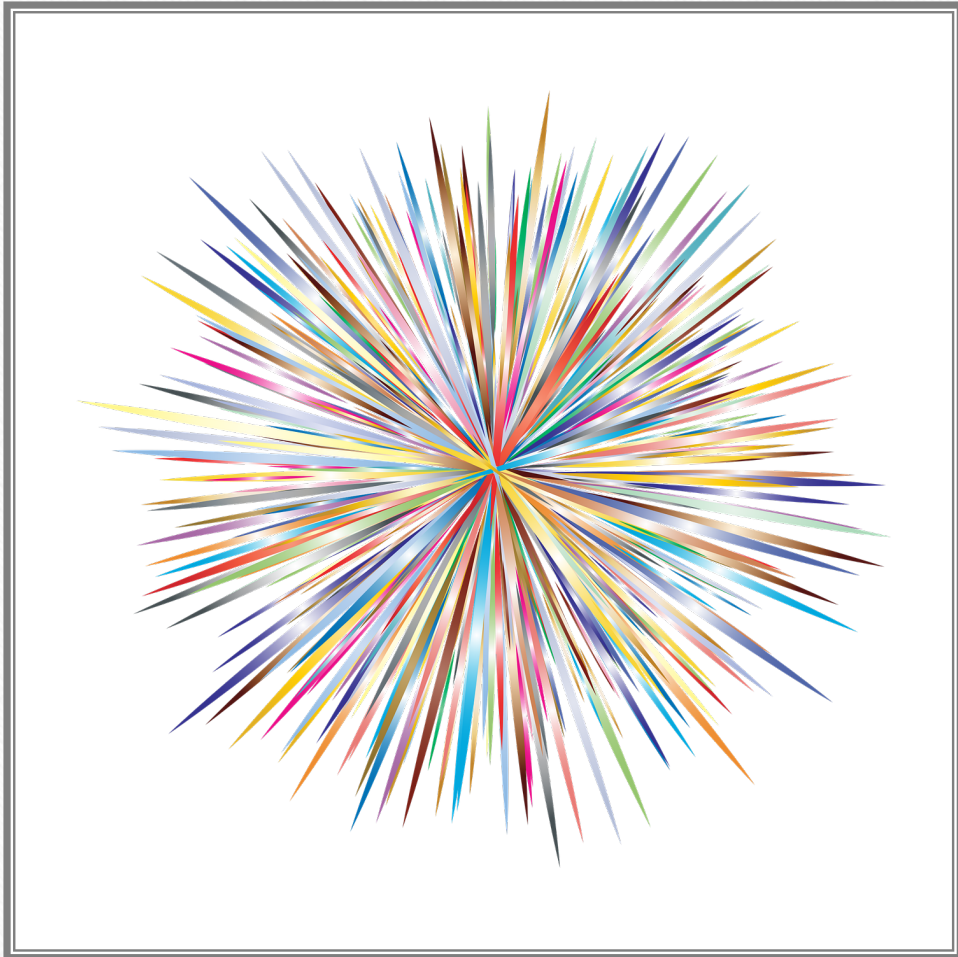


# Ethical Dilemmas

---

- University **Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)** require investigators to complete annual progress reports and to report any **deviations** from their protocols
- Most institutions do not, however, require the reporting of “**ethical dilemmas**” – here defined as *situations that raise moral or ethical concerns where there is no obvious, clear-cut resolution*





# Ethical Landmines

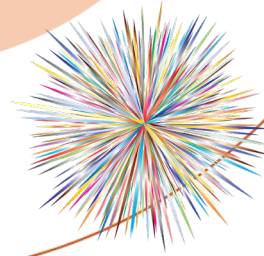
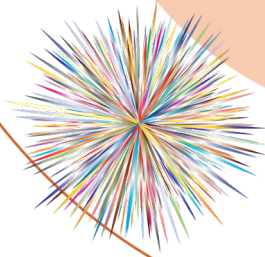
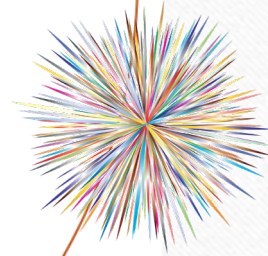
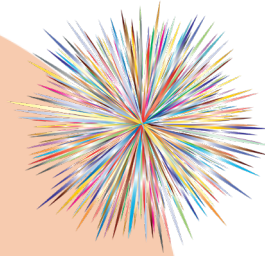
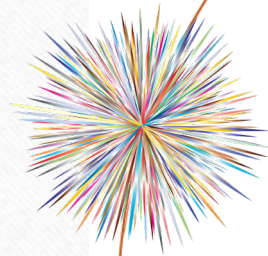
---

- Potentially explosive moments in which a poor ethical choice may produce detrimental effects on:
  - Participants
  - Our relationships with participants
  - Research project as a whole
  - Our discipline or field



**Research Ethics**

**Institutional Review  
Board Requirements**







# Ethical Toolkit

---

- A strong, yet flexible framework comprising a basic set of moral concepts for researchers to draw from as they engage with an ethical dilemma or a landmine



# When an Ethical Toolkit May be Especially Important in Long-Term Disaster Research

---

## *Categories of Concern:*

1. Shifting Vulnerability
2. Expectations
3. Reciprocity

# Categories of Concern

---

## 1. Shifting Vulnerability

- Individuals enter and exit vulnerable states over time
- May build cumulatively



# Ethical Dilemma: How to Manage Shifting Vulnerability

---

- Seven weeks post-Hurricane Katrina
- Interview with Samantha, a single African American mother who had relocated from New Orleans to Denver with her children
- Samantha became extremely emotional and spent 90 minutes relating her evacuation story of Hurricane Katrina—an important aspect of her experience, but not the sole focus of data collection
- The interview continued with our prepared questions

# Ethical Dilemma: *What Happened?*

---

- Focus on collecting “perishable data”—information that would be otherwise lost if not captured immediately after a disaster
- Samantha experienced emotional exhaustion
  - By extension, her children felt worry and sadness
- Potential breach of promises while setting up interview: not having to answer all questions; end the interview at any time



# Ethical Dilemma: *Reflections*

---

- Consider when is the right time to stop an interview
  - Don't assume participants will stop—consider racial, class, educational, gender, age, and other power dynamics that may be at play
- Be aware of signals given by participants
- Active listening  $\neq$  acting in good faith
- Offer alternatives: taking a break, scheduling a follow-up, etc.

# Categories of Concern

---

## 1. Shifting Vulnerability

- Individuals enter and exit vulnerable states over time
- May build cumulatively

## 2. Expectations

- Attention to participants may create expectations of researchers
- May lose trust, withdraw, or experience emotional harm



# Ethical Dilemma: Fulfilling Expectations and Promises

---

- Two years post-Hurricane Katrina
- Difficulty locating interviewees who had relocated to Colorado
- Mekana, 18 years old, good contact for recruiting larger sample, unemployed and in “desperate need” of money
- Miscommunication about \$50/family vs. \$50/person

# Ethical Dilemma: *What Happened?*

---

- Genuine desire to “do good” and express gratitude, but misalignment of expectations
- Unwilling to risk relationship and further contacts
- Paid Mekana what she had understood to be the correct amount



# Ethical Dilemma: *Reflections*

---

- Duty to keep promises even in the face of miscommunication
- Make promises and commitments more explicit (e.g., a brief written contract)
- Recognize power differential when considering what is fair and feasible
- Recognize social location of the researcher (Lori was in a position to actually pay Mekana – what if she wouldn't have had the funds in her bank account?)

# Categories of Concern

---

## 1. Shifting vulnerability

- Individuals enter and exit vulnerable states over time
- May build cumulatively

## 2. Expectations

- Attention to participants may create expectations of researchers
- May lose trust, withdraw, or experience emotional harm

## 3. Reciprocity

- Difficulty deciding the appropriate amount to give back



# Ethical Dilemma: Reciprocity (Kate)

---

- Four years after Hurricane Katrina
- Katie, central character in documentary film and research project, received dramatically lower flood insurance compensation than her sisters
- Kate provided funding and recruited volunteers to build a porch for Katie's new home
- Backlash from a family member

# Ethical Dilemma: *What Happened?*

---

- Family members perceived unjust compensation = harm to relationship with researcher
- Could cause damage to relationship between sisters
- “Justice” outweighed other moral considerations



# Ethical Dilemma: *Reflections*

---

- Don't assume your actions will be perceived as just
- Consider ripple effects throughout the extended network of participants
- Talk through the situation with other participants who may participate in deciding what is fair and right (rather than making assumptions)



# Ethical Toolkit

---

- A strong, yet flexible framework comprising a basic set of moral concepts for researchers to draw from as they engage with an ethical dilemma or a landmine



# Developing an Ethical Toolkit

---

- Not one *right* decision, but a chance to make a *better* decision
- Living part of ourselves
  - Must exercise to strengthen
- No two identical toolkits
  - Gains conceptual (and contextual) relevance in our own work

# *The Right and the Good*

---

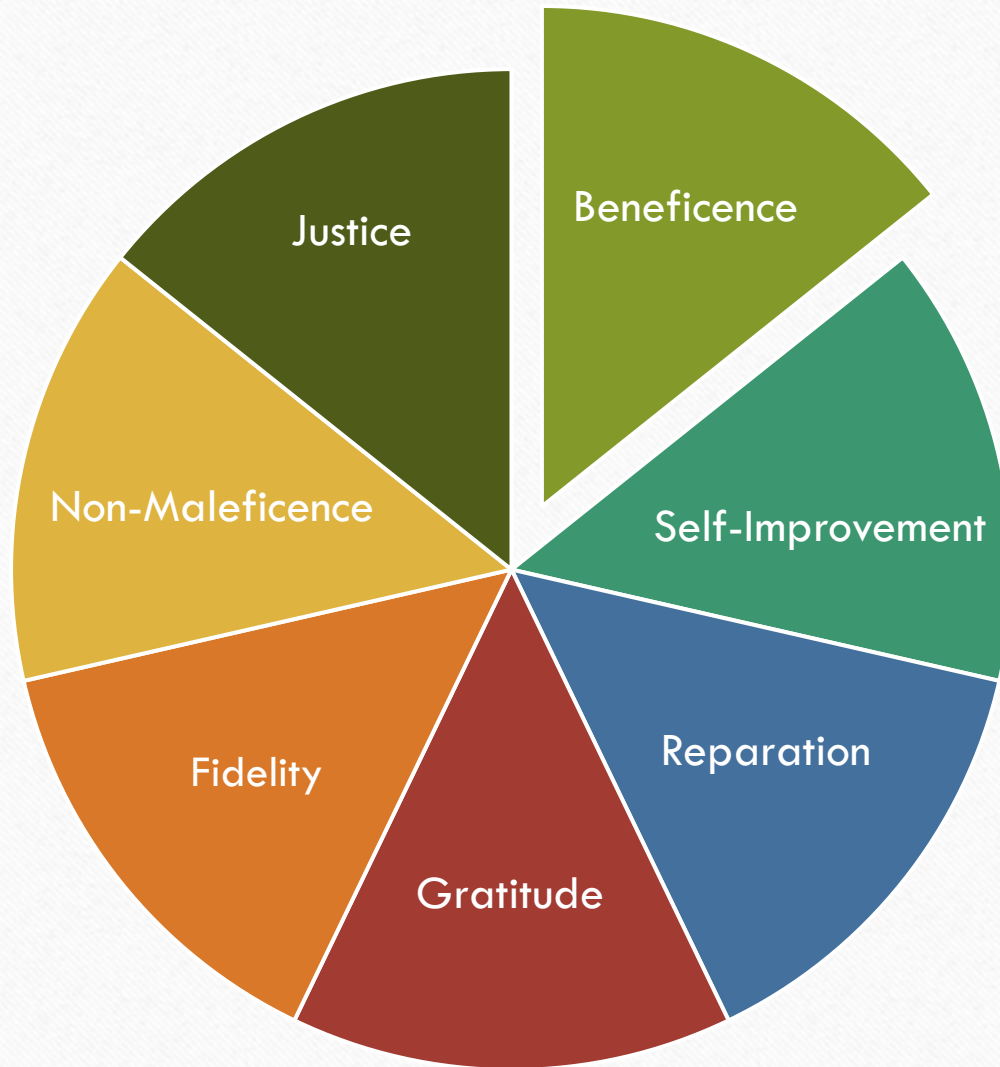
- W. D. Ross (1877-1971)
- **Pluralist** list of moral considerations
  - *Not* hierarchical
  - Offers flexibility and clarity through considering the relative importance of each ethical concern
  - Gives careful consideration to contextual factors





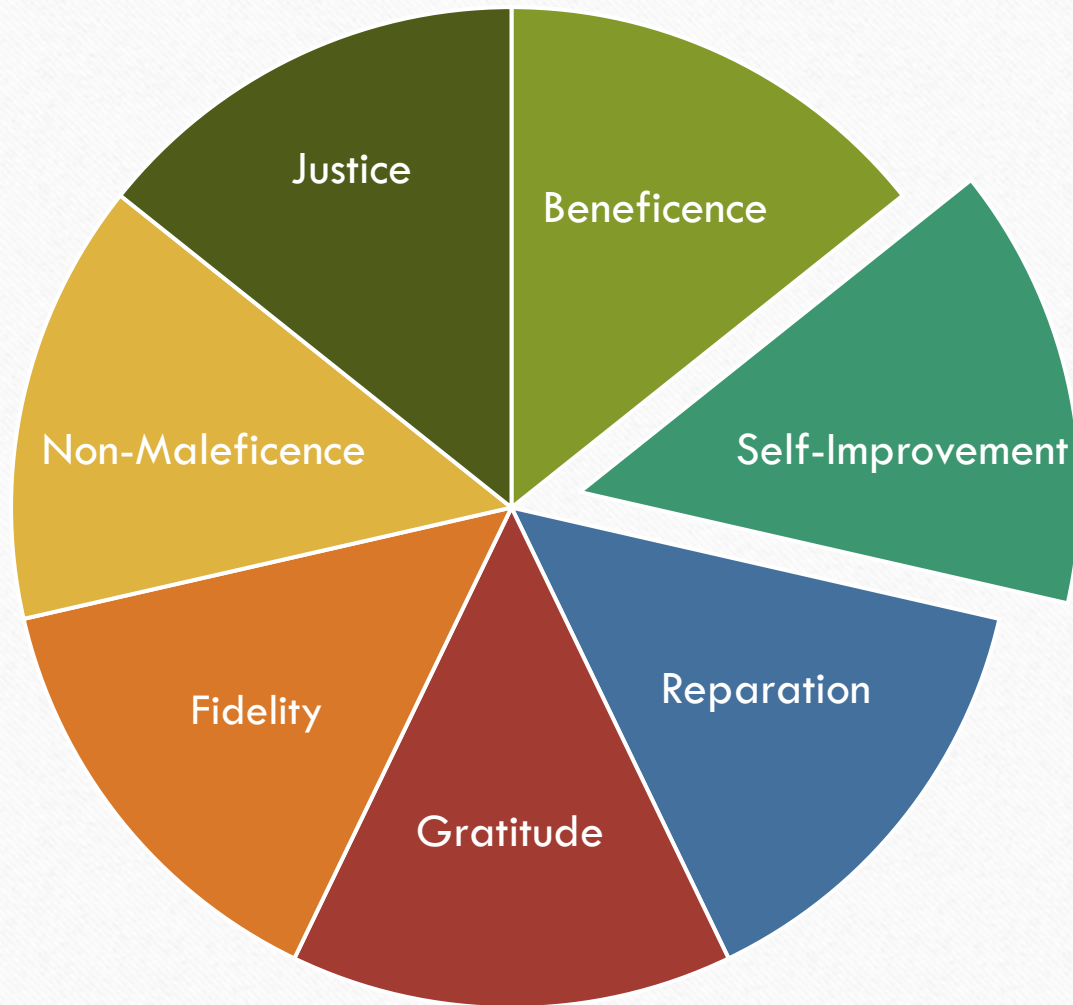


## **Key Ethical Principles Identified by W.D. Ross**

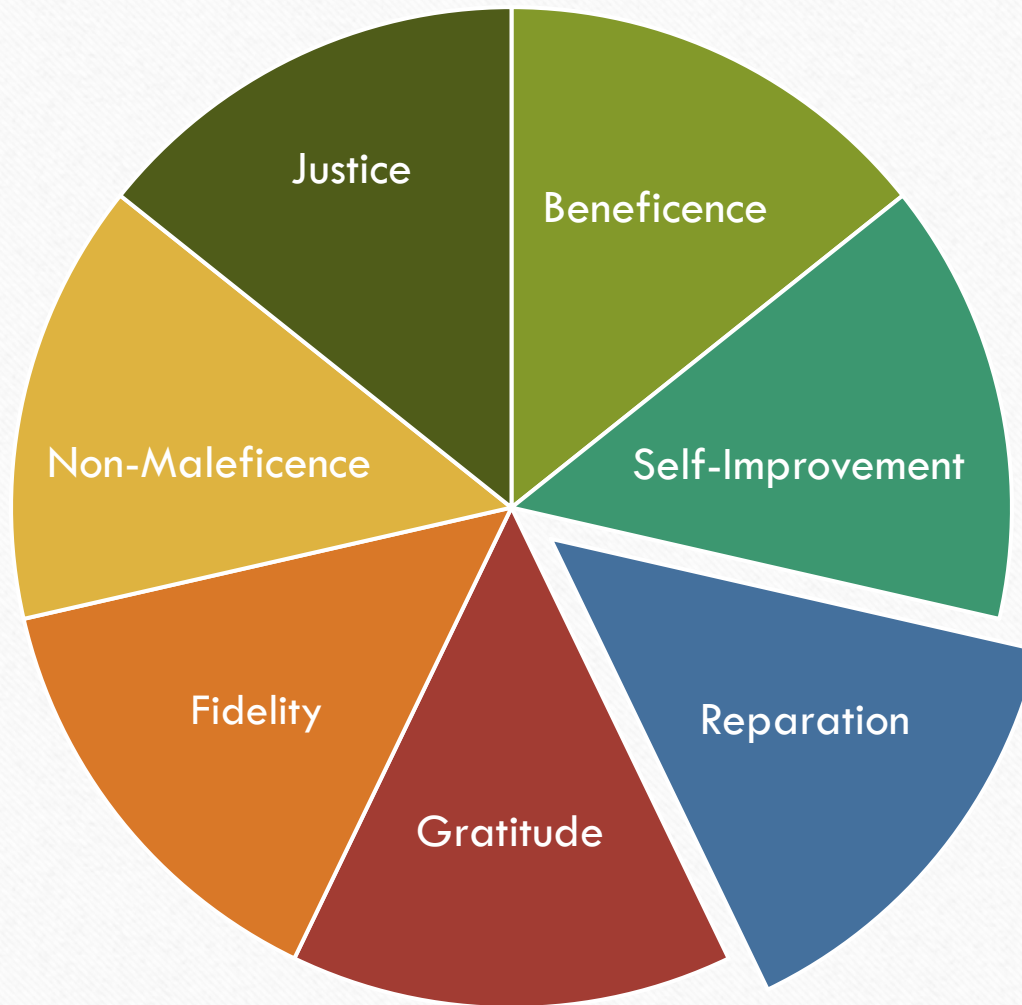


**Be kind to others; try  
to improve their  
health, wisdom,  
security, happiness,  
and well-being**





**Strive to improve  
our own health,  
wisdom, security,  
happiness, and  
well-being**

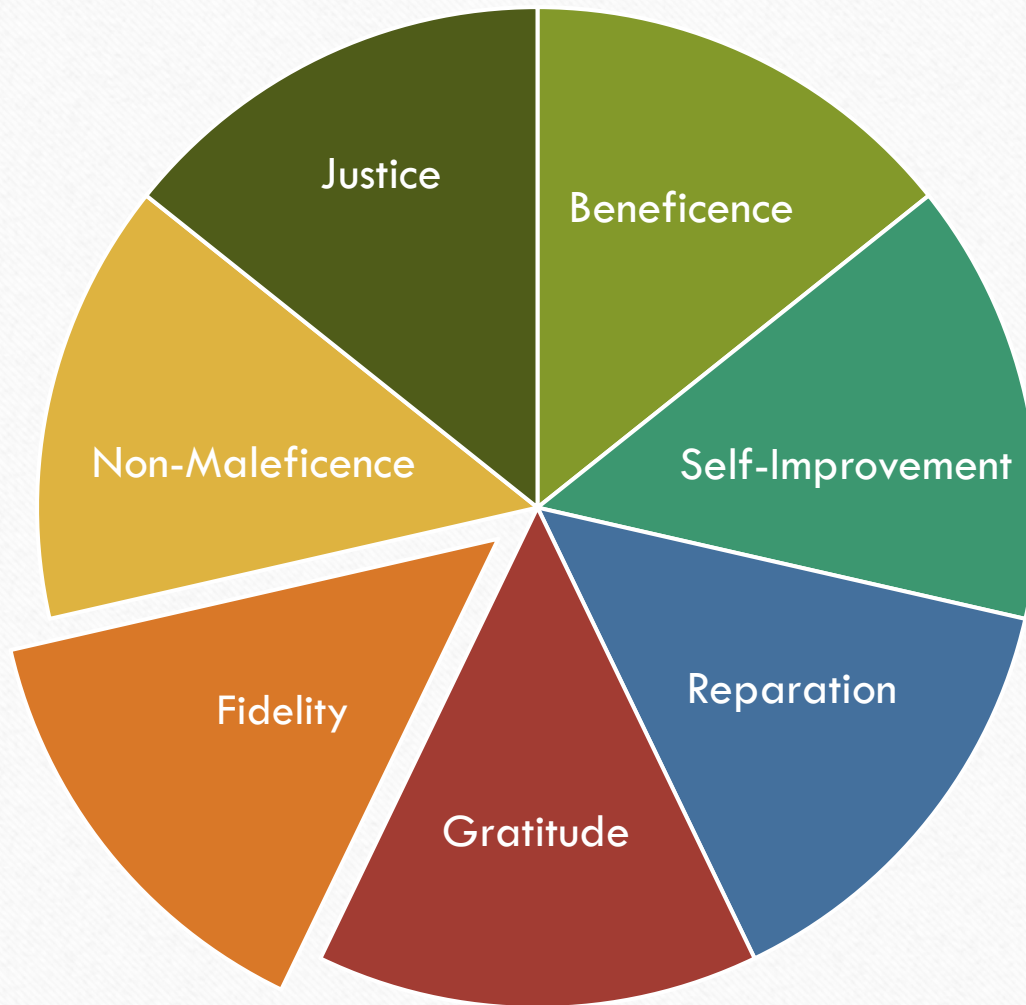


**Make amends when  
we have wronged  
another person**



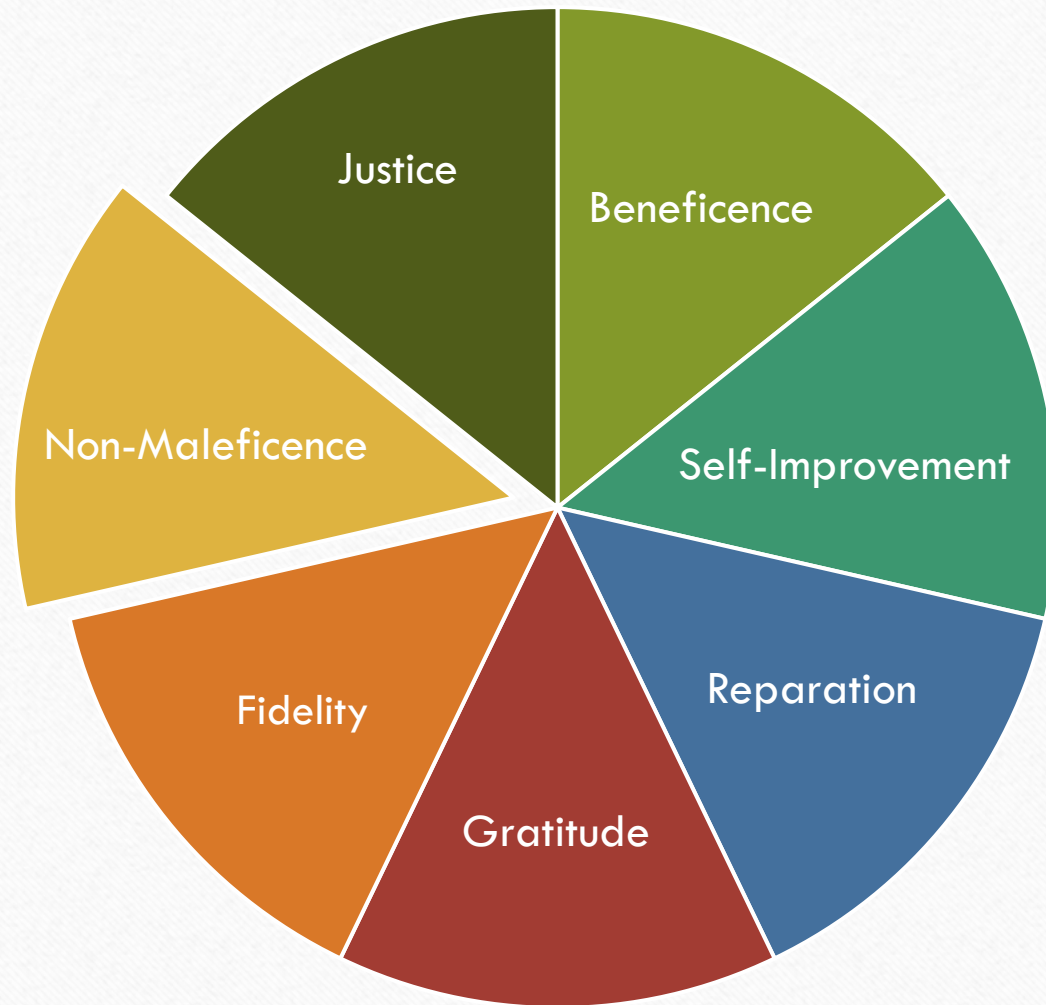


**Be grateful to others  
when they assist us; try to  
return the favor**

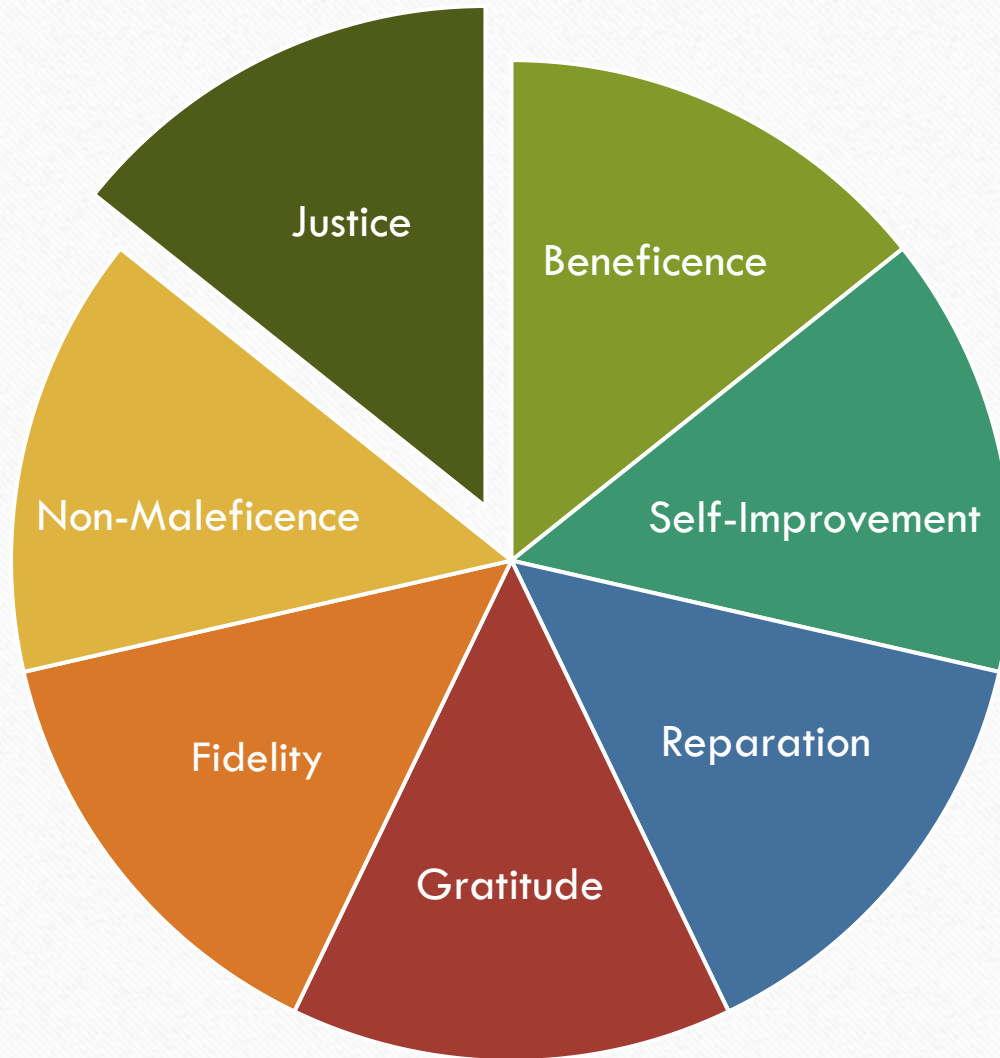


**Keep promises, be  
honest, and be truthful**





**Refrain from hurting  
others, physically and  
psychologically**



**Be fair; distribute  
benefits and burdens  
equitably and equally**



# Applying Ross' Framework

---



- Consider the landmine or the dilemma
- Carefully weigh the list of ethical considerations
- Identify those that are at work in your situation
- Decide which you will honor as the most important
  - *Remember: Not all situations will honor the same considerations!*





**SOCIAL VULNERABILITY AND  
DISASTERS**



**DISASTER MENTAL HEALTH**



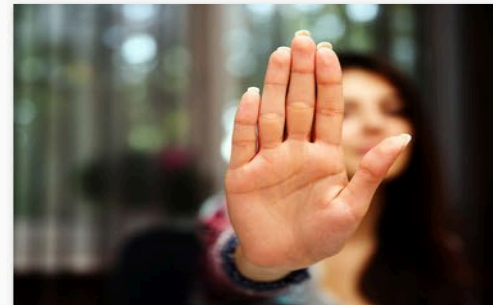
**CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN  
HAZARDS AND DISASTER  
RESEARCH**



**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
(IRB) PROCEDURES AND  
EXTREME EVENTS RESEARCH**



**CONDUCTING EMOTIONALLY  
CHALLENGING RESEARCH**



**UNDERSTANDING AND ENDING  
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN  
FIELDWORK**



**BROADER ETHICAL  
CONSIDERATIONS FOR HAZARDS  
AND DISASTER RESEARCHERS**





**Please sign up for updates and information for the  
Natural Hazards Center and CONVERGE:**

[hazards.colorado.edu/signup](https://hazards.colorado.edu/signup)

[converge.colorado.edu/signup](https://converge.colorado.edu/signup)



*The Natural Hazards Center and CONVERGE are funded by the National Science Foundation (Award #1635593 and #1841338).  
Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect  
the views of the NSF*