



Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the following published research article: Fernandes, A. (2026). Epistemic Doubt as Method: Kinship, Refusal, and the Anticolonial Ethics of Researching the Familiar. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 0(0).

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Who decides what gets shared? When research holds back.

What is this research about and why is it important?

Research training teaches us how to collect, record and analyse what people tell us. It says much less about when not to. Scholars working in anticolonial traditions argue that research has often taken knowledge from people on the researcher's terms, leaving them little say over how it is used. This argument is usually applied to research across large social distances. I ask whether it also applies to research within a family.

I explore this through my own project. I interviewed a close relative about growing up in a racially divided English town. Their account diverged from mine, and I chose not to transcribe their words as data, analyse them, or circulate them as part of the research. I argue that doubt can be a legitimate part of the research process and that choosing not to circulate research material can be an ethical decision. I also ask whether my refusal protected the participant or protected me.

What did I do?

- I planned a standard interview study: I prepared questions, recorded an interview and then planned to transcribe, analyse and write up my findings.
- I assumed that my participant's account would broadly match mine. That assumption is part of what I examine in the paper.
- The formal structure felt wrong for the relationship between my participant and me, so I let the interview become a conversation and held back my planned follow-up questions.
- When my participant's account differed from mine, I weighed whether to continue the conversation. I continued, so that they could tell their story in their own terms.
- I then stopped at transcription. Doubt intruded, and I did not transcribe their words as data or analyse them. I wrote the conversation out for them alone, and they have read my paper.
- The paper is a first-person account of these decisions. I consider them alongside research on refusal and on anticolonial methods.

What did I find?

Problems with standard research practice

- Standard advice on researcher bias assumes that personal views might distort what participants say. Here, the problem ran the other way: what my participant said challenged my own account of our shared past.
- Transcription would have moved their words from a conversation into the academic world, where I would exert control over how they were used. Scholars of anticolonial research describe this as extraction.

Doubt and refusal as research decisions

- Doubt forced a pause, and the pause became a decision not to write the account up.
- Research on refusal helped me think through whether a researcher can legitimately decline to hand knowledge over to the academy. It provided a framework for the decision; it does not prove that the decision was right.
- I treated the gap as a deliberate outcome, rather than a failed project.

The unresolved ethics

- The refusal may have served me as much as the participant. Withholding an account that unsettled my own narrative can look like protection whilst also working as self-protection. I deliberately do not settle this in the paper.
- I discussed the decision with my participant, but the impulse to protect was mine before it was ours. Consulting them did not make the decision a shared one.

What does it all mean anyway?

This case shows that stopping can be a research decision, not a research failure. Interviewing, transcribing and analysing are not neutral. Each can move knowledge from a participant into forms that the researcher controls and the academy can circulate. I could not justify that transfer once our accounts diverged, so I held back the account. I read that as an ethical judgement, not a lapse in method. The case bears most directly on research inside settings that the researcher belongs to, such as teachers studying their own pupils or colleagues.

Three things follow from this. First, formal consent did not settle the question. My participant agreed to take part before either of us knew how far our accounts would differ. A signed ethics form covered what was foreseen, but the ethical decision arose later. Second, familiarity did not settle the matter. It hid it, because I assumed an agreement between us that did not exist. Third, withholding is also a choice, and it needs justifying in the same way that collecting does.

Ethical questions can arise during fieldwork and answering them can mean producing less. Research ethics, on this account, includes a record of what the researcher chose not to do, and why. This leaves a question for anyone who researches people they know: when a participant's account contradicts your own, who decides what gets shared?

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