

The Research Question As Ethical Practice: Ontology and Social Justice in Biosocial Science  
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Levinas writes of ethics before ontology, a notion that appears fundamentally at odds with the positivistic ethos animating biosocial science. However, bending the epistemic lens back on itself—in considering research as a social practice with certain patterns of knowledge production, discursive habits and enactments of power—the formulation of the research question itself comes into focus as an ethical event: one which circularly references an ontological status, but which also invokes future ones through its constitution of problems, effects, relationships, and solutions in language. When we ask and operationalize a research question, we also describe and assign meaning to a problem: we forward a notion of what *kind* of event we are dealing with, and thereby direct and conscribe its solutions in particular and patterned ways. If we seriously consider ethics before ontology—or, more moderately, the simple but charged interweaving of the two—it becomes difficult to continue any illusion of neutrality in the project of knowledge production. Research becomes—really always was—an act and ethics of care. With Levinas as guidepost, this paper examines the relationship of ethics to research to ontology: how the world comes into focus for us, and how we go about understanding, describing, and remediating its inequities and injustices. It is fundamentally a question of love, for in building this empire of knowledge, we are caring—for better or worse—for the Other.