

Ethical Concerns with Collection of Mountaineering Data

The data in the Himalayan Database come from thousands of interviews with climbers in the Nepal Himalaya conducted by journalist Elizabeth Hawley over the course of several decades. On the database website, it notes that Hawley and her assistants would typically interview the climbers both before and after their climbs, and it is in the latter interview that most of the ethical concerns with this data collection lie.

High altitude mountaineering is physically and mentally exhausting, and, depending on the outcome of the climb, a potentially traumatic event to recall. So, it is not unreasonable to question whether it is ethical to have climbers sit through an interview process right after a climb when they may still be tired and unable to properly recall the details of their expedition, or mourning the loss of a teammate. However, it may be that this is the best way to collect the most accurate data, since waiting until long after an expedition concludes may lead to the climbers misremembering more details than normal, leading to our second concern: a lack of accurate data.

High altitude and lack of oxygen can severely impair brain function, in particular memory. Some scientific studies have even shown long term brain damage from high altitude exposure in both professional and amateur climbers. So, it would not be unreasonable for climbers to misremember exactly how high they got on the mountain, if they used oxygen briefly to recover, or exactly where and what type of incident, such as an injury or death, occurred to a teammate. One only needs to look at some of the famous disasters with controversial and convoluted explanations as to what went wrong and who did what exactly, such as the 2008 K2 disaster or the 1996 Everest disaster, to understand that the truth of what takes place at such high altitudes can sometimes be fuzzy at best.