The relationship between filmmaker and subjects is one of the central issues in scholarly research of the documentary genre. It raises many ethical questions – is it possible to document the reality without intervening, and without expressing a certain viewpoint? Does establishing friendly relationships benefit the story or not? Are filmmakers exploiting people by documenting their lives? How truthful are stories of people in a documentary if only a small percentage of footage is used in the final film?

Through semi-structured interviews with six prominent independent documentary filmmakers, this study examined filmmakers’ relationships with their subjects, and how these relationships influenced ethical decision-making. The study also explored gatekeeping forces affecting the decision-making processes. After the analysis of the interviews the following phenomena emerged as primary findings. Filmmakers choose to have friendly relationships with their subjects, and in critical situations they would intervene and help the subjects versus observing or recording. Committed to telling truthful stories documentarians face the conflict between ethics and aesthetics. Acknowledging some similarities with journalism, filmmakers do not consider what they do journalism. The biggest responsibility filmmakers admit to is a responsibility to their subjects.