

## **Ethical Challenges in Community-Based Research: Introduction to the Series**

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**We describe the inspiration for this series of articles and articulate several themes that run throughout the four articles that follow. Particular ethical challenges in community-based mental health research are identified, as is the tension between existing ethical codes and policies and the requirements of more collaborative, community-based research. We edited this special series with an eye toward promoting greater discussion of ethical issues in this realm and the eventual development and promotion of guidelines for ethical decision-making in community-based research.**

**Key words:** community-based research, ethics.  
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The impetus for this series of articles came from experiences that each of us have had as we attempted to navigate collaborative relationships with community mental health agencies to examine questions of the effectiveness and dissemination of mental health treatments. In addition to the numerous practical and logistic obstacles we encountered in establishing and conducting these research projects, we also were struck by the particular ethical

questions that arose. These questions ranged from basic definitions of what is research and who are the participants, to subtler culture clashes between priorities or values held by our service provider collaborators and us as researchers. For example, we struggled with reconciling circumstances in which an agency regularly collected information on determinants of client outcome as part of quality assurance measurement (and that practice was not subject to any form of ethical review by the agency) with how this changed to research that required review by our university ethics review board when there was a wish to report this information to a broader audience.

There is growing pressure for more community-based mental health research to develop contextually and culturally sensitive services, to evaluate the effectiveness and transportability of treatments, and to study procedures for maximizing the dissemination of evidence-based practices. Although several recent publications have outlined the methodological and practical challenges of such work (e.g., Southam-Gerow, Ringeisen, & Sherrill, 2006), the unique ethical challenges to this work have not been extensively considered. Accordingly, we invited four research groups with experience and expertise in various types of community-based research to comment on the ethical challenges in their research programs. The authors were generous in sharing their thoughts and experiences and we thank them for joining us in this endeavor. The four articles illuminate a variety of issues and convincingly demonstrate the need for continued discussion in this realm.

As a package, these articles highlight that existing guidelines and codes of research ethics are derived from a research model that is often at odds with the philosophy and procedures of more community-based research

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endeavors. Based initially on biomedical research traditions, existing ethical guidelines are the most appropriate for situations in which the researcher is considered the authority with responsibility for research participants, where investigators establish tight protocols prior to beginning the research, and where the roles and responsibilities of researcher and participant are clearly defined and distinct. In contrast, as the articles in this series highlight, community-based mental health services research involves dynamic collaborations between researchers and community stakeholders, an evolving determination of research questions and protocols, and fluid movement across multiple roles of researcher, participant, and consultant. Ethical guidelines may need to be modified and expanded to accommodate this new generation of research. Although several excellent discussions of these issues have recently emerged (e.g., Fisher et al., 2002; Hoagwood, 2003; Leadbeater et al., 2006; Minkler, 2004), our hope is that this series of articles will be further stimulation to these efforts and will inspire clinical scientists to reflect on these issues as related to their own community-based research efforts. Ultimately, articulating common ethical challenges involved in this type of work should influence future revisions of professional codes of ethics and standards set by institutional review boards.

The series begins with an article in which Garland, McCabe, and Yeh point to specific ethical challenges they have faced in their research evaluating services for youth and families in community mental health settings. Using the language of current ethical codes, they discuss ethical challenges associated with the multiple roles that researchers, agency personnel, and clients may play in these projects; the uses and ownership of data; and the fiscal responsibilities of grant-funded, community-based research. Frazier, Formoso, Birman, and Atkins focus particular attention on the ethical obligation of establishing feasible research partnerships and argue for a shift away from demonstrating *access* to community agencies toward developing and demonstrating the capacity to build sustainable *collaborations* with community partners. In the third article in the series, Sanders and Prinz use their experiences in development and dissemination of an empirically supported population-level intervention to illustrate the use of a self-regulatory framework for promoting ethical decision-making with regard to issues related to the dissemination of tested treatments. Finally, the article by Sieber provides a general

overview of the ethical challenges in reconciling the research demands of academe with those of community-based research. Her article reviews some difficulties that may arise as academic researchers attempt to collaborate with community partners and offers constructive suggestions for approaching collaborations among research partners in diverse settings.

A central theme that weaves consistently through the articles encompasses the ethical issues inherent in building collaborative research relationships between academic researchers and community service providers. Power differentials, both between these groups and within each of them, are clear ethical concerns. Successful and ethical collaborations may be best when there is an equalization of power among the research parties, but the influence of historical injustices, racism, different training and skills, and competing views of appropriate goals and rewards of research may each present an ethical challenge to establishing the trust and reciprocity that are required. Across the articles, there is a consistent recommendation for researchers to initiate and continually nurture transparent and respectful interpersonal relationships with community partners.

Beyond the common theme of respectful collaborations, the series authors raise other issues that may not fit neatly into existing ethical codes relevant to research. For example, Sanders and Prinz devote attention to several issues related to dissemination of population-level interventions. In their case, “dissemination” and “research” are often synonymous, as they investigate the effects of an intervention at the population level. As evidence-based programs are more fully implemented, who maintains responsibility for the intervention? How should issues of informed consent be resolved when “participants” are entire communities designated to receive a public health initiative? Although true of any research, community-based mental health research demands even greater awareness of the need for continual review of ethical issues, for openness to multiple opinions, and for mechanisms that promote timely resolution of dilemmas as they arise.

We believe that the time has come for greater attention to ethical issues in community-based research. The stakes are high, as community research is increasingly mandated and necessary. If these collaborations are not conducted ethically, harm can result not only to individuals and relationships, but also to the ability of clinical science to

move forward in the most socially relevant manner. Good intentions are not sufficient to avert ethical dilemmas in community mental health research. We call on clinical psychologists to embrace the discussion of ethical issues in this realm, to commit to working with ethical review boards and funding sponsors to increase the relevance of ethical guidelines for community research, and to transmit the importance of these issues and skills to students in training.

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