



## Covenantal Ethics for Action Research: Creating a New Strategy for Ethical Review

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Introduction: Covenantal Ethics as a Framework for Structured Ethical Reflection in Action Research

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Current frameworks for understanding and enacting research ethics based within a biomedical model are not appropriate for Action Research. The contractual nature of most existing human subjects review processes reinforces the notion of the researcher as an objective outsider whose primary interest is in gathering data, a stark contrast to the action researcher who is concerned with establishing genuine relationships within organizations, schools, and communities and working together to achieve positive change. Current models also focus on a narrow set of activities within the overall research process, concentrating on subject recruitment and informed consent, while largely ignoring the ethical implications of identifying meaningful research questions, involving a broad range of organizational and community participants, providing communities with resources and training in research methods, generating knowledge that addresses critical issues within communities, and creating venues for disseminating this knowledge that make it widely available to members of the community to maximize the potential for research to be useful in efforts to create positive social change. These aspects of research raise serious and complex ethical challenges that demand our attention.

In this session we draw upon the notion of covenantal ethics to provide an alternative framework for envisioning ethical review processes designed for action research (Brydon-Miller, 2008, 2009; Hilsen, 2006, May, 1983). Covenantal ethics emphasizes “the acknowledgement of human interdependency, the cogeneration of knowledge, and the development of fairer power relations—paralleling the basic values of action research” (Brydon-Miller, 2009, 247). This framework has been described as “a reciprocal and authentic exchange between researcher and participant that transcends conventional notions of contract” (Newton, 2009). In an action research framework this exchange is enacted within the context of long-term relationships among researchers and community partners with a common commitment to addressing pressing social, economic, and political issues. And while it certainly provides a more consistent ethical grounding for action research in particular, it might also be useful in reframing our understanding of research ethics more generally. “If rather than relying on the existing system of imposed contractual ethics as the primary mechanism for assessing research ethics, all scholars began with a grounding in covenantal ethics, we might find that our combined efforts to bring about positive social change are more effective and our own personal sense of fulfillment in our work enhanced. (Brydon-Miller, 2009, 253).

An important next step in integrating covenantal ethics into action research practice is to operationalize this concept so that we might apply these principles in carrying out an ethical review of our research processes. We begin by further articulating the shared ethical principles of AR and use these to create a

general model for identifying ethical issues that should be addressed at each stage of the research process along with strategies for guiding the development of more ethical practices.

The basic principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice have been identified as core elements of research ethics in documents such as the Belmont report and in the review processes generated from that document. While these principles remain important, the way in which they are understood and applied needs to be critically examined and adapted for action research processes. As one example, the principle of autonomy, which suggests that “respect for persons requires that subjects to the degree that they are capable, be given the opportunity to choose what shall or shall not happen to them” (Sales & Folkman, 200, p. 201), is assumed to have been satisfied once the approved informed consent form has been signed. But this says nothing about how relevant research topics are generated, or how specific research questions, methods, and sources of data are determined. Nor does it include what happens to community members after the research has been completed and how that knowledge is used to bring about change. In an action research framework, autonomy should inform our decision making throughout the entire research process.

At the same time, the principle of autonomy itself might be called into question. For example, we might ask if there are situations in which the rights of communities come before personal decision-making. The assumption is that individual participants in a research project are empowered to decide whether or not they wish to participate, but in some indigenous communities processes of group oversight of potential research projects means that the decision of whether or not to allow research to be conducted within the community is controlled by some form of Tribal IRB or community advisory board (Battiste, 2007; Hermes, 1999; LaFrance & Crazy Bull, 2009). Community sovereignty in this case comes before individual autonomy through the establishment of mechanisms for insuring community oversight of research. This also touches on the question of beneficence by recognizing the importance of weighing not only personal risk/benefit analyses but of understanding the potential for risks and benefits to the community as a whole. This tension between individual autonomy and community sovereignty requires additional attention particularly from action researchers working within indigenous communities.

Beyond the established principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice, action researchers have articulated a set of values that guide our practice: “A respect for people and for the knowledge and experience they bring to the research process, a belief in the ability of democratic processes to achieve positive social change, and a commitment to action” (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003, 15). But how do we go about translating these values into specific guidelines to inform practice? One critical aspect of any review process designed for action research settings is that control must remain within the hands of the participants themselves. To this end a reconceptualization of the ethics review process ought to be collaborative in nature and adaptable as the purposes and design of the research itself is likely to shift over time.

The model we are presenting today is a first attempt to develop a systematic framework for ethical reflection within an action research process.

According to Coghlan and Brannick (2010) there are four main steps in the action research process: Constructing, Planning Action, Taking Action, Evaluating Action

These basic steps might be broken down still further as indicated in the table below.

<b>Basic Principle</b>	<b>Developing Partnerships</b>	<b>Constructing Research Question</b>	<b>Seeking Funding</b>	<b>Planning Action</b>	<b>Taking Action</b>	<b>Evaluating Action</b>	<b>Disseminating Results</b>
Autonomy							
Sovereignty							
Beneficence							

Justice							
Caring							
Respect							
Commitment							
Transparency							
Democratic Practice							

Along the left hand side of the table you see a set of basic principles that might guide our practice. These include the basic principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice, along with principles drawn from within the action research literature including justice, caring, respect, commitment and transparency. Using this table, we would begin the ethical review process by reflecting upon the basic principles that we believe guide our practice. In the case of first-person action research, this might be an individual process, but in most action research projects this would be a collaborative effort to identify key values that we hope will guide our work together. The list shown here reflects the existing principles of current review processes and the shared values of action research I identified earlier. But individuals and groups using this method should consider whether or not these principles reflect their own value system and include additional values they believe to be of importance in guiding their practice.

Once this is done, the next step is to consider how these values are reflected at each stage of the action research process. On our table, the columns identify specific steps or stages in the Action Research process, from first establishing relationships with our collaborators, then identifying a meaningful research question, securing funding, planning and carrying out the research, to the final stages of taking action, reflecting on the outcomes, and disseminating the results both within the local community as well as to fellow action researchers and others interested in learning from our work.

For example, if transparency is a key principle, how is this demonstrated in the way in which we approach potential community partners and begin to articulate a meaningful research question? If community sovereignty and local control is important to us, how do we insure that the results of our work translate into actions that increase community ownership of the research process and create meaningful change at the local level? By filling in the table with relevant questions and specific actions we can insure that our research addresses the full range of ethical principles we have identified as important.

We now want to examine how this basic framework might inform action research in three distinct settings: insider action research in organizations, teacher inquiry in classrooms, and community-based research. We are just beginning the process of articulating this new model and see the opportunity to present our initial thoughts to our colleagues here at the World Congress as a unique opportunity to seek a wide range of responses, insights, experiences, and recommendations.

Following brief presentations by our panelists, we will break into smaller work groups designed to deepen our understanding of the ethical challenges in these three arenas of action research. We will close with a general discussion of our shared findings and recommendations. Our hope for the session is to have participants come away with an understanding of covenantal ethics and strategies for examining the ethical implications of their work as action researchers within this framework. At the same time we anticipate that a wealth of questions and possible avenues for development will be generated that we can draw upon to create a working draft document to be circulated among the session participants as we seek to formulate a viable alternative ethical review model designed specifically for action research settings.

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## Reducing the Perceived Ethical Uncertainty of Insider Action Research

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Research involving ‘humans’ conducted in Australia is governed by the 2007 National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, developed jointly by the National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council and Australian

Vice-Chancellor’s Committee. As in many other places these guidelines are largely based on Scientific-Biomedical approaches and this is reflected in the ‘proforma’ and process used by Human Research Ethics Committees (HREC). General guidelines can be made to work for action research and insider action research if the HREC members have relevant experience however this can vary by time and place.

As part of normal business organizations engage in worthwhile research projects which are useful to the academic and wider community, and can benefit from the advice and approval of a relevant HREC. When insider action research is conducted ethical aspects of roles, relationships, risks and consent need to be explored by researchers, and potential participants, as well as members of Ethics Committees (Holian & Brooks 2004).

Insider action research involves researchers and participants who have mutual values and interests and established working relationships in the past, present and desired future, and as such is covenantal rather than transactional. An understanding of covenantal ethics by researchers, participants, and members of ethics committees is important if the processes of seeking ethical review and obtaining formal approval are to promote and support worthwhile and ethical research exploring aspects of practice in applied contexts.

While a contractual approach to ethical review by a HREC may satisfy minimal legal requirements to protect individuals and organizations from damages due to complaints associated with adverse consequences, a covenantal agreement with mutual commitment to shared values may be a necessary step for approval to conduct insider action research.

- What do you have to say and do to persuade your organizational gatekeepers to agree?
- How much detail about the proposed research steps and processes can and should be included in a formal ethics application?

Insider action research involves emergent processes, collaborative planning and iterative decision making. Often there are dual purposes to enhance understanding as well as to take action, and to link practice with theory. The information available is objective and subjective, the process inductive and deductive, with reflective practice also included. Options for the next step in data collection or reduction are not hard set in advance but remain flexible and responsive to feedback. Participants are often co-researchers and involved in making meaning of and disseminating the findings and recommendations.

Insider Action Research normally involves established genuine working relationships, and ethical aspects may include impacts on individual members of the organization and on the researchers, organizational goals and reputation, and other stakeholders including clients or customers. In covenantal relationships trust and mutual understanding go beyond social exchange, with shared values and a ‘mutual pledge’ to do whatever is necessary to uphold these values even though what this may entail cannot be specified in advance ( Barnett & Schubert 2002). A covenantal agreement may appear vague since unlike a contract where precision is wanted ‘ambiguity is not only tolerated, but built-in by design’, with the promise that we can ‘simultaneously be both free agents and members of a living community... have our cake and eat it too’ (Pava 2001, p86).

Several approaches to reduce the level of perceived ‘uncertainty’ of insider action research in order to satisfy the basic requirements of Ethics Committees include:

- Write up the ethics application ‘as if’ the researcher were external, with basic facts based on best guess estimates, including most likely approaches for data collection and analysis, even though some of these may not be used. If things change then put in an amendment.
- Put in a series of ethics applications/extensions to applications as each step is agreed between the parties involved. The initial application would outline that this will be done.
- Explain the nature of the covenantal relationship involved, how ethical principles will be followed throughout the project, and be able to do this clearly and succinctly prior to commencement of the research.

The third approach may at first appear to be a tall order because of the difficulties some of us may have experienced when trying to convince members of an ethics committee that if we are truly collaborative we will not know in advance exactly what will be done.

They may believe they cannot give approval unless we can state exactly what we are asking them to approve. However a covenantal relationship between insider researchers and those who are going to be invited to be engaged in the research would seem to be a necessary pre-cursor to having a viable project. If the research proposal is based on sound ethical principles, including informed consent and absence of coercion, how can this be adequately articulated and conveyed in writing to the Ethics Committee?

An important aspect of ethical review is the examination of dependency relationships between researchers and people involved in the proposed research. Differences between roles and related levels of power may be present in either ‘top down’ or ‘bottom up’ insider action research. The nature of the relationship, research direction, options and progress need ongoing review and negotiation. The ‘plain language statement’ provided at the commencement of the research often promises that participants/co-researchers will be actively involved in both planning and analysis, and that individuals can choose whether they wish to continue to be involved or elect to withdraw at any time.

Researchers have responsibilities to manage what happens during the research. They are authorized as part of the covenantal agreement to act as a facilitator, to attend, reflect and maintain dialogue which helps keep the research on track. They have ‘power to’ advance the group in an agreed direction, rather than ‘power over’ others - the principles of action research involve doing research with people rather than doing research ‘on’ them.

Insider action research may take place in a range of organizations, including education, health, government, not for profit, and private companies – both large and small. Business ethics, professional ethics and research ethics may all make a contribution to how a project is to be done. People engaged in insider action research can include:

- Members of a Profession who have a corporate management role in their organization.
- Academics who do ‘personal’ research with their current students as participants.
- Managers involved in joint research as clients, sponsors, or part-time students.

If the proposed research is worthwhile, given the complexity of competing roles and limitations of short-term transactional contracts, then covenantal ethics are needed to allow flexible navigation through ‘grey areas’ as emerging research issues appear.

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## Grounding Value Ethics in First Person Inquiry

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In focusing on covenantal ethics as a framework under which research ethics, particularly action research ethics, are understood and evaluated, grounding it in a general value ethics approach is useful. Values ethics may be contrasted with, among others, natural law ethics that focuses on laws of ethical behavior and with virtue ethics that are grounded in moral virtues. While both natural law and virtue ethics have their strong points as general principles and virtues, they are not always easy to apply to concrete situations. In earlier work, I have introduced and explored the work of Bernard Lonergan for action research (Coghlan, 2008; Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). Lonergan provides a first person approach to knowing and valuing that is based on the individual's appropriation of the operations of knowing and valuing.

### I. VALUE ETHICS

We are always valuing. We use words like “good” and “bad” about a wide range of issues. We like this; we don't like that. We choose one item over another. We choose to take this action rather than an alternative. When we think about values we find ourselves focusing on the person thinking, valuing, choosing and acting. Accordingly, values provide a useful approach to exploring ethics and enable us to ground our ethics in first person inquiry/practice. “A value is what the morally self-transcending person intends when assessing a concrete object of choice” (Dunne, 2010: 276). From a first person perspective what does such an assessment involve?

Human knowing is a three-step heuristic process: experience, understanding and judgment. First, we attend to our experience. Then we ask questions about our experience and receive an insight (understanding) and we follow that up by reflecting and weighing up the evidence to determine whether our insight fits the evidence or not (judgment). Human knowing is not any of these operations on their own. All knowing involves experience, understanding and judging. The cognitional operations of experience, understanding and judgment form a general empirical method, which requires

- Attention to observable data
- Envisaging possible explanations of that data
- Preferring as probable or certain the explanations which provide the best account for the data.

These require the dispositions to perform the operations of attentiveness, intelligence and reasonableness (Coghlan, 2008).

When we address questions of ethics we move beyond issues of cognition to issues of valuing and choosing. The process of deciding is a similar process to that of knowing. We experience a situation. Using sensitivity, imagination and intelligence we seek to answer the question for understanding as to what possible courses of action there might be. At this level we ask what courses of action are open to us and we review options, weight choices and decide. We reflect on the possible value judgments as to what the best option might be and we decide to follow through the best value judgment and we take responsibility for consistency between our knowing and our doing. As Lonergan (1972: 18) expresses it,

Spontaneously we move from judgments of fact or possibility to judgments of value and to the deliberateness of decision and commitment; and that spontaneity is not

unconscious or blind; it constitutes us as conscientious, as responsible persons, and its absence would leave us psychopaths.

Lonergan is countering the notion that objective value must be somehow “out there”. Such a notion is based on the mistaken assumption that knowing is a taking a look at something that is “out there”. By understanding what we do when we say that A is better than B, we realize that all things valuable are valued through responsible consciousness and that true values are learned by people being responsible. So affirming something as truly valuable is the fruit of authenticity. Working to attain authenticity is a first person process of attending, primarily in the present tense, to how one is experiencing, understanding, valuing and deciding/acting (Coghlan, 2008).

This summary working note is the first step in articulating these ideas. I intend to develop them further and by bringing a second and third person focus to them.

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## Considering Challenges with Enacting Covenantal Ethics in Teacher Action Research

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The term action research encompasses a large family of research practices which intentionally and systematically combine knowing and doing for positive social change as critical components of the research endeavor. The many AR versions, while sharing some common values such as altering power arrangements, also differ widely in historical origins, theoretical groundings, and practices. What has become known as teacher research, teacher inquiry, or practitioner research has quite different roots for example than participatory action research. Even within teacher research there are diverse genres. The purpose of this section is not to map the landscape of these varied AR traditions – or the diverse genres of teacher inquiry. This has been done elsewhere (see for example Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Pine, 2009). However, to discuss some of the challenges of enacting covenantal ethics in teacher action research, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are differences and nuances among the varied AR approaches. Here I focus primarily on classroom teachers utilizing action research to better understand their contexts and educational practices, improve their classroom practices, and address issues of inequality in schooling.

The basic premise of our session is that the contractual nature of most existing guidelines and review processes for research with human participants are too limited for action research, as well as contradictory to some of the values of participative, collaborative knowledge production and change. We draw upon covenantal ethics to build an alternative framework for envisioning ethical research review processes more consistent with AR values (Brydon-Miller, 2008, 2009; Hilsen, 2006, May, 1983). The covenantal framework has been described as “a reciprocal and authentic exchange between researcher and participant that transcends conventional notions of contract” (Newton, 2009). However, covenantal and conventional research protocols and principles present some very unique dilemmas and challenges in teacher action research. My initial task is to raise some those dilemmas as a jumping off point for our discussion.

First, one distinct feature of teacher inquiry is that the teacher researcher always works with children, whether directly or indirectly, in the AR project. Children are defined by the U.N. as persons under 18. There is also a growing use of participatory action research projects with and by youth and teens, known as youth participatory action research (YPAR). In the U.S., research ethics with children, covenantal or contractual, are framed in part by the same historical works

guiding research with adults, such as the Nuremberg Code (1947), the Declaration of Helsinki (1964), and Belmont Report (1979) produced by U.S. National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The practical applications of ethical research principles such as respect, autonomy, beneficence, and justice, which ground our session today, were laid out in the Belmont Report. In contractual terms, respect for persons as autonomous agents is applied through the informed consent process. The principle of beneficence includes the obligation to act with participants’ well being in mind by avoiding harm and maximizing benefits. Finally, the principle of justice, i.e. fairness in the distribution of benefits, “requires us to ask about who receives the benefits research and bears its burdens.” (Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, n.d. p. 5).

The U.S. national commission which produced the Belmont Report also produced the Report and Recommendations: Research Involving Children (1977). Specific to research involving children, the commission recommended additional protections for children, including the concepts of minimal risk, parental permission, and child assent (Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, n.d). The concept of parental permission holds that there are both rights and limits of parental authority to enroll their children in research studies. Expanding the principle of respect for adult persons to children, the commission

developed this concept of parental permission (as different from parental consent) and the position that children have the right to assent or dissent to their participation in research.

The ethics of action research with children is also informed by the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and Agenda 21 – the Rio Declaration (United Nations, 1992). “Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) require that children should be informed, involved, and consulted about all the activities that affect their lives” (in Kellett, Forrest, Dent, & Ward, 2004, p. 329). This calls for attention to children’s rights to self-expression and active participation in development or research projects that affect them.

In summary then, teacher action research conducted with and/or by children with adult teacher researchers is framed by both human participant research principles and protocols as well as the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Children.

The first and foremost challenge of enacting covenantal ethics in teacher research relates to the notion of a “reciprocal and authentic exchange” between researcher and participants which is at the heart of covenantal ethics. The teacher, the paid responsible adult in the classroom, always has more – and different – power in the school setting than her or his students. The nature of this concrete power differential will always make the possibility of a reciprocal and authentic exchange and relationships particularly complex. Similar to action research with adults, researcher and child participant relationships and power interactions are always mediated by race, gender, class, ethnicity, and other positionality and status markers (Frisby, Maguire, & Reid, 2009; Maguire & Berge, 2009).

The research ethics principle of respect for persons as autonomous agents is in part enacted through an informed consent process. As we are suggesting, this process would look different in a covenantal rather than contractual ethics process. However, what remains constant is that school children the world over frankly have very little autonomy in the classroom. For example, in many U.S. classrooms children are not allowed much control or decision making over something as basic as when they can leave the classroom to use the toilet. While this may seem like an exaggerated example of school children’s lack of autonomy, it raises the question, how does a general lack of students’ autonomy in schools play out in teacher action research? How can the teacher researcher treat children as autonomous beings in systems and settings where students have little autonomy over anything within the school walls? This relates to the democratic values and impulses at the heart of action research.

Specific to the informed consent process in teacher inquiry, many teacher research programs, texts, and courses do indeed recognize and discuss the informed consent process, particularly parental or family consent, and its challenges. This is however different from parental permission and the child participant’s right to assent or consent to be a part of research that their families have permitted. Few teacher research texts discuss meaningful inclusion of children through their direct assent or consent to be a part of the teacher-researcher’s classroom inquiry. This is particularly the case in first person teacher inquiry, in which the teacher is often the primary developer of the AR question. As a side note, first person teacher-research as a whole is generally less participatory and collaborative than other community-based versions of AR in terms of who generates the action research question – and how.

Some teacher action research texts or trainings however do not hold teachers accountable to the ethics and protocols of research with human participants, conventional or covenantal. For example, in his otherwise detailed text, *Teacher action research: Building knowledge democracies* (2009), Pine never identifies the necessity of a teacher getting parental informed consent, parental permission, or student assent or consent for children’s involvement in the teacher action research process. In the extensive section on data sources for teacher AR, Pine (2009) doesn’t address the most basic underlying issue of data collection, i.e. that the teacher research needs consent and/or permission to utilize any data related to students.

When teacher inquiry does hold teachers accountable to typical human participant protocols, there are still challenges. For example, Cochran-Smith and Lytle call attention to the “ethics critique” of practitioner research (2009, p.46) which includes the dangers of coercion given the dual roles of the classroom teacher as teacher-researcher. As part of these dual roles, a teacher researcher also grades students’ work and controls other classroom benefits and rewards. While an intentional and transparent addition of student assent and consent to traditional informed consent protocols is a beginning to including children in teacher AR, in covenantal or conventional terms, we must still grapple with the dangers of teacher power and hence potential coercion, real or perceived. In communities and schools with high populations of traditionally marginalized students, their families and school boards are justifiably suspicious of research done on their children by outsiders. Even an insider teacher, i.e. an insider to her or his classroom, may be an outsider to the local community of the school.

Teachers who are engaging in action research as part of a university program requirement, have another layer of potential coercion and may have to satisfy two institutional review board processes, those of the university and the local school board. One of the ways that teacher research has dealt with this tension, is noting that the teacher is researching something about his

or her own practices, so the subject of the teacher inquiry, is the teacher him or herself. While the teacher still needs parental consent (in the traditional meaning of parental consent), the teacher is able to claim that the focus of first person action research is his or her own practices, i.e. the self, as opposed to research on the students. Usually with parent informed consent, data from children’s work samples, tests, and other school or classroom evaluations or assessment, is used by the teacher to determine how effective or not changes in his/her practices are. The shift of the focus of the insider research from the students as subjects to the teacher as subject, may make it easier for an institutional review board to approve the teacher research, since it seems to minimize the possibility to exploit data on/about children. However, it still leaves another tension and critique of teacher or practitioner research. That is, students are often positioned as objects of teacher’s study rather than collaborative partners or allies (Groundwater-Smith and Downes, 1999; Kelly, 1993). What are the processes that a teacher and her or his students can use to collaboratively develop a teacher research question that focuses on the teacher’s practices while meaningfully including students as partners in the action research? These are just a few dilemmas for our consideration as we build a covenantal framework for ethical reflection in teacher or practitioner inquiry.

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## Community Covenantal Ethics: Case Studies in Community-Based Research

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Covenantal ethics has been defined by Hilsen as, “the unconditional responsibility and the ethical demand to act in the best interest of our fellow human beings” (2006, p. 27). She operationalizes this approach to ethics in three specific practices—the acknowledgement of human interdependency, the cogeneration of knowledge, and the development of fairer power relations—paralleling the basic values of action research and creating a system that addresses concerns regarding power and reciprocity.

In community-based forms of action research, the challenge is to frame this covenant within the context of relationships of reciprocal responsibility, shared decision making, and power sharing—to create what I’ll call a community covenant. Drawing upon Reason and Bradbury’s definition of action research as “a participatory, democratic process”, we see that the key to creating an ethics grounded in this notion of the community covenant lies in our ability to genuinely create opportunities for participatory democracy to guide our practice. Together with the other basic principles of action research in our systematic framework for ethical reflection, this focus on democratic practice allows us to evaluate ethical dilemmas that we might encounter as community-based action researchers.

The following case studies are intended to raise critical questions regarding the ethical implications of our work in community-based action research projects at each stage of the research process. These case studies draw upon both published and personal examples of ethical concerns encountered during the action research process. Details have been changed where appropriate to insure that the identity of those involved is not revealed and the situations themselves have been adapted to offer more open-ended examples to foster reflection and discussion. Working from the concept of community covenantal ethics and the principles we’ve identified, how would you go about addressing the ethical issues involved in each of the following case studies?

### *A. All stakeholders are equal...But some stakeholders are more equal than others (with apologies to George Orwell):*

In an effort to address the problem of AID/HIV transmission you have established a research project designed to bring all the stakeholders to the table. This includes local physicians and other health care providers, community leaders, sex workers and union officials representing local miners who have high rates of AIDS/HIV infection and who often transmit the virus to their wives and other sex partners. In order to make clear the importance of this effort and to show respect to the participants in the process, you arrange to hold the meetings at a regional conference center with state-of-the art facilities. Unfortunately, when you have your first meeting, few of the union members and none of the sex workers you have contacted attend, despite your work to provide stipends to cover travel costs and other expenses. In the interests of moving forward, you decide to go ahead with the meeting, in hopes of increasing participation next time.<sup>1</sup>

### *B. Follow the Money:*

Recent requests for proposals from the National Institutes of Health focus on finding solutions to the problem of childhood obesity. You are working with a local non-profit organization whose mission is to promote girls’ health and wellness. Childhood obesity is a serious problem in the largely low-income, minority communities in which you are working and a large NIH grant would allow you and your

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community partners to continue to support your research team, made up of residents of these neighborhoods. Problem is...no one there sees this as the problem. In a survey of local residents they identified street violence, teenage pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases as the primary health issues facing their community. But you have been unable to identify grant opportunities to address these issues that would provide the kind of funding...and prestige...of a large NIH grant. And did we mention the fact that you're up for tenure and your institution, let's say, looks favorably on faculty who are able to land large grants? So, what do you do?

*C. When good projects go bad:*

When it came time to write up the results of your initial research project at a local women's prison education program, you wanted to be sure to give credit where credit was due. The Head of School of the program had worked closely with you and the teachers to establish an innovative and effective program and you wanted to include their voices as co-authors of the publication you were working on. They agreed and the work was published in a prominent journal in your field. Unfortunately, as the partnership continued, you began to notice tensions developing between the Head of School and her staff. You tried to intervene by bringing in colleagues with expertise in the areas of curriculum development and special education and to provide material resources through grant writing. You made a point of spending time with the teachers in their classrooms to get to know them and the students. But the situation continued to deteriorate until one day you received a call from one of the staff saying that the Head of School had attempted to physically intimidate her and she wanted you to intervene. Your attempts to do so resulted in you being told to leave and never come back. Calls to the local authorities in charge of the program were not returned. Do you go public with a call to the local paper despite the fact that this might lead the program to lose its funding? Do you publish an article exploring the challenges of community-based research knowing that given your earlier publication that your then co-author could be identified as the current culprit? Do you go back in time and make sure that you insure the confidentiality of your co-researchers?

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<sup>i</sup> This case is very loosely based on two excellent sources: Catherine Campbell's book "Letting them Die": Why HIV/AIDS prevention programmes fail and Susan Boser's article, "Ethics and power in community-campus partnerships for research" (*Action Research*, 4(1), 9-22).

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