COVENANTAL ETHICS AND ACTION RESEARCH

Exploring a Common Foundation for Social Research

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Action research takes many forms, from community-based researchers helping poor women in Tanzania to develop income-generating strategies (Swartz, Ndedya, & Masaigah, 2001), to teachers working to form closer bonds with at-risk students (Meyer, Hamilton, Kroeger, Stewart, & Brydon-Miller, 2004), to indigenous communities in Guatemala working together to address the impact of state-sponsored violence (Lykes, 2001), to senior employees and members of management in a Norwegian industrial setting working together to address the concerns of older workers (Hilsen, 2006). But despite distinct differences in terms of location, age, and educational attainment of participants, and the issues facing them, each of these examples illustrates a central aspect of action research: It is an inherently and explicitly values-imbuend practice. Rather than espouse the doctrine of value neutrality and objectivity demanded in conventional, positivist-inspired research, action research is defined by its unapologetic ethical and political engagement and its commitment to working with community partners to achieve positive social change. This moral
positioning of our research practice demands a reexamination of the ways in which we understand and enact research ethics, a reconceptualization that not only shapes the practice of action research but also offers a new perspective on the question of ethics in all forms of social research.

In this chapter, I argue for a fundamental reconsideration of the basic terms by which we understand and evaluate research ethics, suggesting that rather than approach the determination of ethics using the current contractual discourse that regards research as commodity and ethics as a legalistic exchange, we adopt a covenantal ethics founded on the establishment of caring relationships among community research partners and a shared commitment to social justice.

I begin by outlining the fundamental value system that undergirds the practice of action research. This articulation of an embedded ethical position leads to a discussion of the notion of immanent versus imposed ethics as a strategy for distinguishing action research from more conventional research methods. Acknowledging this tension and building on the participatory and socially engaged nature of action research, I then introduce the concept of covenantal ethics—that is, an ethical stance enacted through relationship and commitment to working for the good of others that is an inherent component of action research—and contrast this with the system of contractual ethics, which typifies other research methods and is exemplified by current systems of human subjects review in which the terms of interactions are externally defined and monitored.

This shift to a system of covenantal ethics reflects many of the same concerns raised in discussions of feminist ethics as well as guidelines developed to inform researchers working in indigenous and minority communities and drives a reconfiguration of major components of the research process from the initial definition of the research question to decisions regarding the distribution of research results.

After considering some of the key shifts in practice precipitated by this reframing of our basic notions of research ethics, I conclude with a brief discussion of the ways in which covenantal ethics might inform the development of new strategies for teaching and mentoring ethical research, the establishment and maintenance of community partnerships, and the creation of a more equitable and sustainable agenda for social research in the future.

♦ Comparing the Core Values of Action Research and Conventional Research Models

The core values of action research have been defined as “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, p. 15). Reflecting a similar understanding of the basic ethical stance of action research, Reason and Bradbury (2001) described it as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes” (p. 1). And Greenwood and Levin (1998) noted that action research “promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders” (p. 4) and suggested that it “aims to increase the ability of the involved community or organization members to control their own destinies more effectively and to keep their capacity to do so” (p. 6).

R. Tandon (2005), whose work across India and throughout Asia has provided a model of effective community-based research for over a quarter century, reflected a similar moral framework for defining what he termed participatory research,
This contrasts sharply with more conventional approaches to research in which the role of the researcher is that of the objective and disinterested observer of a tightly defined and circumscribed set of actions on the part of a group of naive subjects with no expectation that the research will contribute in any direct way to addressing specific concerns of the participants or their communities. This general framework, reflecting the biomedical model of research, functions reasonably well in the settings for which it was originally developed—for example, in the systematic assessment of the risks and benefits of new drug therapies. The problem arises when this same model is generalized as the only scientifically supportable approach to all research with human subjects.

While this assumption of an exclusive claim to all credible processes of knowledge generation may be more explicitly stated in quantitative research, it has also permeated much of qualitative research. As Moss (1992) suggested in describing the role of the ethnographer, the goal “is to interfere as little as possible with the daily routines in the community” (p. 158). And rather than respect for the knowledge and experience of community participants, the attitude of researchers can be downright dismissive. “But if our ‘subjects’ happen to be wrong or confused or resistant in what they are thinking, then adding their voices to our research may contribute little of importance to the knowledge developing in the field” (MacDonald, 1998, p. 114). Of course, many qualitative researchers do articulate research methods that honor the voices of participants and that raise critical social issues (Brabec, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001), positions consistent with those defined within a system of covenantal ethics and the more engaged forms of scholarship that such an ethical stance implies.

These more engaged forms of research notwithstanding, the overall dominance of the biomedical model with its assumptions regarding the necessity of objectivity,
distance, and value neutrality has also been reflected in the development of policies and procedures of institutional review boards. Beginning with this understanding of research as without an internal moral compass and reacting to examples of horrific research, such as the medical experiments of Nazi doctors (Lifton, 1986/2000) or the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (Jones, 1993; Thomas & Quinn, 1991), documents such as the Helsinki Declaration on an international level (Human & Fluss, 2001) and the Belmont Report in the United States (Sales & Folkman, 2000) attempt to impose a set of ethical requirements on a practice that is otherwise regarded as unequipped to generate any kind of inherent moral framework. It is from efforts such as these that the current human subjects review processes with their catalog of requirements and ever-lengthening compliance documents are created in an attempt to instill ethical values on otherwise amoral research practice.

**Contrasting Contractual and Covenantal Ethics**

The outcome of this process has been the development of the legalistic, contractual system of practitioner credentialing and project oversight currently reflected in the human subjects review processes in place at most universities and required of most granting organizations. The problem is not in the existence of such systems nor in the individuals who serve on these boards, the vast majority of whom are highly trained professionals dedicated to performing what is most often a thankless task, but it is instead in the all too common belief that simple adherence to the specifications of such documents ensures that the resulting research will be ethical. Rather than consider the broader ethical and moral implications of research, such systems narrow our focus to a minute examination of the precise language of consent forms and a somewhat perverse fascination with whether or not these forms are secured under lock and key for a specified time period. The broader questions of how power relationships frame the discourse of validity in social research, of what real contributions are made to the overall welfare of the community, and of who owns research results and how this information is made available to the public are largely deemed to be outside the realm of the review board's charge and, as a result, too often escape attention altogether. Such concerns place the entire research enterprise more starkly within the broader economic and political systems which favor an individualistic, entrepreneurial relationship to research that emphasizes grantsmanship, the patenting of specific products and processes, and a capitalistic approach to knowledge generation quite at odds with the collaborative, egalitarian, social change focus of action research. Placed within this broader economic context, even the seemingly altruistic efforts to bring new, more effective drug therapies to the market are understood as driven by the economic interests of large pharmaceutical companies and the importance of reenvisioning a research ethics truly designed to support the common good rather than common greed becomes all the more apparent.

It is also the case that, based on this unquestioning belief in the importance of objectivity and distance, the very aspects of action research that make it most meaningful and most effective in achieving its goal of positive social change—the relationships among the research participants and the deep and sustained commitment to working together to address important problems—are instead viewed with suspicion and seen as liabilities (liability in a literal sense, given the concern over litigation that governs much of the deliberation of review bodies) rather than as vital mechanisms that strengthen our ability to understand and address important social issues in ethically defensible ways.
In this way, the long-term commitment of action researchers to working with community partners is redefined as coercion and deemed an ethical problem rather than recognized as a powerful form of moral engagement.

If conventional research methods and existing systems of human subjects review dictate a contractual definition of research ethics, action research can best be understood by adopting a model of covenantal ethics, a "the unconditional responsibility and the ethical demand to act in the best interest of our fellow human beings" (Hilsen, 2006, p. 27). Hilsen based her discussion of covenantal ethics on the work of William F. May (1980, 1984, 2000) and her broader investigation of the ethical demands of action research on the contributions of the Danish philosopher Knud Ejler Legstrup (1956/2000). She operationalized 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. The development of trust, both in the sense of developing trusting relationships among research participants as well as helping our community partners develop an ability to "trust in their own powers of action and decision" (Hilsen, 2006, p. 28) is a fundamental imperative of such covenantal ethics. Hilsen went on to suggest that "action research's commitment to promoting social justice makes it even more of an ethical demand to take responsibility for the social consequences of the research and make it explicit both in our practice and our communications about that practice" (p. 32).

This notion of covenantal ethics and the specific practices of action research are mirrored in the challenges to conventional research raised by feminist scholars. The commitment to grounding our understanding of ethics within the context of human relationships as suggested by covenantal ethics is captured in Meara and Day's (2000) discussion of feminist virtue ethics and in particular in "the other-regarding virtue of respectfulness" (p. 260; see also MacIntyre, 1984; May, 1984). Kitchener (2000) likewise reflected a recognition of the importance of respectfulness and included in her discussion of feminist virtues trustworthiness, the willingness to take responsibility, and caring and compassion, all of which resonate with the values underlying covenantal ethics and action research (see also Noddings, 1999).

The call to move from observation to action likewise is reflected in feminist ethics. "Feminist ethics go beyond moral awareness of particulars, ethical principles, and knowledge of the good to advocate for action to achieve social justice" (Brabeck & Ting, 2000, p. 12). As Kirsch (1999) suggested,

Researchers must begin to collaborate with participants in the development of research questions, the design of research studies, and the interpretation of data if they want to ensure that feminist research contributes toward enhancing—and not interfering with—the lives of others. Moreover, researchers need to find ways to invite participants to study their own communities and to represent their own voices, values, and lives in public and academic discourse. (p. x)

Feminist action researchers have long advocated such a rapprochement, insisting that "action research and feminism are mutually implicated because action research involves collaboration among all the legitimate stakeholders, the valuation of all knowledge, and the enhancement of fairness, justice, healthfulness, and sustainability—all values that underlie feminism" (Greenwood, 2004, p. 158; see also Brydon-Miller, Maguire, & McIntyre, 2004; Maguire, 1987).

This emphasis on understanding our identity as researchers from the perspective of our relationships with our community partners and on locating our research
practice within the context of a shared commitment to social change has been central to explorations of research ethics from the perspective of indigenous and minority communities as well (see, e.g., Cram, Chapter 20, and Chilisa, Chapter 26, this volume, for insightful examinations of this issue). Building on culturally grounded systems of ethics, many of these discussions reflect similar concerns regarding existing frameworks to those raised here, and the ethical systems they offer as solutions often closely parallel the basic tenets of action research. As Hermes (1999) has noted in describing the development of a First Nations’ methodology,

A well-articulated “ethic” that legitimates community-generated research questions and culturally appropriate research behaviors and holds researchers accountable to these standards would displace the current system of research projects that are accountable only to institutions of higher education or funding sources. (p. 87)

Covenantal ethics, with its focus on relationships, respect, and responsibility thus provides a broad framework that addresses many of the issues raised by feminist, minority, and indigenous scholars. Having outlined this new framework for understanding the basic nature of research ethics, how these distinctions between immanent and imposed, covenantal and contractual ethics inform the ways in which specific issues facing researchers might be understood? This reconfiguration of our understanding of research ethics has profound implications for the entire research process, from the generation of the research question to the development and distribution of results. In the following discussion, I consider the ways in which this shift might affect practice by focusing on two key points in the research process—the negotiation of informed consent and the question of ownership and control of research results.

Beyond Autonomy and Informed Consent: Negotiating Participation and Defining the Terms of Engagement in the Research Process

A key ethical principle enshrined in current human subjects review processes is the concept of autonomy, reflected within the review process by informed consent procedures. As noted in the Belmont Report (Sales & Folkman, 2000),

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. This opportunity is provided when adequate standards for informed consent are satisfied. (p. 201)

Reflecting the system of contractual ethics, informed consent includes a clear statement of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of the research project, as well as the obligations and commitments of both the participants and the researchers. The resulting explicit agreement is in most cases documented through the use of a written consent form, which should be clear, fair, and not exploitative. (Fischman, 2000, p. 35)

This description suggests a straightforward and transparent agreement between the researcher and the research subject. However, one troubling aspect of the existing model of human subjects review is the potential for the process itself, and in particular the ritual of the consent form, to contribute to what Newkirk (1996) has referred to as an “act of seduction” (p. 3) on the part of researchers toward their research subjects. As he described the process, “The measures devised to protect
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suggests a straightforward agreement between the research subject. The key aspect of the subjects review is the process itself, and in the consent form, to Newkirk (1996) has "seduction" (p. 3) toward their he described the revised to protect those being studied often aid the researcher in the seduction... Typically these forms provide a very brief and often vague description of the project, and then provide a number of assurances" (p. 4); the form helps to reinforce the impression of the researcher's solicitude" (p. 4) and "heighten the sense of importance of the study about to be undertaken" (p. 5). After being lulled into a false sense of security and encouraged by the expressed interest and engagement of the researcher to reveal their most deeply felt beliefs and most cherished experiences, subjects are then at the mercy of the researcher, whose selections, interpretations, and judgments of those revelations—which may or may not reflect well on the subjects or truly capture their understandings of events—are received as the voice of superior intellect and perception. This is the part of the process Newkirk referred to as "the betrayal."

In challenging this mode of operation, Newkirk makes three important recommendations: first, that the consent process acknowledge the potential for negative interpretations to be made public; second, that subjects themselves have an opportunity to contribute to the process of interpretation; and third, where concerns exist, that researchers have the obligation to contribute whatever expertise and resources they have toward ameliorating the problem. In this, Newkirk actually outlines a process very close to that of action research and, in emphasizing the relational nature of all social research, suggests solutions that reflect the same basic values as those of covenantal ethics. His final warning is relevant to all of us conducting research with human subjects: "Ultimately, those of us in the university must question the automatic belief in our own benevolence, the automatic equation between our own academic success and ethical behavior. For the stakes are high" (Newkirk, 1996, p. 14).

Boser (2006) raised a concern with the informed consent process related specifically to the practice of action research, but with broader implications for the human subjects review process in general. Noting that action research is a cyclical process involving ongoing negotiation and dialogue among all participants, she observed that "participants cannot give informed consent to research activities in advance, because the full scope of the process of the research is not determined in advance by one individual" (p. 12). She suggested that a more effective means of ensuring that such research is ethical is to develop iterative processes of reconfirming consent that are embedded within the context of the research itself. Furthermore, she noted that differences in power among participants and between researchers and their community partners must be considered and recommended that researchers remain mindful of the potential barriers to participation and open to alternative forms of gathering and disseminating input from community partners. "Integrating consideration of ethical issues into the research cycle, and guiding this consideration through examination of the potential for risk and asymmetrical patterns of power, will promote democratic practices and support realization of the action research potential" (p. 19).

One strategy for reconfiguring the informed consent process that is both more consistent with the notion of covenantal ethics and mindful of the power dynamics noted by Boser is to develop mechanisms for the mutual negotiation of informed consent (Khanlou & Peter, 2005). Such a strategy is articulated by Fisher and Ball (2002) in their description of the tribal participatory research model, in which ongoing review of the research process is explicitly placed under the control of community-based oversight committees. Recounting the devastating impact of governmental programs of relocation of American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) families from their communities and the policy of forcing children to attend boarding schools where AIAN children were forbidden to speak their own languages or practice their own
religion, these authors make clear the deep suspicion with which native communities might regard researchers coming in from outside. In many ways, this legacy of exploitation of an oppressed community and the resulting distrust of researchers among AIAN communities parallels the response of African Americans to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (Thomas & Quinn, 1991), another infamous example of research carried out as a thinly veiled mechanism for maintaining oppression.

Challenging this, the Family Wellness Project described by Fisher and Ball (2002) includes clear tribal oversight, the training and employment of native researchers, and culturally grounded intervention and assessment strategies, including mechanisms such as videos and regular meetings designed to disseminate the results of the research within the communities themselves. As the authors noted, this emphasis on community oversight “is germane to all communities that experience oppression and discrimination” (p. 239).

One central aspect of action research and of covenantal ethics reflected in these studies is the centrality of human relationships and the commitment to working alongside our community partners to bring about positive social change. This should translate more concretely into the creation of community-based review boards, as outlined by Fisher and Ball, whose charge is to ensure that all research being conducted within the community has direct benefits to its members. At the same time, it is vital that researchers recognize that regarding any community as an unproblematically homogeneous entity fails to acknowledge the hierarchies of power that exist within any group of humans, privileging some while oppressing others. One of the challenges to shifting the control of review processes to communities, whether you define this as communities of practice or as local communities in a geographic sense, is to develop mechanisms for ensuring broad participation by all factions within a community while respecting the community's own culture and traditions regarding leadership and decision making.

In addition to raising concerns regarding informed consent, the shift from contractual to covenantal ethics can be examined through a second critical aspect of the research process, the determination of ownership, control, and dissemination of the results. In most research settings, the disconnect between the original subjects of research and the final analysis of the information they provide to researchers as well as the lack of understanding on the part of those being studied as to where and how the research will be used contribute to the potential for researchers to take advantage of the situation by furthering their own agendas while overlooking the interests of those taking part in their studies.

Beyond Anonymity: Negotiating Ownership and Defining the Terms of Distribution of Research Results

“Nothing about us without us.” This motto of the disability rights movement (Charlton, 2000; see also Brydon-Miller, 1993) captures the dilemma of representation and control that marks the question of ownership of research data and decisions regarding where and how research results are distributed. In conventional models of research, these responsibilities are clearly defined as being under the control of the academic researcher. “Respect for privacy and confidentiality is at the heart of the conduct of ethical research with human participants” (Folkman, 2000, p. 49). The common assumption in conducting research with human subjects is that clear mechanisms must be put in place to safeguard the identity of participants in the research process and that this protection is clearly articulated in the informed consent and ensured through strict attention to
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led to the development of a variety of initiatives intended to improve the lives of local community members and to support the interests of the indigenous population of Guatemala at broader national and international levels as well.

The development and dissemination of materials that more effectively communicate the results of collaborative research efforts is an especially important aspect of action research. Kelly, Mock, and Tandon (2001), for example, in their collaborative investigation with African American community leaders in the city of Chicago, developed a quote book, a training manual, videos, and a graphic representation of their findings to help illustrate their findings regarding strategies for leadership development within the community. As the authors noted, their strategy of including community participants in all stages of the research process marks a shift in power that “clearly validates the indigenous knowledge and experience of community members. However, this shift must be accompanied by providing community members with skills, competencies, and knowledge necessary to design effective programs and policies” (S. D. Tandon, Kelly, & Mock, 2001, p. 215).

This research, as well as the photovoice projects described above, are fine exemplars of covenantal ethics in that they demonstrate respect for the community members who serve as coresearchers, emphasize the critical role of participation and community control, and directly challenge social injustice. It is also important to note that such projects typically take place over an extended period of time, providing an opportunity for the development of genuinely trusting, respectful relationships among all research participants, another key element of covenantal ethics.

The work of the Highlander Research and Education Center, which has for over 75 years been addressing issues of community ownership and control of knowledge, provides another excellent exemplar of the way in which the ideals of covenantal ethics can be put into practice (Horton, 1993; Lewis, 2001). Founded in 1932, Highlander has led the way in the development of community-based examinations of environmental issues, union reform, civil rights training and advocacy, and a variety of other issues. Unaffiliated with any university, Highlander has maintained its independence and hence its ability to address the concerns of community partners without having to bow to the economic and political pressures that face those of us working within more traditional academic settings.

Merrifield’s (1993) description of a series of Highlander-sponsored studies of environmental and occupational health illustrates how community researchers can use sophisticated data-gathering techniques, generally believed to be the sole territory of highly trained and credentialed scientists, to address environmental degradation resulting from industrial pollution and other serious health-related problems. These studies as well as other research in areas as diverse as community health (Krieger, Allen, Roberts, Ross, & Takaro, 2005; Schulz, et al., 1998), land ownership and tax reform movements (Horton, 1993), and public policy regarding grandparents providing foster care (Minkler, 1999) demonstrate that action research and covenantal ethics can apply to quantitative studies just as readily as they do to qualitative research.

Finally, any discussion of the question of intellectual property and the development of new, more open systems of knowledge distribution must, of course, acknowledge the immense potential impact of new technologies.² The potential impact of social networking tools, auto-publishing, and open access sources has already begun to challenge the traditional bastions of information gathering and distribution, but it remains to be seen whether these new outlets will remain open and active and continue to grow in influence or whether the hierarchical system that has heretofore controlled access to research will find new ways to reassert its control.
Covenantal Ethics as a Common Foundation for Social Research

With its focus on the development of caring and committed relationships, on respect for people's knowledge and experience, and on working with community partners to achieve positive social change, covenantal ethics clearly provides a framework more consistent with the values underlying action research than the existing contractual model. But shouldn't all social research share these aspirations? This is not to say that other forms of both quantitative and qualitative research do not make important contributions to our understanding of social phenomena or that action research is the only means of achieving these goals. Research that expands our understanding of the world in any way should be valued, and it is this very diversity of ways of generating knowledge that allows us to deepen our understanding of social issues and to develop effective strategies for addressing common concerns. That said, 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.

This is also not to suggest that the existing system of contractual ethics be entirely dismantled. Rather, contractual ethics should be understood as serving the broader demands of covenantal ethics under certain well-defined circumstances. As noted earlier, this system was initially developed to ensure that participants in controlled biomedical studies were fully informed about possible side effects, and in this regard it continues to work fairly well. The shift to covenantal ethics would, however, reframe this review process in fundamental ways. For example, as suggested in the earlier discussion of informed consent, the initial question of which studies should be undertaken, who would participate, and how the research would be conducted would be developed in consultation with community partners. Review processes would also include questions regarding dissemination of research results, requiring scholars to articulate specific plans for making the knowledge gained through their research accessible to members of the public.

If such a reframing of the review process and, indeed, of our fundamental understanding of research ethics sounds overly idealistic and naive, what are the practical considerations of such a shift? Certainly, building trusting relationships with community partners takes time, especially when working in communities in which trust has been betrayed by researchers in the past. It also demands that researchers develop a new set of skills focused on effective communication, consensus building, mediation, and negotiation. And it requires that universities, academic publishing concerns, and funding agencies embrace this new ethical framework as well and respond by reconfiguring systems to reflect this new set of expectations (Brydon-Miller & Tolman, 2001). I conclude this discussion by beginning to examine some of the systemic changes that will be required to support this shift to covenantal ethics.

Anticipating the Broader Implications of the Shift to Covenantal Ethics

The shift to a system of covenantal ethics reframes our understanding of the research process in fundamental ways, not only affecting the nature of the individual research endeavor itself but also demanding changes in the systems of training, monitoring, and evaluating researchers; the development and maintenance of community
partnerships; and the very way we understand and value our practice as researchers.

The current emphasis in providing training in research ethics focuses on helping students negotiate the specific demands of human subjects review boards. As part of its bid to win national accreditation for its overall review process, the human subjects review board of my own institution recently instituted an online testing system developed by an outside corporation whose business it is to develop such licensing systems, emphasizing again the entrepreneurial nature of the entire system of academic research. Both faculty and students must demonstrate that they have successfully passed this test before their proposals to the review board will receive consideration. Like so much of current educational practice, it all seems to have come down to achieving a particular score on the test. At conferences and among students and faculty at my own institution, a great deal of the discussion I’ve heard seems to focus on how to finesse the system rather than on any substantive examination of the deeper ethical imperatives of human subjects research.

When I present the topic of research ethics to my own students, I begin by asking them to reflect on their personal value systems and how this might inform their research practice. We do this through the use of first-person action research projects (Chandler & Torbert, 2003; Torbert, 2001), in which the focus of the inquiry is on the researcher’s own practice. The dialogue that results from this process allows for a much more meaningful exploration of the issues of trust, commitment, and social change central to covenantal ethics. This same focus on the ongoing ethical challenges of engaged forms of research must be maintained throughout the student’s program and should be supported not only by coursework related to research ethics but also by establishing mentoring relationships and opportunities for institution-wide dialogue in which the ethical issues of research are revisited on a regular basis.

Rather than maintaining what is often an adversarial relationship between institutional review boards and faculty and student researchers, this shift to covenantal ethics includes working within the system to develop more effective mechanisms for ensuring that research involving human subjects reflects the values of caring and commitment in substantive ways. It would be naive to assume that simply invoking a system of covenantal ethics will resolve all ethical problems. Instead, a new form of review, one that recognizes the unique contributions and ethical challenges of multiple forms of research and that engages community partners as informed and empowered contributors to the process, must be developed. Here, Boser’s (2006) recommendations regarding iterative cycles of negotiation of the research process and Fisher and Ball’s (2002) discussion of local review boards provide important directions for more informed community involvement. Ongoing and inclusive opportunities for discussions of the ethical implications of community-based research held in venues familiar to community partners would help ensure that such research addresses critical social issues as these are defined by community members themselves. At the same time, it is imperative that rather than using the rhetoric of citizen participation to maintain existing systems of oppression (Arnstein, 1969), such dialogue reflect a critical awareness of issues of power and representation among all participants in the process so that the resulting research truly challenges inequality and fosters genuine social change.

Finally, moving away from a contractual definition of research ethics to a covenantal understanding of our deep and abiding responsibility to act in the interest of others shifts our current identification of research as commodity to a system in which all research, not simply action research, is regarded as a source of common good. The covenant includes ourselves, our universities, our funding sources, and our communities. And it extends beyond local interests.
to embrace the problems facing people around the globe, recognizing the most critical ethical imperative—that we dedicate ourselves to working together to address issues of community development, environmental sustainability, and social justice.

♦ Notes

1. I am indebted to my colleagues Anne Inga Hilsen, Annulla Linders, Helen Meyer, Beth Moore, and Bronwyn Williams as well as two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

2. Other authors, including Fromm, Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard, have used the phrase *immanent ethics* or some variation of this notion. My use of the term refers specifically to the area of research ethics and the notion that particular values might be a fundamental and defining aspect of research approaches such as action research.

3. Other terms that have been used include participatory research, participatory action research, and community-based research. Each reflects a distinct genesis, and there are distinctions among these practices in terms of their histories, disciplinary foundations, and so on. The most inclusive term, action research, is used here to indicate this range of participatory, socially engaged practices. For more detailed discussions of these various contributions, see Khanlou and Peter (2005), Reason and Bradbury (2001), and Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire (2003).

4. There is, of course, a set of values underlying this approach as well. The assumption that there is a scientific truth that can be uncovered and that it is through science that human problems will be solved and the valuing of expert knowledge over other forms of knowing, for example, all reflect a particular value system.

5. Institutional review boards are the standard mechanism for ensuring ethical oversight in the United States and many other countries. However, this system is not universal. Norway, for example, has instituted human subjects review processes through legislation (A. I. Hilsen, personal communication, April 12, 2008).

6. While this notion of covenantal ethics originates in the Judeo-Christian concept of the covenant between God and humankind, I use the term in a more secular sense to suggest a solemn and personally compelling commitment to act in the good of others.

7. It is clearly impossible given the constraints of space and the overall focus of this chapter to do justice to the many variants of feminist theory and their implications for framing our understanding of research ethics. Interested readers are encouraged to see Brabeck (2000) and Kirsch (1999) for more fully developed discussions of this topic.


9. For an interesting and well-informed discussion of the intersection of intellectual property issues, new technologies, and research ethics, see Carla Shaffer’s discussion in Greenwood, Brydon-Miller, and Shaffer (2006).

♦ References


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