

CSWE National Statement on Research Integrity in Social Work

Background and Acknowledgements

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) managed the development of this Statement and corresponding Action Plan for Research Integrity in Social Work with the crucial assistance of the social work education community. Over 50 social work deans, directors, faculty members, and doctoral students participated in a Symposium on the Responsible Conduct of Social Work Research at the 2006 Annual Program Meeting in Chicago. These participants provided guidance for the initial work for this project by outlining the pressing issues in social work research and the potential scope and purposes for this Statement. Those convened included representatives from baccalaureate and graduate programs of various sizes and institutional settings from all 10 CSWE regions. CSWE heavily relied on their analyses and recommendations for developing the subsequent Statement and Action Plan. We are grateful for their work and insight.

In June 2006, a workgroup of social work researchers who participated in the Chicago Symposium collaborated with CSWE to focus on the outcomes from the Symposium and to develop the Final Statement and Action Plan. This work group included Lee Badger (Fordham University), Phyllis Black (Marywood University), Loretta Brewer (Arkansas State University), James Clark (University of Kentucky), Elizabeth Essex (Governors State University), Sheldon R. Gelman (Yeshiva University), Kay Hoffman (University of Kentucky), Dorothy Idleburg (Mississippi Valley State University), Robert Prue (University of Kansas), and Nancy Shore (University of New England). The group's efforts led to this *National Statement on Research Integrity in Social Work* and an *Action Plan for Promoting Research Integrity in Social Work*. CSWE is very appreciative to these ten scholars for their indispensable contributions to this project and for sharing their time and expertise with CSWE.

Most research activity is designed, generated, and managed in college and university settings. As the organization that serves social work educators and students, CSWE recognizes “research” as an integral dimension of its mission. The newly formed CSWE Office of Social Work Education and Research is committed to promoting research integrity in social work and to providing social work programs, deans, directors, faculty, and students with support in their research endeavors. The purpose of this *National Statement* is to provide broad guidance and education to social work researchers and should not be construed as an outline of rules to be enforced by CSWE.

The Council on Social Work Education is also especially thankful to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC), which provided funding for this project.*†

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Introduction

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) presents this *National Statement on Research Integrity in Social Work* (hereafter “*National Statement*”) as a way of assisting social workers in identifying the challenges of conducting ethically-responsible research.

Research activities are essential for the continued growth and improvement of the profession. Social work practitioners have a professional duty to provide clients with effective services, while social work researchers have an obligation to assist them in meeting that fiduciary responsibility. Social workers practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities in a wide range of settings. According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics*, an “historic and defining feature of social work is the profession’s focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society” (1996, p. 1). Well-designed social work research can contribute significantly to the development and refinement of effective practice approaches at all levels and in all settings, as already evidenced by important contributions in the domains of mental health, substance misuse, gerontology, and child welfare.

In this *National Statement*, research is defined as a systematic process of investigation and analysis that develops and promulgates generalizable knowledge to inform professional practice and social policy. Throughout the research process—which typically includes the conceptualization of a research idea, development of a viable design, purposeful selection and recruitment of study participants, implementation of the study in the field, data entry, analysis, and interpretation, and, finally, dissemination of research findings—there are numerous ethical considerations to be addressed and decisions to be made. Along with the ethical tensions inherent in the research process itself, researchers face a growing and complex set of laws and ethical regulations that they need to understand and follow.

Responsible Conduct of Research

The many domains of inquiry and the diverse settings that concern social work researchers require pluralistic strategies. Social work scholarship requires multi-disciplinary approaches that span conceptual and methodological domains of great breadth. For example, the study of substance misuse in a community might require the researcher to have expertise in qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as to demonstrate proficiency in engaging community leaders and research participants. Other social work researchers engage in program evaluations, single-subject design, participatory action research, and secondary data analysis. Such research protocols make complex and varied ethical demands on the researchers.

Research should be conducted in accordance with the principles articulated in the *Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), *NASW Code of Ethics* (1996), the *CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (2001), and the other applicable organizational and governmental rules and regulations. Ethical research must account not only for design considerations, but also for process (e.g., gathering data, recruitment, informed consent, etc.) and outcome/impact of the

research project (e.g., dissemination—including authorship, impact on best practices, impact on community, and individual well-being, etc.).

To ensure the responsible conduct of research, social work researchers need to: (1) work to protect the people and communities whom they study; (2) ethically and effectively participate in mentoring relationships that are crucial to scientific activity; (3) manage apparent and implicit conflicts of interest and commitment; (4) collaborate ethically with researchers from other professions and disciplines; (5) ensure that research data issues are managed properly; (6) employ responsible publication and authorship practices; (7) responsibly conduct and contribute to the peer-review process; and (8) understand and prevent research misconduct (Office of Research Integrity, 2006). In the sections below we discuss each of these areas of concern and briefly discuss particular issues facing social work researchers.

1. Human Subjects and Communities

Social work researchers must strive not to harm the people or communities that they are studying. Research protocols should first ensure the protection of study participants, including consideration for the Basic Ethical Principles described in the *Belmont Report: Respect for persons* “incorporates at least two ethical convictions: first, that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and second, that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection” (p. 4). *Beneficence* assures that persons are “treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being” (p. 4–5). *Justice* requires that the “selection of research subjects needs to be scrutinized in order to determine whether some classes (e.g., patients receiving government assistance, vulnerable racial and ethnic minorities, and institutionalized persons) are being systematically selected simply because of their easy availability, their compromised position, or their manipulability, rather than for reasons directly related to the problem being studied” (p. 6) (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

Research involving vulnerable populations needs to assure that risk of harm is minimized and benefits from the research are equitably distributed. While designing protocols to protect vulnerable people and communities can be extremely challenging, total or arbitrary exclusion of vulnerable populations from research is detrimental to the people the profession serves and can sometimes constitute research misconduct. Social work research in developing countries poses additional and specialized ethical problems in human protection that deserve special consideration. Rather than avoiding these difficulties, researchers should work with their colleagues and the appropriate Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) to develop ways to ethically include vulnerable populations in research. Participation in research should be predicated on the potential participant's understanding of the project, including obtaining informed consent. Finally, social work researchers should keep in mind that students involved as research participants are to be afforded the same protections as any other population.

Before beginning any research investigation, researchers should receive all necessary approval from the organizational regulatory bodies. The organizational regulatory bodies, such as the researcher's Institutional Review Board, will provide another layer of protection for the participants and communities in research, by ensuring that pertinent laws and guidelines have been met by the protocol and that the research is ethical. Researchers should consult with colleagues and the Office of Research Integrity/IRB staffs in their institutions and universities if they have questions regarding regulatory bodies.

2. Mentor/Trainee Responsibility

Social work researchers have a responsibility to mentor trainees in a manner that enhances the professional development of the latter and advances the general progress of the profession. Mentoring junior researchers and trainees in social work research serves to instill the mentee with the ethics, techniques, and community of the profession (Vasgird & Hyman-Browne, n.d.). Social work's commitment to advancing the careers of traditionally underrepresented and marginalized groups indicates a special commitment to mentoring trainees who often experience isolation and exaggerated expectations in academic and research settings. Senior researchers and mentors have a special responsibility to act ethically toward junior researchers and trainees by avoiding implicit and explicit exploitation. Mentoring relationships are complex; collaborative agreements that are developed early in the working relationship and that clearly delineate the rights and responsibilities of all parties can be very helpful in ensuring fair and just outcomes.

3. Conflicts of Interest and Commitment

Social work researchers are encouraged to develop relationships with public and private institutions. However, social work researchers should scrutinize their research endeavors and seek to avoid and eliminate any improper conflicts of interest that might result from their activities. These can involve tangible conflicts, such as untoward financial gain, but may also involve other and intangible forms of improper personal enhancement or advancement. Despite institutional pressures to attract high levels of external funding and to lead multiple projects, social work researchers should judiciously commit only to those projects and positions which they can reasonably undertake. The number and complexity of contemporary researchers' roles makes this a challenging domain of responsible conduct.

4. Collaborative Science

Contemporary social work research is rarely an individual enterprise. Multidisciplinary and community-based research are often required, especially for significant research investigations. Social work researchers should engage in collaborative enterprises with other professions and disciplines to advance scientific knowledge. These efforts will require special attention and sensitivity to the ethos and cultures of those research partners. Social work researchers also should seek to clarify, and in many cases commit

to a written agreement, issues pertaining to data ownership, authorship, project roles, and financial management.

As the growth of translational science continues, social work researchers will increasingly collaborate with communities. It is important that researchers work hard to understand and reasonably respond to local needs and expectations as research projects are designed, implemented, and published. This is especially challenging as social work researchers often collaborate with community members who come from very different backgrounds and have goals that are divergent from the researchers.

5. Data Acquisition, Management, Sharing, and Ownership

The rapid development of exciting technologies for data acquisition, analysis, and sharing create complex ethical challenges for social work researchers. Researchers need to consult and understand the regulations and obligations involved as they conduct research. The federal government and most other sponsors stipulate what these obligations shall be when a researcher is awarded a grant or contract. Universities also have policies and regulations in this domain which create obligations for researchers who are, in effect, agents of these academic institutions. The best strategy is to discuss the particular approaches the researcher will take with sponsors and their academic colleagues early in the life of the research project. It is important that the entire research team understands these issues as well, as they often intersect with more mundane personnel issues, for example, changing jobs, or moving to a new institution.

6. Publication Practices and Responsible Authorship

An important part of social work research is the reporting of study results. Publication of research findings should include appropriate attribution of authorship. Authors and co-authors should be determined on the basis of the type and amount of work completed. There can be controversy over who should be included as an author, especially since being identified as an author or first author on a publication can have implications for tenure, funding, and other professional opportunities; beginning discussions of authorship earlier in the research process can reduce confusion. Many universities, departments, peer-reviewed journals, and professional organizations have specific policies outlining the criteria for who qualifies as an “author” for a publication (Eisner, Vasegird, & Hyman-Browne, n.d.).

Social work researchers must never fabricate data or publish data that are known to be fabricated or otherwise compromised in nature or engage in plagiarism. All ideas and phrasing not originating with the author or co-author should be appropriately acknowledged in publication of results. Researchers should respect ethical obligations, regulations, and laws pertaining to intellectual property, copyright, and patents. Complex developments in technologies and regulations regarding data acquisition, management, sharing, and ownership demand special consideration. The emergent quality of these areas requires social work researchers to regularly study pertinent issues, problems, and solutions as they develop.

7. Peer Review

Peer review is critical for the advancement of science. Journals and federal- and private-granting organizations are reliant upon reviewers to ensure the quality of their publications and awards. Social work researchers should participate in the peer-review process in a fair, constructive, and rigorous manner. Additionally, peer-review processes should be timely and protect the confidentiality of all participants. Social work researchers should identify all potential conflicts of interest and also strive to subordinate their personal preferences and biases to the higher purposes of advancing the profession, scientific activity, and the public welfare.

8. Research Misconduct

Consequences for engaging in research misconduct are varied but may include ineligibility for future grants, termination of positions, monetary penalties, or other penalties. Findings of research misconduct result in negative publicity for the researcher/research team and for the university. If the university is also implicated in misconduct (e.g., chronic nonresponsiveness of the IRB) sanctions may include the withdrawal of federal authorizations and funding for selected or for all federally-sponsored research. It is also important to note that local or state jurisdictions might impose criminal or civil penalties if such investigations reveal criminal misconduct or tortious behavior. Loss of personal integrity, moral authority, and community trust transcend the particular events associated with misconduct cases by destroying the relationships enjoyed by researchers and the wider community for years. In sum, research misconduct can be extraordinarily costly to all persons and organizations concerned. Consequences extend beyond issues of liability and damage to reputation, to include damage to: (1) relationships with the participating communities, (2) individuals involved in the work, and (3) professional integrity.

Undetected research misconduct can have even graver consequences, including the dissemination of practice technologies, programs, and social policies that have relied on unfounded or distorted scientific work. The result might be the waste of limited social resources, loss of life, or reduced personal well-being for clients and significant harm to the public welfare. Therefore, social work researchers have an obligation to work hard to prevent research misconduct, to report such misconduct when it occurs, and to support colleagues who attempt to do both despite the personal and professional risks involved.

A Call to the Profession for Greater Involvement in the Responsible Conduct of Research

In closing, we urge social work researchers to act with integrity not only to avoid trouble, but to do so in order to enhance the conduct of research. Social workers should join the work of the federal government and universities as the Office of Research Integrity and other bodies deliberate, design, and disseminate research regulations and policies. **It is especially important to add the pragmatic voices of social work researchers who typically work outside of the traditional biomedical and laboratory sites that all too often are the contexts envisioned by such policy makers.** Regulations should enhance the responsible conduct of research and should

not make scientific work impossible. Social work researchers can provide crucial insights to such deliberations and should do so whenever possible in order to protect the interests of the profession, our clients, and the public.

Social work professors should join their local IRBs as full members and participate in the important work of protecting human subjects. Social work practitioners can also join IRBs as community volunteers and representatives—important positions that IRBs are required to fill on each committee. We also call on social work ethicists and researchers to advance the conceptual and empirical scholarship that can enrich the overall knowledge base important to the conduct of responsible research.

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