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Ethical guidelines for program and research implementation with socially marginalized youth within virtual spaces

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Abstract

Youth-centered practitioners and researchers often use the virtual space to recruit, collect data, and implement programs for hard-to-reach and socially marginalized children, youth, and young adult populations. This approach has increased research and program development with understudied populations that are less accessible through traditional in-person recruitment strategies. Although the online space has been widely used for nearly three decades, there are still no universal guidelines for youth-centered practitioners and researchers who engage in such methods. Guided by The 2024 Standards of Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals and case study examples, this article highlights three critical ethical problems and best practices for mutually constitutive engagement with socially marginalized youth in the virtual space. Although each youth-centered program or study is designed with its particular participants and their unique needs in mind, these best practices are widely applicable.

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For nearly 30 years, children, teens, and young adults have increasingly used virtual spaces for community-building and connection (Craig et al., 2023; Gooding et al., McDaniel, 2024; Poquiz et al., 2024; Wilf et al., 2023). These spaces include social media platforms, chat rooms, and virtual gaming. For Millennials, Gen Z, and Gen Alpha, this rich and complex ecosystem is an important yet under-explored socializing context. These virtual environments also shape *and* are shaped by the youth who use them.

Building on theories of human development in the digital age (Granic et al., 2020; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015; Nesi et al., 2018b; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2010), Navarro and Tudge (2022) introduced the neo-ecological theory. This theory reconceptualizes Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development to include the unique ways technology and virtual spaces influence behavior and development. The neo-ecological theory adds new elements like the virtual microsystem, digital culture, and sub-cultures within the macrosystem. Of importance, cultural spaces involve symbols, social norms, and interactions generated by and shared among individuals (Navarro & Trudge, 2022; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2010).

Youth, as active participants, co-create and engage in these cultural spaces. Through social media (e.g., X formerly Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat) or dating and friendship apps (e.g., Bumble, Tinder, Hinge), youth within the United States and across the globe meet, connect, share their cultural experiences, and build communities. Despite growing research on virtual environments and youth development, there is still limited guidance on ethical engagement in virtual spaces for practitioners and researchers working with children and youth.

Although more programs and studies now include youth from socially marginalized communities (e.g., BIPoC, SOGIE, immigrant, undocumented) in virtual spaces (Charmaraman et al., 2022; McInroy, 2016; Thomas et al., 2023), there is still a lack of clear development of ethical guidelines, protocols, or best practices for working with these communities online. This gap can result in ethical, legal, and social issues, potentially harming the everyday lives of marginalized youth and their communities. Without guidelines, research that reflects and supports their experiences may decline, limiting the development of culturally responsive youth-centered programs.

We argue, given the long history of exploitation in U.S. research and social services of youth in socially marginalized communities–such as the abduction and selling of youth from poor communities through the adoption and foster care system or Indigenous youth to Native American boarding schools–there is a pressing need for child and youth practitioners and researchers to "do no harm" (ACYCP Ethical Principle II.a.)

Ethical concerns and solutions for engaging youth-centered research or programs in virtual spaces with socially marginalized youth

Expanding research and programs for youth from socially marginalized backgrounds in virtual spaces introduces significant ethical issues that child and youth service practitioners and researchers must be aware of and navigate with care and compassion. This section discusses three key ethical concerns, offers culturally responsive solutions to address each one, and links the solutions to the current ACYCP ethical principles.

Problem 1: Limited IRB Policies about Virtual Recruitment

One ethical concern is the lack of clear and consistent recruitment policies for the virtual environment. While some institutional review boards (IRBs) have developed specific guidelines (e.g., Cornell University, University of Florida, University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of California, Santa Barbara), many still lack comprehensive protocols. This gap can lead to unsafe and unethical practices, such as violating youths' privacy or failing to ensure proper informed consent, which can cause harm (Gelinas et al., 2017).

To reduce these risks, IRBs need clear and specific guidelines to ensure ethical virtual engagement with socially marginalized youth. These guidelines should include detailed procedures for obtaining informed consent and assent, protecting participant privacy, implementing virtual studies or programs, and reducing risks associated

with identity-based stressors. For example, IRBs could make additional Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) modules or courses, like Consent and Cultural Competence or Social Media Research, mandatory for all researchers and practitioners and require biennial guideline reviews to protocols to reflect the quickly evolving digital landscape.

Case Study 1: Ethical Recruitment on Facebook

A research team plans to recruit participants from a public Facebook group focused on adoptees who were in the foster care system. The study aims to understand the lived experiences of youth in foster care. Since the group is open to the public, anyone can read posts, send messages, or join the form, meaning not all members may be adoptees or former foster care children.

Social workers on the research team raise ethical concerns about the implications of contacting group members. They note that the group discusses potentially traumatic experiences and that its members may feel exploited, stigmatized, or alienated by the research process.

To address these concerns, the team has developed a two-part recruitment strategy:

1. *In-Person Outreach*: Researchers will attend an open foster care support group meeting to share study details. They will post flyers, speak with members, and offer participation opportunities while avoiding coercive language or pressure.
2. *Ethical Virtual Outreach*: If in-person engagement is not possible or does not yield enough participants, researchers will use online recruitment methods. Reaching out to group members on Facebook allows them to remain anonymous and provides them the choice to ignore or decline participation.

This approach balances ethical considerations with the need to engage participants respectfully and sensitively.

Clear IRB policies and protocols for the recruitment of youth from socially marginalized backgrounds would aid youth-centered practitioners and researchers in adhering to the following ACYCP principles:

- I.a. Demonstrates high standards of integrity and professional conduct: By establishing explicit guidelines, researchers can uphold high ethical standards and avoid practices that could harm participants.
- I.b. Develops knowledge and skills necessary for engaging children, youth, and families, including trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive practices: Comprehensive guidelines could include mandatory training on trauma-informed care and cultural responsiveness, ensuring researchers are well-prepared to engage with socially marginalized youth and their communities.
- I.d. Recognizes sources of power and privilege and engages in anti-oppressive practices: Context-specific protocols would help researchers recognize and mitigate power imbalances, promoting anti-oppressive engagement with youth.
- II.b. Maintains privacy and confidentiality within in-person and virtual settings: Clear guidelines would ensure that participant privacy and confidentiality are rigorously protected.

Problem 2: Limited IRB Policies about Practitioner/Researcher-Youth Engagement

Another ethical concern is the lack of clear IRB guidelines for how practitioners and researchers should engage with youth in virtual settings. For instance, there are no specific policies addressing deceptive recruitment strategies, like misrepresenting one's identity or intent, to access socially marginalized youth and their communities within exclusive identity-based online communities. This oversight increases the risk of researchers violating trust and potentially causing harm.

To address these risks, IRBs should create clear and detailed guidelines for engaging socially marginalized youth online. These guidelines should explicitly prohibit the use of deception with youth, require transparency about the researcher's identity and purpose, and outline specific procedures for obtaining informed parental consent and youth assent. For example, youth-centered practitioners and researchers should clearly disclose their affiliation(s) and intent during their first interaction with youth on apps or social media platforms.

Case Study 2: Ethical Recruitment on BumbleBFF

A middle-aged white practitioner-researcher plans to use BumbleBFF, an app primarily designed for making social connections, to recruit Black teens for a program on the effects of race-based stressors on mental

health. However, teens using the app to connect with peers their age may feel discomfort or exploitation when approached with a request to participate in a program about race-based stressors. This approach not only disrupts the app's intended purpose but also risks invading the teens' sense of safety and comfort.

To address these concerns, the researcher should:

1. ***Transparency in Communication:*** The researcher should provide a clear and professional introduction at the start of any interaction. This includes their name, institutional or organizational affiliation, and the purpose of the conversation. This approach ensures potential participants understand the intent behind the outreach.

2. ***Respect for Autonomy:*** By providing context upfront, the researcher allows potential participants to make an informed decision about whether to engage. This gives them the autonomy to decline the interaction before it begins, reducing the risk of discomfort or feeling misled.

3. ***Alignment with Platform Purpose:*** Researchers should carefully consider whether the chosen platform is appropriate for recruitment. If the platform's primary purpose conflicts with the goals of the program or study, researchers should explore alternative, more suitable avenues for engaging participants.

4. ***Ethical Virtual Engagement Guidelines:*** IRBs and practitioners should develop and provide clear guidance on virtual recruitment methods, particularly for researchers engaging with racially marginalized youth. This includes addressing issues related to researcher-participant dynamics, cultural sensitivity, and the appropriateness of recruitment platforms.

These solutions aim to protect the well-being of participants while ensuring the recruitment process is ethical, transparent, and culturally responsive.

Straightforward IRB protocols for engagement with socially marginalized youth would aid practitioners and researchers in adhering to the following ACYCP principles:

- I.a. Demonstrates high standards of integrity and professional conduct: By instituting guidelines prohibiting deceptive recruitment or engagement practices with youth, researchers and practitioners can uphold high ethical standards.

- I.b. Develops knowledge and skills necessary for engaging children, youth, and families, including trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive practices: Comprehensive and context-specific protocols could include mandatory trainings on cultural responsiveness and developmentally appropriate engagement practices with youth.

- I.d. Recognizes sources of power and privilege and engages in anti-oppressive practices: Guidelines could help researchers be aware of power imbalances, and provide anti-oppressive engagement strategies.

- II.i.ii. Ensures interactions reflect developmental age, status, understanding, and capacity: By utilizing culturally and developmentally appropriate engagement strategies with youth, practitioners and researchers can ensure more meaningful interactions.

Problem 3: Transparency and Miscommunication of Program or Research Study Intent

The final ethical concern is transparency and clear communication. Being open about the goals of a program or study is essential to avoid misunderstandings and maintain trust with youth participants. While most IRBs encourage clear communication, researchers working with socially marginalized youth in online spaces should take extra steps. Youth and their guardians need a clear understanding of the study's purpose, participation requirements, and potential risks or benefits to make an informed decision. Any lack of clarity or missing information can harm both participants and researchers.

Case Study 3: Ethical Concerns in Data Sharing

A researcher conducting a mixed-methods program on the mental health experiences of queer BIPoC youth with ADHD assured participants and their guardians during the consent and assent process that only their research team would access the collected data. However, years later, the researcher uploaded the data to The Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) data archive for public use. Participants and their guardians were not informed during the consent process that their data could be shared beyond the research team.

To address these concerns, the researcher should:

1. ***Transparent Consent Process:*** Researchers should clearly explain during the consent and assent process if and how the collected data might be shared in the future, including potential public data archiving. Participants and their guardians should be informed about who could access the data and for what purposes.
2. ***Optional Data Sharing Consent:*** Participants should be given the option to consent separately to data sharing, allowing them to decide whether their information can be made publicly available after the study.
3. ***Clear Communication of Changes:*** If the researcher decides to share data publicly after the study, participants and guardians should be notified and given the option to withdraw their data before it is shared.
4. ***Ethical Data Sharing Practices:*** IRBs should establish guidelines requiring researchers to disclose data-sharing plans in detail, ensuring participants and their guardians fully understand the implications during the consent process.

By implementing these solutions, researchers can maintain trust with participants, protect their privacy, and ensure ethical practices in data sharing.

Practitioners and researchers must clearly explain program and study participation and any potential long-term uses of collected data. If data-sharing plans change (as they sometimes do!), IRBs should guide practitioners and researchers on how to ethically contact participants to get their consent for new uses of their data. Clear IRB policies on transparency, communication, and data management for youth from socially marginalized communities would help practitioners and researchers in following ACYCP principles:

- II.i.ii. Ensures interactions reflect developmental age, status, understanding, and capacity: By providing youth and their guardians with all necessary information that can shape their involvement in a program or study, practitioners and researchers can ensure ethically sound interactions.
- II.j.ii. Supports effective, respectful communication and engagement within and across systems: Transparency fosters trust and effective communication, which is crucial for ethical engagement with youth.

Table 1

Ethical Issues, Guidelines, and Solutions on Virtual-based Engagement

Problem	Ethical Concern	Solution	ACYCP Ethical Principle
Virtual App-Based Recruitment	The limited and unclear IRB policies on virtual app-based recruitment increase the risk of unsafe or harmful engagement for socially marginalized youth and their communities.	Develop both comprehensive and context-specific guidelines to ensure the ethicality of virtual engagement protocols that address the unique needs and vulnerabilities of socially marginalized youth in virtual spaces. This includes ensuring informed consent, protecting participant privacy, and addressing potential risks of identity-based stress and exploitation.	I.a. Demonstrates high standards of integrity and professional conduct I.b. Develops knowledge and skills necessary for engaging children, youth, and families, including trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive practices I.d. Recognizes sources of power and privilege and engages in anti-oppressive practices

			II.b. Maintains privacy and confidentiality within in-person and virtual settings.
Researcher/ Practitioner- Youth Engagement	The limited and unclear IRB policies on the use of deceptive engagement strategies to gain access to socially marginalized youth and their communities within exclusive identity-based virtual spaces and/or when engaging with youth.	Develop unambiguous and comprehensive guidelines and best practices to set boundaries for practitioner and researcher engagement with socially marginalized youth in virtual settings.	I.a. Demonstrates high standards of integrity and professional conduct I.b. Develops knowledge and skills necessary for engaging children, youth, and families, including trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive practices I.d. Recognizes sources of power and privilege and engages in anti-oppressive practices II.i.ii. Ensures interactions reflect developmental age, status, understanding, and capacity.
Transparency and Miscommunication of Intent	Lack of transparency about research or program intention can lead to distrust and miscommunication, particularly in app-based recruitment or programs involving socially marginalized youth.	IRBs should ensure that researchers construct profiles and bios that make it explicit that the interaction is for research or program implementation purposes only. Practitioners and researchers should clearly communicate their intentions, study/program aims, potential risks, and benefits to participants.	II.i.ii. Ensures interactions reflect developmental age, status, understanding, and capacity. II.j.ii. Supports effective, respectful communication and engagement within and across systems

Conclusion

This article highlights the ethical challenges of working with socially marginalized youth in virtual spaces and emphasizes the importance of ensuring their safety, dignity, and the integrity of programs and studies. Clear and comprehensive IRB guidelines can help researchers and practitioners effectively address these challenges while following ACYCP principles. Such policies promote trust, transparency, and informed consent, ensuring that youth and their communities fully understand their participation.

Additionally, these guidelines should include culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices to meet the diverse needs of youth and their communities. By aligning with ACYCP's professional standards for ethical engagement with socially marginalized youth, researchers and practitioners can contribute to advancing ethical, equitable, and impactful youth-centered research and programs in the digital age.

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