

# Ethical Considerations for Global Mental Health Research & Practice

Courtney A. Colgan, M.A., Betty S. Lai, Ph.D.

*Boston College, Lynch School of Education and Human Development*



**BOSTON COLLEGE**  
Lynch School of Education  
and Human Development

## Problem Statement

The global burden of mental illness is significant (Patel et al., 2018; World Health Organization [WHO], 2017). Poverty, climate change, sociopolitical conflict, and forced displacement pose serious and ongoing threats to the mental health of communities around the world. Depression, one of the leading causes of suicide, affects approximately 322 million people globally (WHO, 2017). Approximately 264 million people are estimated to live with an anxiety disorder worldwide (WHO, 2017). The prevalence of depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses, coupled with inadequate access to mental health care, poses a major public health risk to communities worldwide. Premature mortality is common among individuals with a mental illness due to inadequate access to medical care and humane, culturally-relevant mental health care (Patel et al., 2018). As outlined below, the high global burden of mental illness and inadequate access to treatment raises important ethical issues.

## Ethical Issues

Issue:	Question:	Example:
Conceptualization of Mental Illness	How should mental illness be conceptualized in different cultural contexts?	The International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) is a valuable diagnostic tool. However, its psychiatric criteria are based on Western conceptualizations of mental illness and may not be cross-culturally meaningful.
Decision-Making	Who decides what mental health-related issues are a priority to address (e.g., researchers, local community leaders)?	Outside researchers bring mental health expertise, but local community leaders possess important cultural knowledge and familiarity with their community's values and priorities with regard to mental health.
Cultural Considerations	Should Western evidence-based treatments be adapted to local cultural contexts?	The imposition of Western evidence-based treatments, whether culturally adapted or not, may be controversial; particularly in post-colonial regions of the world.
Cost Effectiveness	Should cost effectiveness be prioritized at the expense of widespread treatment?	Some mental health treatments may not be cost-effective to implement in resource-limited settings. However, they may provide potentially life saving treatment for individuals living with a mental illness.
Capacity Building	To what extent should treatment be prioritized over local mental health capacity building?	Given finite resources, a choice often has to be made between investing in short-term treatment versus long-term capacity building (e.g., treating mental illness versus building a sustainable mental health system.)

## References

- Patel, V., Saxena, S., Lund, C., Thornicroft, G., Baingana, F., Bolton, P., . . . Unützer, J. (2018). The *Lancet* Commission on global mental health and sustainable development. *The Lancet*, 392(10157), 1553-1598.
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