

## 2014 CCCR national summit case studies

### Taking Culture Seriously in Community Mental Health: A community-university research initiative that moves research into action

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<b>Project coordinators</b>	Julie Wise, 2005—2007; Sarah Marsh, 2007—2011.
<b>Students</b>	Thirteen PhD and Masters students
<b>Community partners</b>	Twenty-six community and cultural-linguistic organizations; 20 health and community organizations
<b>Location</b>	Toronto and Waterloo Region, Ontario
<b>Dates</b>	2005—2011
<b>Funders</b>	Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and Ontario Trillium Foundation

### Introduction

The purpose of this case study is to explore research excellence criteria that balance both academic excellence and community relevance using the case example of *Taking Culture Seriously in Community Mental Health*. This paper will discuss this research project, outlining the background, research purpose, research design, research challenges, and finally the ways this project demonstrates the four domains of community-based research excellence.

### Project background

Taking Culture Seriously in Community Mental Health was a five-year (2005-2011) Community University Research Alliance (CURA) project. This research project brought together over 45 diverse university and community partners in the Toronto and Waterloo regions of Ontario, Canada. Partners included members from ethno-cultural communities, multi-disciplinary academics, and leading practitioners from the mental health and settlement sectors.

The purpose of this research project was to explore, develop, pilot, and evaluate how to best provide community-based mental health services and supports that would be effective for people from diverse ethno-cultural communities. This research study was funded by Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) and led by the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR).

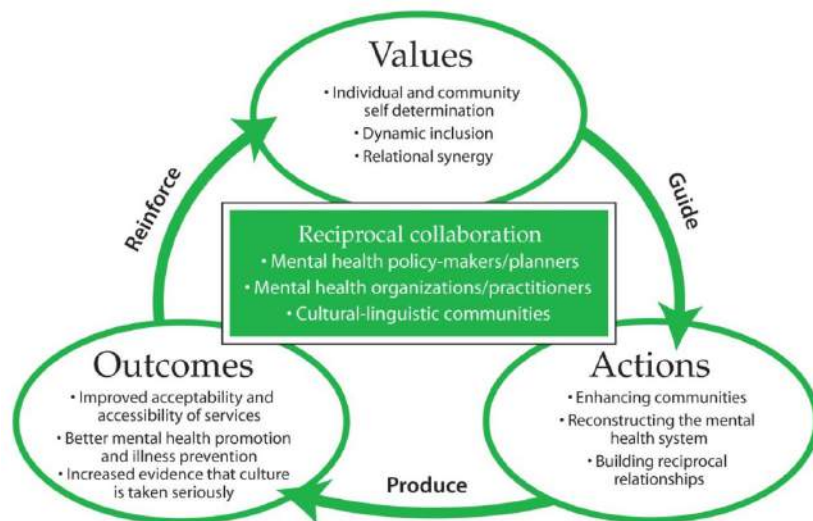
Five ethno-cultural communities, including Somali, Sikh- Punjabi, Polish, Mandarin, and Spanish Latin-American were actively involved in both Toronto and Waterloo Regions. These communities were chosen based on demographics across sites (including both new and established ethno-cultural communities with sufficient numbers), geographic distribution of world region of origin, differences in migration experiences (including immigrants and refugees; voluntary and forced migration), and visible minority status. One of the project's explicit goals was to emphasize the transferability of knowledge gained to all of multicultural Canada.

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### Research design and methodology

The project was carried out in three phases:

- **Phase one** explored diverse conceptualizations of mental health problems and practice through primary data collection.
- **Phase two** developed culturally effective demonstration projects through collaborative proposal development between partners and community members.
- **Phase three** evaluated demonstration project development and implementation.



#### Phase one

Within the first phase, five research methods were used to gain a wide range of perspectives:

- A review of international literature
- Key informant interviews with service providers, ethno-cultural leaders, academics, and policy-makers
- Online surveys with community mental health agencies across Ontario
- Focus groups with members of the five selected ethno-cultural groups
- Case studies with individuals experiencing mental health problems from each of the five selected ethno-cultural groups

In total, data was gathered from over 300 individuals. During this data collection, study participants affirmed the need to develop a conceptual framework that laid out how mental health policy and practice can change to become more responsive to people from diverse cultural-linguistic backgrounds.

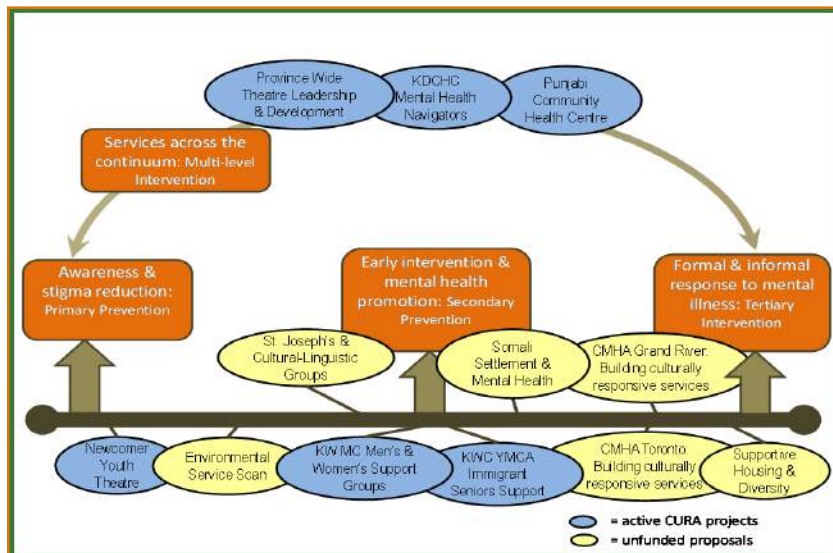
Through analysis of the primary and secondary data compiled from the study, a new theoretical framework was developed for improving mental health services for cultural communities (Figure 1). The framework was principle-driven, action-oriented and able to inspire future innovation.

#### Phase two

In phase two, the new framework was the basis for the development of innovative ideas intended to address many of the challenges and issues identified throughout the primary data collection. Stakeholders clustered into sub-groups to develop a series of demonstration project proposals. Each project was a collaborative effort that sought to examine both power and culture in practice, while committing to actions that advance reciprocal relationship building between the mental health system and ethno-cultural communities.

In total, twelve demonstration project proposals were submitted to funders, with six being successful in securing external funding and implementation within the Waterloo and Toronto Regions. Figure 2 shows the full range of projects that were proposed and implemented.

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### Phase three

The third and final project phase included a second round of data collection, focusing on evaluation of demonstration projects' planning and initial implementation. Data collection methods for this evaluation included interviews, focus groups and a tracking tool designed to monitor project activities over time.

### Lessons-learned

The diverse stakeholders came to the research project with their own expectations and needs. Although these expectations were not in competition, sometimes the expected priorities had to be negotiated among stakeholders. For example, ethno-cultural communities prioritized the ability to have a safe space to talk about problems and to see the new practice emerge. Mental health practitioners on the other hand prioritized learning specific skills to be able to respond appropriately to ethno-cultural communities. And academics prioritized developing papers and presentations related to the processes and outcomes of this research project. All stakeholder groups wanted to see their priorities emphasized, so this required constant negotiation between stakeholder groups.

Another challenge encountered by this research project was the level of engagement that was required throughout. Ultimately this research project could have benefitted from additional engagement of policy makers in order to encourage changes at the policy level. Time and funding restrictions did not allow for extensive relationship building with policy makers. Additional time to engage policy makers and additional related projects are necessary in order to stimulate changes within Ontario's mental health policies.

### Domains of research excellence

The four domains of excellence were addressed through the project in a number of ways.

### Community relevance

#### The research topic was of practical relevance to the community

This research project began at the community level, when various members of ethno-cultural communities expressed their concerns about mental health struggles experienced within their communities to CCBR and project partners. Thus, even before the project was officially funded, an emphasis was placed on continually engaging members of ethno-cultural communities. The research literature also provided evidence that Western-trained service providers and program planners often do not understand the culturally specific meanings and customs attached to mental health and mental illness. As a result, many cultural groups lack access to appropriate mental health services or receive inadequate diagnosis and treatment.

#### The research was conducted in the community

Efforts were taken to meaningfully involve diverse communities and other stakeholders to produce new knowledge, to mobilize that knowledge, and in the process to collectively develop and implement new practice. During knowledge mobilization, for example, stakeholders facilitated workshops and round-table discussions, and were able to communicate knowledge in a culturally-appropriate and community-relevant way. Additional strategies included extensive data collection within the community (ten site visits, over twenty focus groups; five community fora, two conferences), the development of multi-stakeholder committees, and the

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hiring of community researchers to initiate, conduct and disseminate the research. The ongoing inclusion and active participation of diverse stakeholders, who were themselves active members of the participating communities helped to ensure the relevance of the research.

### **Research questions and research findings were useful to the participating communities**

The use of research methods implemented in communities, as well as frequent stakeholder participation, community forums, and project evaluations ensured the project's ongoing relevancy. Allowing the knowledge mobilization agenda to be shaped by ethno-cultural community members ensured cultural relevance and usefulness.

## Equitable participation

### **Value-driven approach to research**

From the inception, we wanted to have a successful process that engaged various stakeholders including ethno-cultural communities, mental health practitioners, policy-makers and multidisciplinary academic researchers. We aimed to facilitate a process that was appropriately sensitive to and respectful of cultural differences and issues, and that had a rigorous methodology producing credible recommendations for future actions. We kept the values of empowerment, supportive relationships, learning as an ongoing process, social change and respect for diversity in mind throughout the process. This commitment showed that we valued the collaborative process of inquiry as much as the outcomes or findings of the research.

### **Redefining the researchers' roles**

This research project adopted non-traditional research roles and relationships by moving the research partners beyond the traditional external/expert researcher to the facilitator who is aware of power dynamics in research relationships and who adopts new roles of animator, facilitator, educator, and participatory researcher. The researchers' roles as well as the functions of research expanded to include nurturing engagement for all stakeholders. This equitable participation broke down barriers between researchers, stakeholders, and community members.

### **Working with community researchers and using multi-stakeholder steering committees to guide the research**

The research was conducted together with ten community researchers hired from the five participating ethno-cultural communities. These community researchers were key ambassadors of the research project within participating communities. The study was guided by two multi-stakeholder steering committees, ensuring the relevance to the participating communities and that all stakeholders were equally represented and respected. Both of these engagement strategies allowed for active and equitable participation from ethno-cultural communities and other stakeholders, and ensured that action and social change were consistent aims of the project.

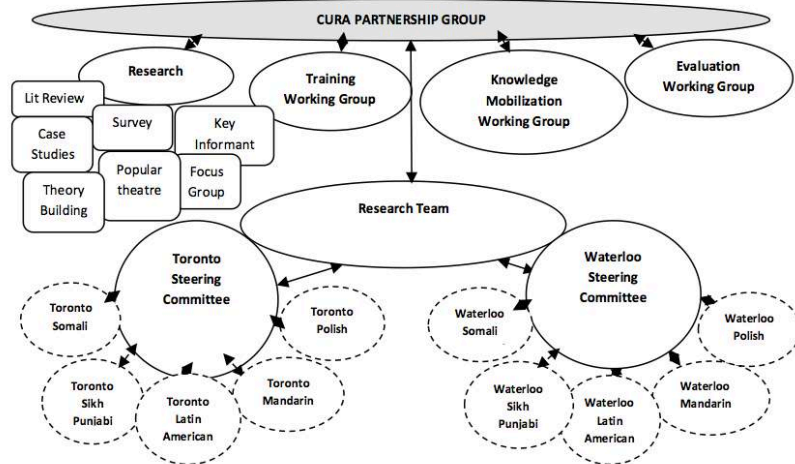
### **Recognizing and utilizing the skills and expertise of all research partners**

The research project shifted leadership to the most knowledgeable partners, whether for the technical or relational aspects of research, in order to bring the required expertise to the fore in every context. Examples of this include the multi-stakeholder committees, which contained a breadth of skills and knowledge, and the intensive training of all community researchers, which allowed for the nurturing of additional capabilities within project participants. Another mechanism that allowed this research project to utilize the skills of all research partners was by establishing a partnership group, including representatives from all partner organizations to guide the research project. In addition, academics played various leadership roles, including leading research methods, data gathering, analysis and interpretation of the data, and knowledge dissemination. Service providers and policy makers were active in all various research and knowledge mobilization activities, including development and evaluation of new social demonstration projects.

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### Clear structure for stakeholder roles

Sharing responsibilities and leadership in this project was facilitated through an inclusive, well-organized project structure (Figure 3). This research project engaged a variety of stakeholders, beyond those from ethno-cultural communities, including mental health practitioners, policy makers, and multi-disciplinary academics. The engagement of stakeholders was not a passive process whereby stakeholders were engaged only at convenient intervals, but rather an equitable process where participation of all stakeholders was solicited throughout the research project. The ongoing process of engagement was constantly evaluated by all involved as the responsibilities and benefits of the research agenda were shared.



### Action and change

Throughout the research project, knowledge mobilization was simultaneous with community mobilization as the knowledge acquired from each phase was used to inspire and equip local communities with skills to improve their mental health support system. This research project maximized the social action potential by linking communities of research and communities of practice.

#### Knowledge mobilization

Knowledge mobilization activities included: 1) ten community forums with ethno-cultural communities to produce practical ideas on how to improve mental health practice and to mobilize communities for actions; 2) two project conferences (with 150 people attending each) that mobilized knowledge and stakeholders for future actions; 3) two professional theatre productions that translated research findings into an artistic format able to engage diverse audiences; 4) a series of workshops for mental health service providers across Ontario (Leaders Mobilizing Change) to inspire and equip service providers with knowledge that could change their attitudes, skills, and behaviours towards people from diverse ethno-cultural communities; 5) organizing “round-table” workshops for policy makers and senior public servants that allowed for deeper understanding of research findings and for discussion about their implications; and 6) ten peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters and over 40 conference presentations delivered nationally and internationally (all authored collaboratively).

#### Community mobilization

Six demonstration projects were developed by all involved and funded by external funders. The demonstration projects that emerged from the research project effectively increased the level of mental health support available for ethno-cultural communities. By promoting an open dialogue about mental health issues among all stakeholders, this research project was able to move the topic mental health out of the shadows and into the forefront of local communities. The research project also aimed to promote cultural awareness within the mental health system and the broader community and emphasized the importance of ongoing learning and exposure to cultural diversity for all involved in the mental health system.



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### Research design

#### Multi-phased research design

Quality research was developed through the use of a multi-phased research design that was both time and resource intensive. The study was designed in three phases: knowledge production (research), development of new social interventions (practice), and evaluation of new social interventions (reflection). This research project combined those three aspects of research (research, practice, and reflection) into a single comprehensive research project. All three phases utilized the strengths of diverse qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches.

#### Multiple stakeholder perspectives captured

Within *Taking Culture Seriously in Community Mental Health*, the research process was designed to include the largest amount of stakeholder perspectives. The primary data was gathered from a number of stakeholders including ethno-cultural groups, service providers, policy makers and academics. These multiple stakeholder perspectives allowed for strong triangulation and interesting comparisons.

#### Multiple methods and multiple researchers

The research design used multiple methods to gather data: focus groups, case studies, surveys, and interviews. Methods complemented one another. There was also a strong component of secondary data gathered from an extensive literature review process. Both qualitative and quantitative data was considered to allow for both breadth and depth. All data from these various perspectives and sources was analyzed. Multiple researchers were involved in both data gathering and analysis. This team approach helped to build theory and practical interventions through the demonstration projects.

#### Qualitative and quantitative standards of excellence

In terms of qualitative standards of excellence, feedback loops were essential throughout the research project. There was constant acknowledgement of the interaction between the research questions, data collection, and results obtained across the three phases. This type of action-oriented research design allowed the whole cycle of applied research conducted in one study. It also motivated the partners and

stakeholders to participate fully to the end and to see the results of both the research exploration and research application with the feedback loops. In terms of quantitative standards of excellence, the research project was rigorous in its sampling for the survey, selecting to use a full population sample of all mental health agencies across Ontario.

### Conclusion

This community-university research initiative demonstrated how community-based research using participatory and action-oriented approaches can initiate innovative changes in policies, communities, and individuals. This research project equipped and inspired people for change through collaborative knowledge and community mobilization efforts. Throughout its entirety, *Taking Culture Seriously in Community Mental Health* prioritized both academic excellence and community relevance. This was done through utilizing multiple stakeholder perspectives and skills through all phases of the research and utilizing rigorous qualitative and quantitative methodology to produce credible recommendations for future actions and policies.

### Links

<http://www.communitybasedresearch.ca/takingcultureseriouslyCURA/>