

**The Organization and Practice of Collaborative Research:  
Guidelines for Participation in the SPRISTAD Multisite Longitudinal Study of  
Psychotherapy Trainee Development**

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**Introduction**

*Collaborative research* differs in important respects from the more familiar 'entrepreneurial' or 'PI' model of research organization, both in structure and in spirit. In the traditional 'entrepreneurial' model, individual principal investigators (PIs) conceive and plan *their* study, then obtain funding for it via a successful grant application, and use those funds to employ research assistants or associates who 'work for' the PIs. It is the PIs who control the work and the rights to its publication. The structure is hierarchical (subordinate-superordinate, even when 'friendly') and is motivated, and operates, in a 'spirit' (i.e., value ethos) of PI self-initiative and individual interest.

By contrast, in *collaborative research*, studies originate among groups of colleagues who share an interest in a specific topic and who together design and implement a project as *partners*, each contributing to and sharing proportionately in the resulting work and right to its publication. There is some differentiation of status, but more like that found in a partnership of professional colleagues than in subordinate-superordinate work relationships. The structure is collegial and is motivated, and operates, in a 'spirit' (value ethos) of shared interest and mutual benefit.

*Constraints and Advantages of Each*

Because *entrepreneurial* studies typically rely on external funding through granting agencies, the questions they pose and the methods they use are more tightly bound to the current

consensus among authorities in the field concerning research relevance and rigor. For grant applications to be successful, granting agencies and their reviewers typically want to see them as "safe" investments, taking small but solid steps to advance already well-defined areas of research. Consequently, they tend to be conventional, often hypothesis-testing studies and their main value lies in advancing "normal science" (Kuhn, 1962).

By contrast, because collaborative studies tend to draw upon resources accessible to partners, and thus may require relatively minimal external support, they are less tightly bound to the current consensus among authorities, and so are better able to explore new or unexamined research areas that are interesting to their senior partners. Compared to individual-entrepreneurial research, they are better suited as innovative and exploratory studies of broader scope, and are less constrained to conform to current research conventions. The main constraint tethering collaborative studies to their research field is journal reviewers (or publishers' book reviewers) preparedness as gate-keepers to consider their relevance and value to the field, typically making authors devote more time to providing the rationale for their research. Compared to the "normal science" value of individual-entrepreneurial studies, collaborative studies offer a model for "novel science" research—a category not included in Kuhn's schema of normal vs. crisis science but currently well-represented by major projects in astronomy, physics and astrophysics that involve hundreds of collaborators.<sup>1</sup>

The *entrepreneurial* and the *collaborative* models of research organization can be viewed as complementary, serving different but important research aims and having the potential to contribute valuably to the advancement of science. In the field of psychotherapy research (as

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<sup>1</sup> Probably the best known example in the field of psychotherapy research is the classic "NIMH Treatment of Depression Collaborative Research Program" (Elkin, Shea, Watkins et al., 1989) which coordinated data collection at three research sites to obtain a combined database with sufficient statistical power to evaluate alternative treatments.

elsewhere) *entrepreneurial* studies have been the norm and are the most familiar contents of research journals. However, in the field of research on *psychotherapists* there are at least two major examples of collaborative studies that can be referenced: (1) the long-term International Study of Development of Psychotherapists (ISDP), conducted since 1989 by an informal partnership known as the Society for Psychotherapy Research Collaborative Research Network (SPR/CRN) [see Orlinsky and Rønnestad (2005)]; and (2) the more formally organized Collaborative Multisite Longitudinal Study of Psychotherapy Trainee Development, conducted since 2012 by the SPR Interest Section on Therapist Training and Development (SPRISTAD) [see Orlinsky, Strauss, Rønnestad et al., 2015]. In the following pages, we provide some initial guidelines for conducting the SPRISTAD-Study as a formally organized *collaborative research* program, based on decades of prior experience in both aforementioned studies. These guidelines concern (a) participation in the study, (b) the SPRISTAD research instrument, (c) data collection, storage and access, and (d) procedures regarding data analysis and publication.

### **Guidelines for the SPRISTAD Study**

#### ***Organization and Value Ethos***

Formally, SPRISTAD is a special interest section within the Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR) that was organized<sup>2</sup> officially in 2011 by the procedure for establishing interest sections in the SPR By-Laws, which includes having separate but compatible section By-Laws [see SPR website <[www.psychotherapyresearch.org](http://www.psychotherapyresearch.org)>]. The SPRISTAD By-Laws in turn established a 6-member *Steering Committee* to promote, support and coordinate activities of and within the interest section. The Steering Committee consists of an executive track (chair, chair-

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<sup>2</sup> Key roles leading to the formation of SPRISTAD were played by Jan Carlsson (Sweden), David E. Orlinsky (USA), and Bernhard Strauss (Germany).

elect, and immediate past-chair) and a consultative track (senior career counselor, mid-career counselor, and early career counselor).

In 2012, at the SPR meeting in Virginia Beach (USA), a large number of SPRISTAD members<sup>3</sup> favored the idea of creating a collaborative longitudinal study of development in therapist trainees, based on a recommendation to that effect made by Hill and Knox (2013). Construction of the study was assigned to the *Steering Committee* chaired by D. Orlinsky, which eventually appointed a Research Committee to design and implement the collaborative study. The SPRISTAD Research Committee consists of an appointed chair (D. Orlinsky) plus the current Steering Committee executive track (U. Willutzki, A. Hartman, M. H. Rønnestad), with additional Steering Committee and SPRISTAD members (as available).

The value ethos or 'spirit' of the SPRISTAD-Study collaboration has its roots in the very long term study of therapists conducted since 1989 by the SPR Collaborative Research Network (SPR/CRN), which was founded upon members' mutual interest in therapist development and which operated effectively in an atmosphere of friendliness and basic trust, sometimes growing into long-term personal friendship. As a result of this history, the idea of “collaborative research” has acquired a very definite meaning.

Taken literally collaboration means “working together”, which in the context of research means cooperating (co-operating) in planning, designing, implementing, analyzing and presenting the research project (in conferences and publications)—with co-workers sharing in credit for the work proportionally to their specific contributions. Co-workers in the SPRISTAD-Study are viewed as colleagues and partners. Those who have worked the longest and contributed the most to plan, design, and implement the study are senior partners. In addition to

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<sup>3</sup> In a 'breakout' session chaired by then Steering Committee senior career counselor Clara Hill.

their specific tasks as co-workers in the study, some of the senior partners also work together as the Research Committee to facilitate, support and coordinate the work of the group as a whole, and all of the individual partners within it. This includes maintaining clear boundaries that respect the rights of all partners as well as fostering collaboration on specific sub-projects where those seem desirable and appropriate.

Those who join the study after it has been established but participate actively to carrying it forward are contributing partners, typically serving as Local Research Site Coordinators facilitating data collection at their training programs or as Liaison Research Site Coordinators who make data collection possible at nearby free-standing programs. Those who enter the study to fulfill masters or doctoral degree requirements are junior partners who typically work as research assistants. However, the boundaries between these roles may change over time if a partner's level of involvement in the study changes. Contributing partners whose sustained activity contributes substantially or in multiple ways to the study may become senior partners; junior partners who continue to participate in the collaboration after completing their studies are recognized as contributing partners; and senior partners whose level of participation fades over time (e.g., when they retire or turn to other research interests) cease to have that status within the SPRISTAD-Study.

### ***Instrument Development and Use***

Psychotherapy studies rely on research instruments that are used by observers (participant observers like clients and/or therapists, and non-participant observers like raters) to assess the characteristics, experiences and behaviors of subjects. These instruments vary from relatively short rating scales designed to focus on one theoretical construct (e.g., empathy, alliance or current mental status) to broader surveys or inventories designed to explore a range of related

topics (e.g., experiences of participants in therapy sessions). Broader surveys typically involve a set of scales that together represent a conceptualization of a research area, including hypotheses about the relationships between concepts. As such they provide a research program developed by those with a shared interest in the area.

Instruments also vary according to whether they are published by their designers for general use in therapy studies (e.g., the *Working Alliance Inventory*, the OQ45) or they are not published as such but retained by their designers for use by interested colleagues willing to engage collaboratively (e.g., the DPCCQ, which requests sharing of collected data).

Published instruments normally are "finished products," are fixed in form, are available for most entrepreneurially-organized therapy studies by individual PI-researchers who make reference to the original work but otherwise implement the instruments in their own research ideas—and those who developed the instruments must be glad to see them used by other (whether for intellectual or commercial reasons). Share-limited instruments imply a research program, involving the intellectual effort of those who developed it. They are not freely available for use by others, and the research instruments designed for the SPRISTAD-Study are of the latter kind. By design they are broader in content than is useful for most specifically-focused and hypothesis-testing studies (e.g., evaluating the relation of concept A to concepts B or C). By intent they are meant for the cumulative collection of large-scale databases for exploratory study. Moreover, because they are designed to facilitate exploratory research, they rarely are finally finished products but rather works-in-progress that may evolve over time as some topics are dropped and new topics are added. As a consequence, the research instruments that have been designed for the SPRISTAD-Study are not made available for individually-initiated

entrepreneurially-organized studies. At the same time, they are available for use by those engaged in the SPRISTAD-Study partnership (in circumstances described below).

Researchers interested in using the SPRISTAD instruments to collect data are invited to do so by *becoming* contributing partners in the SPRISTAD-Study, gathering data for their own scientific use (when enough cases have been collected to protect trainee confidentiality) and for use as part of the SPRISTAD-Study database. Inquiries about how to join should be addressed to the SPRISTAD Research Committee as <therapistdevelopment@gmail.com>. However, unauthorized use of the instruments by individual researchers for their own purposes, outside of and with no benefit to the SPRISTAD-Study, flouts the spirit (or value ethos) of collaborative research, and is strongly discouraged.

#### ***Data Collection, Management and Access***

Data collection in the SPRISTAD-Study is facilitated at individual training programs by SPRISTAD members serving as Local Research Site Coordinators, and who by virtue of that are recognized as SPRISTAD-Study partners. They are responsible for obtaining ethical approval from their institutional review boards for trainee participation at their site; for ensuring the online *Training Program Description Form* (TPDF) is completed, either by the program director or a senior staff person (which they may be); and for soliciting and motivating trainees in the program to participate by returning Informed Consent documents and completing online the cross-sectional *Trainee Background Information Form* (TBIF) and, periodically, the longitudinal *Trainee Current Practice Report* (TCPR). Additionally, these colleagues may also serve as Liaison Research Site Coordinators to facilitate data collection at nearby training programs interested in the SPRISTAD-Study that have no research staff or ethical review boards of their own (e.g., free-standing non-university based training programs).

The process of online data collection is mediated by the SPRISTAD Data Management Center at Witten-Herdecke University in Germany, who collects the Informed Consents and email addresses of trainees at participating training program sites, sends them individualized URL links to the appropriate research instruments, checks on trainees' completion of the instruments, and sends email alerts and reminders to trainees when their reports are due. Data are securely stored and backed up on computers at Witten-Herdecke University. In a few instances, data are initially collected at local sites (e.g., University of Helsinki, University of Oslo), and are then transmitted for integration into the main database at Witten-Herdecke University.

One significant benefit for participants in the SPRISTAD-Study is the ability to request access to data that has been collected, which may be done by email to the SPRISTAD Research Committee as <therapistdevelopment@gmail.com>. Access for the use of data stored the Witten-Herdecke Data Management Center will be provided in three ways:

(1) *Individual trainees* may request access to data they themselves have contributed, with the inclusion of algorithm-generated measures that will enable trainees to compare themselves with group norms, including those established through the SPR/CRN study.

(2) *Local Research Site Coordinators*, as contributing partners, may request access to data that has been collected from their own training program after a minimum of 10 trainees have completed the instruments as agreed in their Informed Consents—a TBIF a first TCPR upon entering the study, plus a minimum of two more TCPRs completed approximately 6 months and 12 months after entering the study.

Contributing SPRISTAD-Study partners may request summary data (e.g., to provide feedback to program participants and use in program evaluation) which will be computed by the Research Committee, or they may request a copy of the actual raw data. If raw trainee data is



requested, identifying information (sex, age, etc.) will need to be redacted to conform with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) law governing EU countries, but with the redacted data given in summary form (percentages, means & SDs) to permit adequate sample description.

A contributing SPRISTAD-Study partner who has also served as Liaison Research Site Coordinator for other training programs may ask the directors of those programs for permission to request access to that data, after each liaison program has satisfied the "10 completed trainee case" criterion.

(3) Contributing SPRISTAD-Study partners may propose collaborative studies on topics of *specific interest* that require access to relevant portions of the cumulative database maintained at Witten-Herdecke University. Submitted to the SPRISTAD Research Committee for approval, these proposals should include opportunities for participation by other SPRISTAD-Study partners, as deemed equitable by the SPRISTAD Research Committee.

### ***Data Analyses and Publication***

Data analysis for the SPRISTAD-Study as a whole will focus on the main research goals outlined in Orlinsky, Strauss, Rønnestad et al. (2105). These are: (1) tracking progressive changes over time in trainees as therapists; (2) identifying factors that tend to facilitate or impede trainee development; and (3) relating trainees' characteristics and their training experiences to their development as psychotherapists, and of all those to therapy process and outcome. The senior SPRISTAD partners who formulated the study, its instruments and procedures, reserves the right (through the Research Committee) to analyze and publish data on these research topics of *general* interest. The Research Committee often will also invite other SPRISTAD partners who have contributed substantially to relevant aspects of the Study to participate in these studies of general interest.

Additionally, proposals for research on topics of *specific interest* may be submitted to the Research Committee. Topics of specific interest could include (a) explorations of the many descriptive and contextual therapist data collected for the Study that are interesting in themselves but not directly involved in analyses of the main research questions, and (b) studies focusing on the relationships among those various variables. Applications should conform to the usual format for research proposals, outlining the rationale and specific research questions of the study, listing the data relevant for exploring the study's research questions, and specifying the methods to be used in analyzing the data.

The Research Committee aims to (a) favorably support the development of such studies, (b) optimize the scientific quality of those studies through consultation, and (c) ensure effective coordination of various studies proposed by SPRISTAD-Study partners with one another and with the interest of the SPRISTAD-Study as a whole. However, specific interest studies initiated by individual SPRISTAD members *without Research Committee approval* (e.g., by combining data accessible to them with data accessible to other Research Site Coordinators) are a *serious violation* of the collaborative spirit (value ethos) of SPRISTAD. Similarly, in pursuit of these aims, manuscripts of papers that make use of SPRISTAD-Study data should be presented to the Research Committee *prior to being submitted for publication*. The Research Committee will encourage publication and help make manuscripts submitted for publication as strong as possible, since those papers will represent (and shape the reputation of) the SPRISTAD-Study as a whole.

In exercising its responsibility to coordinate the various interests and studies of SPRISTAD-Study partners, the Research Committee will attempt to ensure the fair and equitable recognition of all who contribute substantially to each publication by recommending authorship

or acknowledgement in proportion to each person's contribution. Prominent among the contributions to be considered are (a) the conceptual work of those who designed the overall SPRISTAD-Study, (b) the intellectual effort and time invested by those who developed or translated the SPRISTAD-Study's research instruments, (c) the organizational intelligence and skill of those who constructed and maintain the SPRISTAD-Study as a group activity, (d) the diligence, persistence and hard work of those who helped collect substantial amounts of data, (e) the scholarly knowledge, theoretical competence and logical acuity of those who formulate interesting and meaningful research questions, (f) the methodological and technical skills of those who conduct or supervise quantitative and qualitative data analyses, and (g) the literary and expository skills of those who draft and edit major manuscripts. Contributions like these to the collaborative SPRISTAD-Study deserve recognition in its publications, and the Research Committee takes seriously its responsibility for ensuring that recognition is given fairly.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Should a SPRISTAD-Study partner feel unfairly treated, they should apply to the Research Committee for attentive and impartial consideration to their request for remedy; and, if needed, the Research Committee may call on respected senior colleagues who are not involved in the SPRISTAD-Study to serve as independent consultants to help resolve disputes.

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