

Just Research: Advancing Antiracist and Antioppressive Social Work Research

Bernadine Y. Waller *Columbia University/New York State Psychiatric Institute*

Arati Maleku *The Ohio State University*

Camille R. Quinn *University of Michigan*

Anamika Barman-Adhikari *University of Denver*

Linda S. Sprague Martinez *Boston University*

Dorian Traube *University of Southern California*

Jennifer L. Bellamy *University of Denver*

The Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) created its Research Capacity and Development Committee in 2017 to build research capacity across the careers of social work scholars. The committee has initiated multiple conferences and webinar sessions that have increasingly focused on antiracist and antioppressive (ARAO) research, including "Mentorship for Antiracist and Inclusive Research" and "Strategies for Supporting Antiracist Pedagogy & Scholarship: Reimagining Institutional Systems & Structures." This commentary integrates themes from these sessions and other discussions among committee members about strategies to advance ARAO research. Although SSWR board members reviewed and approved this submission, it is not an official statement of SSWR or its board of directors.

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A renewed call to confront structural and systemic racism and oppression globally, and more specifically in the United States, has emerged to confront a confluence of state-sanctioned violence against Black lives; systemic racism against Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); abuses based upon sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression; oppression of people with disabilities; religious discrimination; xenophobia and anti-immigrant fervor; attacks upon reproductive rights; and racial erasure and pandemic othering against Asian Pacific Islander and Desi American communities. Fear of white replacement—based on

the “great replacement” conspiracy argument that white people are being replaced at ethnic and cultural levels via mass migration (Davey & Ebner, 2019; Obaidi et al., 2021)—and polarizing politics fuel vitriol, hatred, and an overall devaluation of human life, with BIPOC and minoritized communities experiencing the brunt of the effects.

Although antiracist and antioppressive (ARAO) social work scholarship has been part of the call to confront racism and oppression and dismantle white supremacy, little progress has been achieved, in part because the social work profession lacks a comprehensive framework for ARAO research. Scholars with minoritized identities have long confronted racist and oppressive scholarship practices and have continually amplified the deep, embodied knowledge and experiences of minoritized populations. The weight of this work, however, should not rest solely upon them (McCoy, 2021). We must collectively ensure that all scholars adopt ARAO research practices. We call upon the profession to move beyond performative acknowledgments and intentionally center ARAO research. Just as social work pedagogy has failed to comprehensively incorporate critical theories and frameworks (Yearwood et al., 2021), ARAO research approaches are implemented in fragments. To center ARAO research, we must first acknowledge the role of social work in upholding white supremacy (National Association of Social Workers, 2021), failing to address oppression (Corley & Young, 2018; McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992), and inflicting tremendous harm on BIPOC communities (Jacobs et al., 2021). This includes “whitewashing” social work’s history, from the research and saviorism practiced by white women (Wright et al., 2021) to the enforcement of the social control that sustains racial capitalism (Jacobs et al., 2021). Building upon the work of the Society for Social Work and Research’s Research Capacity and Development Committee (RCDC), we hope this commentary will direct social workers toward pragmatic steps to develop a comprehensive framework and strategies for ARAO research.

Research Capacity and Development Committee

The RCDC was created in 2017 to build research capacity across the careers of social work scholars. In its efforts to do so, the RCDC has initiated multiple conference and webinar sessions that have increasingly focused on ARAO research. For example, the webinar “Mentorship for Antiracist and Inclusive Research” discussed ways to support antiracist and inclusive mentoring and equip doctoral students to conduct ARAO research. Another webinar, “Strategies for Supporting Antiracist Pedagogy & Scholarship: Reimagining Institutional Systems & Structures,” examined systemic and institutional barriers to conducting ARAO research and discussed ways to support and incentivize ARAO practices, such as reimagining promotion and tenure criteria and productivity metrics. The RCDC is now conducting a study to garner a comprehensive understanding of ARAO research in social work.

The Need for Antiracist and Antioppressive Social Work Research

ARAO research includes critically examining and resisting policies that oppress and minoritize the populations social work purports to assist, as well as building new systems and structures that value and uplift marginalized voices. ARAO research facilitates knowledge democracy and recognizes that all knowledge is socially constructed and that individual perceptions of reality are manifold (Potts & Brown, 2005). This is an ongoing practice of identifying and resisting policies that serve ways of knowing and being that are fundamentally racist and oppressive. A deeper self-interrogation reveals a veneer of change rather than a radical transformation toward ARAO research. Arguments to uphold traditional research often rebuff such introspection by arguing that the status quo is necessary to preserve objectivity and rigor.

Toward a Vision of Antiracist and Antioppressive Social Work Research

Social work can address racism and oppression directly through its scholarly practice, with the potential to advance an equitable society and become a model for rigorously applied ARAO research in interdisciplinary spaces. Although ARAO research has burgeoned, it is unclear how this methodology is different from other research methods (Dei, 2005), undercutting the potential of ARAO approaches to dismantle racism and oppression (Doucet, 2021). ARAO research critiques traditionally white-centered, Western approaches to research, from conceptualization to dissemination. The production of knowledge is inextricably linked to power and success in academia. Prestigious program grants are predominately awarded to white principal investigators (Onyejiaka, 2021). Scholars hold the power to assign meaning and value to participants' lived experiences and present those experiences as knowledge, often through a deficit lens. This approach of social-scientific data interpretation showing the inferiority of and problematizing of populations is described as an epistemologically violent action (Teo, 2010). Thus, all stages of research—including training, idea generation, epistemologies, theories, methods, funding, publishing, promotion, library cataloging, and more—must be critiqued using an ARAO lens (University of Minnesota, 2021). Ingrained practices and systems point to the need for clear guidance on ARAO research and a complementary vision for structural change.

Antiracist and Antioppressive Research Challenges and Opportunities

RCDC discussions reflect the challenges of centering ARAO research, including competing views about ways of knowing and what constitutes methodological rigor; data collection and aggregation practices that hide nuances across minoritized groups; limited time and resources, and productivity pressure that dissuade relationship building, deep critical reflection, and community engagement; and gaps in training and mentorship resources. For example, collaboration with the populations being studied is essential to ARAO research. In fact, community-engaged scholarship has

long been at the heart of social work research, and scholars have rightly called for community-engaged research to be considered the signature methodology of social work (Delavega et al., 2017). Unfortunately, the time-intensive process of community-engaged work is rarely facilitated by existing structures, such as tenure and promotion standards and institutional review board processes (Hammatt et al., 2011; Solomon et al., 2016).

The need to explicate how and what we know, what knowledge matters, what metrics are appropriate, and the terms and conditions of knowledge ownership is essential to ARAO research (Rogers, 2012; Strier, 2007). Although the communities we engage in research should be the coarchitects of the complete knowledge production process, the process often depends on scholars' capacity to commit to and implement these approaches. Additionally, ways of knowing that are primarily based on engaged scholarship using multiple methodologies—such as qualitative and mixed methods—and the contributions of those who are not formally trained as researchers are often considered “nonscientific” (Almeida et al., 2019; Curry et al., 2009). The preference for first- or sole-author publications, for establishing leadership in a field of study, and for receiving national or international recognition runs counter to deep, authentic community engagement. Another essential element is to value and uplift all minoritized groups. However, social work researchers focusing on unique areas and highly diverse populations often encounter challenges due to the limitations of available large-scale national data and issues of mistrust related to research in general. For example, highly diverse groups such as Asian Pacific Islanders and Desi Americans are often aggregated, making subpopulations invisible. Although the concept of rigor and the emphasis on large, representative samples favor larger, more easily engaged populations, research grounded in community perspectives that aims to identify unique experiences can meaningfully contribute to knowledge, even with small samples (Maleku et al., 2022). ARAO research requires that social work scholars are accountable for the input and critique of a diverse set of actors—including those in the academy and in the community—and directs us to reconsider the concept of research rigor that benefits our target populations. Unfortunately, the literature on implementing capacity-building frameworks for ARAO is scant. Thus, we have identified key steps that should be taken to advance ARAO research in social work.

Steps Toward Advancing Antiracist and Antioppressive Research

Dismantle White Supremacy in Social Work

The first step toward defining ARAO research is to describe the activities that have sustained white supremacy in social work research, both as a profession and as individual scholars. Among the social sciences, social work is uniquely positioned to foster and expand community-engaged research. Still, there remains a great deal

of work to be done in our own profession to weed out performative practices that reify racism. We must document how histories and structures of cumulative disadvantage and privilege seep into the social-psychological landscapes of populations and examine social problems and research dialectically in relation to complex dynamics across time, space, and groups (Fine, 2014), including our own role in the histories and processes. This work includes the further development and incorporation of critical theories that center race and other marginalized identities.

Understand Researcher Positionality

We must be curious, compassionate, and courageous enough to recognize, call out, and address racist and oppressive acts in real time. It is essential that all social work researchers understand their positionality. Understanding how researcher positionality informs what questions are asked, how research is designed, who is included in the research team, and how research is conducted is fundamental to ARAO research. Social work scholars can model these practices for their research teams and incorporate them into doctoral training by using insight-oriented exercises to clarify the primary motivation for their work. This critical self-reflection is key to co-constructing and co-conducting research that is driven by the needs and vision of the community and researchers' methodological expertise.

Promote Antiracist and Antioppressive Research Methods

Social work scholars must also develop and codify research approaches that promote ARAO research methods, such as community-engaged and community-driven research that honors community strengths and capacity. This requires the alignment of training, hiring, recognition, human subjects research oversight, and promotion practices that value this work. The advancement of ARAO research culture in social work requires investments at the individual and structural levels. It will require institutions, including social work leadership organizations, to invest in training, funding, and capacity-building initiatives that advance these practices.

Conclusion

Substantial work remains to center ARAO research in social work. To do so will require social work researchers to collectively and humbly engage in this effort. It is high time that social work—including scholars, professional organizations, publishers, and the broader community of partners who use social work evidence to inform policy and action—engages in radical leadership to promote and advance ARAO research practice in pursuit of the profession's social justice mission.

Author Notes

Bernadine Y. Waller, PhD, LMHC, is an NIMH T32 Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Psychiatry, Columbia University Irving Medical Center/New York State Psychiatric Institute.

Arati Maleku, PhD, is an associate professor at the College of Social Work, The Ohio State University.

Camille R. Quinn, PhD, AM, LCSW, LISW-S, is an associate professor at the Center for Equitable Family and Community Well-Being, School of Social Work, University of Michigan.

Anamika Barman-Adhikari, PhD, is an associate professor at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work.

Linda S. Sprague Martinez, PhD, is an associate professor at the Boston University School of Social Work.

Dorian Traube, PhD, is an associate professor at the Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, University of Southern California.

Jennifer L. Bellamy, PhD, is a professor and the Associate Dean for Research and Faculty Development at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work.

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Jennifer L. Bellamy via e-mail to Jennifer.Bellamy@du.edu.

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