Ethical Anti-oppression and substantive political transformation in Research

Dionisio Nyaga, Ph.D.[1,3]*, Rose Ann Torres, Ph.D.[2]

[1]School of Social Work, Algoma University, Canada
[2]Center of Excellence in Anishinaabe Education, Shingwauk Kinoomaage Gamig (University), Canada
[3]ORCiD: 0000-0003-2884-4240
*Corresponding author: Dionisio Nyaga, dionisio.nyaga@algomau.ca

Abstract. *N/A*.

Keywords: Critical Research Methodologies, Journal, Open Access.

Introduction

The anti-oppression framework in research, practice, and policy has been undergoing significant transformation, impacting various marginalized populations. Central to these changes is the need to foster substantive, transformative shifts that acknowledge the daily pain and suffering experienced by communities facing ongoing colonial violence. While anti-oppression broadly addresses social and political issues such as race, gender, and other forms of marginalization, hidden forms of oppression still persist within the framework itself (McLaughlin, 2005; Wilson, 2000; Yee & Wagner, 2013). From a social work perspective, anti-oppression must be re-evaluated and reinvigorated to ensure its principles align with an ethically transformative agenda. This involves reimagining the origins of the anti-oppressive framework, particularly in relation to the research that has historically supported its application (Wehbi & Parada, 2017). This journal sets anti-oppression on a path toward uncharted territory, opening up conversations and engagement from epistemological, methodological, axiological, and ontological perspectives. In this context, the journal serves as an essential resource that should be understood through a psychically informed lens.

Anti-oppression, as a framework, has been criticized for taking a generalized approach to oppression, which can overlook the specific circumstances and challenges faced by marginalized groups. As an umbrella term, anti-oppression briefly addresses specific forms of oppression (Williams, 1999), but in doing so, may inadvertently contribute to delaying meaningful responses to the pain experienced by affected individuals.This type of generalization stems from scientific reductionism, which assumes a singular truth about all marginalized communities and thus shapes social services based on this one-dimensional view (Pon, 2009). This Western, white-centric, and market-oriented simplification of marginalized communities has been linked to the social marginalization—or "social death"—of these communities (Nyaga, 2023), implicating both social work and research in this process. Anti-oppression has, in many ways, supported and encouraged neoliberalism by creating standardized tools intended to aid communities facing oppression (Yee & Wagner, 2013). Cultural competency or sensitivity is one such tool, developed within the framework of anti-oppression, which is promoted as a means for social workers to engage with marginalized communities in culturally appropriate ways (Pon, 2009). In many cases, such tools have been used in ways that prevent communities from expressing their concerns in ways that are true to their values, histories, and ways of being. Cultural competency, framed as an anti-oppression tool, assumes that there is a single, homogenous culture for each marginalized group. This perspective implies that all individuals within a cultural group must conform to the norms created by the tool. Those who do not fit, or cannot be made to fit, are often labeled as pathological, which then justifies further research aimed at reshaping them to align with a normalized cultural framework. This framing of individuals

who deviate from the norm reinforces a form of social incarceration, highlighting the need to critically examine and challenge white-centric and neoliberal research practices that perpetuate carceral dynamics. This type of epistemological and ontological violence appears to be defined, justified, and authorized by research and science. Anti-oppression frameworks have been criticized for inadvertently supporting whiteness and white supremacy by enabling covert forms of racism (Pon et al., 2011). Pon et al. (2011) argue that cultural competency, as an anti-oppressive tool, has contributed to the erasure of marginalized people's values and lived realities, thereby reshaping racism in ways that elude traditional perceptions. Contemporary racial discrimination is entangled with neoliberal marketization practices, which currently shape our understanding of knowledge and the process of knowledge creation. Consequently, research as a process of knowledge creation must go beyond performative approaches, striving to unlock possibilities within the neoliberal paradigm and opening pathways for substantive, ethically grounded anti-oppression-driven change.

Ethical anti-oppression in research, practice, and policy calls for reimagining oppression in ways that are intersectional, ethically transformative, and critically reflexive. This approach requires researchers to go beyond surface-level observations and recognize that, while all marginalized communities face oppression, certain oppressions are uniquely traumatic due to specific historical, cultural, and social contexts (Nyaga, 2023).

As researchers, we must be open to examining ourselves and the power we bring into the research process and practices (Harrington, 2005). This does not mean rejecting the institutional power bestowed upon us; rather, it involves recognizing that power as something we can wield to benefit others. In our role, we often approach knowledge-making with a foundation in Western thinking (Gegeo & Gegeo, 2001), where scientific methods are used to establish "truth." These forms of truth-making have historically been used to rationalize and simplify people's lives into a single narrative that is assumed to represent the realities of those we study. This "truth" is then packaged and marketed as a solution to people's problems (Nyaga, 2023). Such a truth is detached from relationships, life, and the dynamic existence of communities (Nyaga, 2021). This form of forgetting aligns with earlier comments about cultural competency and the ontology of forgetting (Pon, 2009). The impact of such epistemological and market-driven logic on marginalized communities is well-documented and has been extensively discussed by scholars from these communities (Nyaga, 2023). These practices of commodifying the pain and trauma of communities are not only protected but also sustained by anti-oppressive research, all while generating profits for corporations.

Anti-oppressive research has been criticized for sanitizing white-centric technologies that persist in policy and practice (Yee & Wagner, 2013). The anti-oppression framework itself has been framed as a white- and male-centric approach, often masking its true intentions under the guise

of helping and protecting marginalized communities. This approach assumes that by using qualitative research methods, marginalized communities can be supported and "saved" (Nyaga, 2021). While qualitative research has opened the door to recognizing the importance of storytelling in research—challenging the singularity of quantitative truth—it has also contributed to a subtle form of oppression. This form of oppression postpones addressing people's real problems and fosters an environment of manufactured freedom (Nyaga, 2021). Qualitative research, in its current form, has inadvertently helped create an industrialized and superficial narrative of social and political transformation, obscuring the ongoing colonial atrocities faced by marginalized groups across gender, race, class, disability, and other social markers. Therefore, it is crucial for all social research to prioritize an intersectional approach, considering how multiple identities intersect and compound, especially when market-driven methods are employed in research practices.

As an epistemological approach grounded in anti-oppression, qualitative research holds that all stories are of equal value. The key question, however, is whose story is deemed the most compelling and intelligible. In deciding which story takes precedence, others are marginalized or forgotten, burdened by the hierarchical structure of knowledge-making. Often, dominant narratives have been privileged in qualitative studies, overshadowing and silencing the stories of marginalized groups. This exclusion has had both material and symbolic consequences for those voices. Media, in particular, has reinforced the refusal to acknowledge that marginalized communities have their own important stories to tell. These stories are dismissed by the rationalizing power of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and are thus relegated to the status of mere "echoes." Anti-oppressive stories told within qualitative research conducted under a neoliberal regime have, in many ways, contributed to concealing oppression in more subtle, less visible forms. Oppression today is not as overt as it once was, but rather operates in insidious, hidden ways. As a result, qualitative research framed within anti-oppressive narratives may appear to benefit communities, yet it can also align with systems of oppression, effectively manufacturing a false sense of freedom for those on the margins of society. This journal highlights many of the ways in which oppression is obscured under the current paradigm of qualitative research. It offers a diverse range of perspectives on oppression, imagining and describing it in unique and complex ways.

In conclusion, this journal emphasizes the importance of examining oppression in research through both liberating and ethical lenses. While anti-oppression frameworks have played a crucial role in transforming communities, it is equally important to recognize how they have sometimes been used to create new forms of oppression. This journal aims to guide students, scholars, and others conducting research in marginalized communities to critically engage with the politics of knowledge production and begin asking new questions about social change.

References

Gegeo, D., and Watson-Gegeo, K. (2001). "How we know": Kwara'ae rural villagers doing Indigenous epistemology. The Contemporary Pacific, 13(1), 55-88.

Harrington, C. (2005). "Liberating" critical ethnography: Reflections from Fiji garment industry research. Anthropology Forum, 15(3), 287-296

McLaughlin, K. (2005). From ridicule to institutionalization: Anti-oppression, the state and social work. Critical Social Policy, 25(3), 283–305.

Nyaga, D. (2021). "Chapter 1 Critical Research Methodologies: Positionality, Ethics, Power". In *Critical Research Methodologies*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004445567_003

Nyaga, D. (2023). "Chapter 7 Markets Logics in Research Process and the Denigration of Black Bodies". In *Critical Reflexive Research Methodologies*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004681644_009

Nyaga, D. (2023). "Chapter 1 Making Research Black and Strange: Why History Matters in the Current Disappearing World". In *Critical Reflexive Research Methodologies*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004681644_003

Pon, G. (2009). Cultural Competency as New Racism: An Ontology of Forgetting. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, *20*(1), 59–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/10428230902871173

Pon, G., Gosine, K., and Phillips, D. (2011). IMMEDIATE RESPONSE: ADDRESSING ANTI-NATIVE AND ANTI-BLACK RACISM IN CHILD WELFARE. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies IJCYFS*, *2*(3/4), 385-. https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs23/420117763

Yee, J. Y., and Wagner, A. E. (2013). Is Anti-Oppression Teaching in Canadian Social Work Classrooms a Form of Neo-Liberalism? *Social Work Education*, *32*(3), 331–348. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2012.672557

Wehbi, S., and Parada, H. (Eds.). (2017). *Reimagining anti-oppression social work research*. Canadian Scholars.

Williams, C. (1999). Connecting anti-racist and anti-oppressive theory and practice. Retrenchment or reappraisal? British Journal of Social Work, 29(2), 211–230.

Wilson. (2000). "Anti-oppressive practice": emancipation or appropriation? *The British Journal of Social Work.*, *30*(5), 553–574. https://doi.org/info:doi/