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Practice Standards for Addressing Social Justice in Social Work Research

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Abstract

Social justice is a core value of the social work profession. Although various social work codes of ethics provide social workers with ethical guidance regarding research conduct, they do not specifically address how social workers can or should promote social justice when they are planning, conducting, and disseminating their research. This article offers a set of practice standards for social work researchers focusing on ways that they can conduct research in a manner that promotes social justice and redresses social injustices. These standards include both aspirational standards (moral goods to which social work researchers may aspire) and baseline standards (moral duties or minimum standards of good practice). Social work researchers can promote social justice not only by

choosing to conduct research related to social justice issues, but also by conducting their research in a manner that promotes social justice. The proposed standards address social justice concerns related to how the benefits, risks, and burdens of research are shared. They also identify ways to empower research participants, share power, and increase the capacities of various groups and communities to engage in research.

Keywords: Research, social work ethics, practice standards, social justice

Introduction

Social work codes of ethics in various countries recognize that social workers have an ethical duty to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession (British Association of Social Workers [BASW], s.2021; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021, s.5.01 [USA]; National Association of Social Workers in India, 2016, s.1-4). This duty may be realized by conducting research, evaluating practice and programs, and sharing knowledge through publications, presentations, and online and in-person discourse. By engaging in research activities, social workers can promote evidence-based practice, inform social policies and practices, and enhance wellbeing for the individuals, families, groups, and communities that social workers and allied helping professionals serve (Delva & Abrams, 2022).

In the United States, the NASW Code not only highlights social workers' duty to participate in research, but also describes how to conduct research in an ethical manner. Standard 5.02 provides guidance related to informed consent, confidentiality, risk, and integrity. Although the NASW Code identifies *promoting social justice* as a core professional principle, the duty to promote social justice is not directly reflected in the standards specific to research conduct. Given that research is an integral element of practice, social workers should consider whether and how social justice should be considered when making research-related decisions (Sobočan et al., 2019; Waller et al., 2022). The purpose of this article is to propose a set of practice standards on social justice and research, building on existing provisions in social work codes of ethics and providing specific guidance on

promoting social justice through research. The proposed standards are not intended to provide a final statement to be adopted by the profession. Rather, they offer a starting point for social work practitioners and organizations to consider, discuss, and determine what practice guidance the profession may use to inspire social workers engaged in research.

This article begins with a definitional framework for the practice standards, explaining key concepts incorporated into the standards. The balance of the article identifies specific practice standards focusing on how social work researchers (SWRs) may use research to promote social justice and address social injustices. The interpretation section under each standard offers guidance on how to implement these standards in various research situations.

Key Concepts

Before delving into the proposed practice standards, it is important to understand five key concepts: practice standards, social work research, social justice, common morality, and people in vulnerable situations. “Practice standards” describe current and emerging best practices in a particular area of social work. The NASW has established practice standards for various areas of practice, including school social work, palliative and end-of-life care, case management, and clinical social work (NASW, n.d.). The NASW has not developed practice standards for social work research. Practice standards may be used as educational tools for SWRs. SWRs can also use them to advocate with their research partners, employers, and sponsors, promoting ethically responsible research practice (Giordano et al., 2021). Although practice standards build on ethical standards, they are not the same as ethical standards. Ethical standards in the NASW Code of Ethics, for example, provide guidance on ethical conduct across all areas of social work practice. Practice standards relate to a specific area of practice, providing social workers with more detailed and in-depth guidance on best practices in these areas.

Whereas practice standards are developed by professional organizations, “regulatory standards” are laws establishing legally enforceable rules for a particular practice area. Within the United States, the Common Rule establishes national regulations for conducting research with human subjects (Protection of Human Subjects, 2018). Researchers receiving federal funding must comply with the Common Rule; however, not all social work research falls within the purview of the rule (e.g., if type of research does not fall within the Common Rule’s definition of research, as described below). The proposed research standards apply to research regardless of the funding source and whether the research involves human subjects. The Common Rule establishes legal baselines and consequences for researchers who violate them. Researchers may also need to comply with professional ethical codes, agency policies, and other research requirements that apply to their context of practice. The following practice standards include aspirational guidelines, going beyond baseline requirements and encouraging SWRs to strive for the highest social work principles and ethical standards (Barsky, 2023). To underscore that these practice standards for educational and aspirational purposes, they are written in a descriptive rather than prescriptive manner; that is, rather than prescribing what SWRs “shall” or “should” do, these standards describe good practices without suggesting that they are legally or ethically required.

For the purposes of this article, “research” refers to the deliberative study of particular phenomena to develop new knowledge or understandings (Joubert et al., 2023). “Social work research” is defined as research conducted by one or more professionally educated or credentialed social workers (Sobočan et al, 2019). Conducting research includes roles such as developing research questions, designing research methods, gathering and analyzing research data, and disseminating research findings. The reason this definition focuses on *who is conducting the research* (rather than *what the research is about*) is that these standards are designed to provide guidance for social workers engaging in research roles. When SWRs collaborate in research with people from other professions, each professional may refer not only to their own profession’s standards but also to professional standards

that apply to their research partners. When conflicts arise between the guidance offered in the different sets of professional standards, they should strive for consensus on how to best address social justice issues in relation to their research.

Although the Common Rule defines research in terms of investigations designed to promulgate “generalizable knowledge,” the definition of research for the purposes of the proposed standards includes investigations designed to develop and share generalizable knowledge as well as investigations designed for internal use. Accordingly, the research standards apply not only to generalizable research but also to program evaluations or other practice research designed for internal purposes (e.g., to improve one’s own services or programs; Joubert et al., 2023). It should be noted that different types of researchers have different roles and contexts of practice, which may affect how they use these standards. Program evaluators, for instance, may be hired by a social agency or government department specifically to evaluate a particular program or service provider (Wanzer, 2021). Program evaluators may have more limited ability to select the focus of their research than researchers in universities, for instance, who typically have greater latitude in determining their research agendas. Different organizations that conduct research have different organizational cultures, including the extent to which they support research that facilitates social change and social justice (McBride et al., 2019). These differences in roles and contexts of practice may affect whether and how different types of researchers may address social justice issues in their practice (just as social workers who work as clinicians, advocates, mediators, community organizers, family therapists, and so on may also have different opportunities and limitations on how they address social justice in practice).

“Social justice” may be defined in terms of fairness, equity, and inclusion for individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and other social units. Equity and fairness relate to the way that opportunities, burdens, and benefits are distributed in society (Anastas, 2013). According to Nussbaum’s (2011) capabilities approach, social justice also requires that people have sufficient abilities or resources to function well. In other words,

social justice depends on people having the capabilities required to maintain life, health, bodily autonomy, social wellbeing, and control over their environments. Social workers have an ethical duty to promote social justice which they may fulfill through activities that advance human rights, address human needs, improve lives, and remediate unjustified disparities (Cox & Maschi, 2023). Part 6 of the NASW (2021) Code of Ethics describes specific ways that social workers may advance social justice: promoting social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice; facilitating informed participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions; engaging in social and political action to ensure all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities; promoting conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity; and acting to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical ability. SWRs have recognized that the professional duty to address oppression and promote social justice includes social workers who are involved in research activities (Society for Social Work and Research Board of Directors, 2022).

The Common Rule, the Belmont Report, and other non-social work guidelines for researchers suggest that researchers have an obligation to promote “justice” rather than “social justice.” They define justice as the ethical principle of ensuring fairness in the distribution of the benefits, burdens, and risks of research (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979; Protection of Human Subjects, 2018). Although social justice includes concerns about the fairness of how the benefits, burdens, and risks of research are distributed, social justice is a broader concept than justice. Social justice suggests that SWRs should also consider how their choice of research processes and topics can address discrimination, oppression, unjustified social disparities,

and other social injustices, and advance the rights, needs, and wellbeing of individuals, groups, communities, and society.

“Common morality” refers to a system of moral guidelines that would be agreeable to all rational, unbiased people (Paranhos et al., 2019). Gert (2004) suggests that common morality includes 10 perfect duties: do not kill, do not cause pain, do not disable, do not deprive people of freedom, do not deprive people of pleasure, do not deceive, keep your promises, do not cheat, obey the law, and do your duty. They are “perfect duties” in the sense of being duties that people should follow all the time. Gert distinguishes moral duties from moral goods, actions that are morally desirable but not morally required. Examples of moral goods include be charitable, be loving, engage in self-care, prevent harm, and reduce risk of loss of freedom (Gert, 2004). Thus, “do not engage in actions that lead to social injustice” is a moral duty (avoid causing harm), whereas “do engage in actions that foster social justice” is a moral good (beneficence). The proposed standards include both moral duties and moral goods.

Under Standard 6.04(b) of the NASW Code of Ethics, social workers have an ethical duty to act on behalf of people in vulnerable situations, including people who have been oppressed, marginalized, traumatized, or exploited. Accordingly, the proposed standards on social work research and social justice specifically address concerns related to people in vulnerable situations. For the purposes of the proposed research standards, “people in vulnerable situations” refers to individuals, families, groups, communities, or other social units that are at greater risk of harm because of their particular circumstances. Vulnerability may include risks related to physical health, mental health, cognitive ability, communicative ability, employment, finances, family relationships, reputations, and other aspects of wellbeing (Anastas, 2020; Danchev & Ross, 2014). The Common Rule recognizes children, prisoners, and people who are pregnant as members of vulnerable groups (Protection of Human Subjects, 2018). Similarly, the Declaration of Helsinki, an international statement of ethics for medical research, states that people from vulnerable groups should receive special protection (World Medical Association, 2013, s.19). The United Nations (n.d.) identifies

people of African descent, Indigenous peoples, Roma, Sinti, migrants, women, and people living in extreme poverty as examples of vulnerable groups. Vulnerability, however, is not simply predicated on membership in a particular group (Craig, 2022). Vulnerability in research depends on the specific research participant's situation and the types of risks associated with a particular form of research (Anastas, 2020). For instance, a person who is pregnant may have a high level of vulnerability if the research involves an intervention that could harm fetuses; however, the same person may not be particularly vulnerable in a study that surveys attitudes toward social support. Examples of situations that may lead to higher levels of vulnerability include people with compromised cognitive capacity, health risks, histories of trauma, or susceptibility to discipline or punishment (e.g., prisoners, employees, students, or people in abusive relationships). In each of these examples, research participants may be vulnerable to exploitation due to power asymmetry between researchers and participants. To promote social justice for people in vulnerable situations, SWRs assess for potential vulnerabilities of research participants and methods of involving them in research without putting them at undue risk.

Proposed Practice Standards

The following practice standards include both aspirational standards (denoted by an A after the number) and baseline standards (denoted by a B after the number). As noted earlier, aspirational standards reflect moral goods or ideals. Although these behaviors are morally desirable, they are not required of all SWRs or of any particular SWR in all circumstances. Baseline standards reflect moral duties. Violations of baseline standards suggest that the SWR's conduct is causing harm. The proposed standards highlight both morally desirable research conduct as well as research conduct to be avoided.

1-A: SWRs consider how their research may be used to promote social justice and address social injustices.

As the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles suggests, “Social workers challenge discrimination and oppression, promote equitable distribution of resources, and build networks of solidarity to work toward inclusive and responsible societies” (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). Given the centrality of social justice in social work practice, SWRs contemplate whether and how their research may contribute to fairness, equity, and inclusion, reduce human suffering, and address social injustices such as discrimination, exploitation, colonization, and oppression (Hugman et al., 2011; Smith, 2012). When SWRs observe social injustices, they understand that they are not passive observers or bystanders; rather, they can play active roles in addressing the injustices (Danchev & Ross, 2014; Waller et al., 2022). The duty to consider social justice does not mean that all social work research needs to address social justice as its primary purpose; social workers may have other valuable reasons for engaging in research (e.g., generating knowledge; developing better understandings of various biological, psychological, social, and spiritual phenomena; providing valuable data to inform social work policies and practices). Still, SWRs consider how their research may contribute to social justice, regardless of its primary focus.

Examples of promoting social justice through research include:

- giving voice to people who have been underrepresented, ignored, or oppressed;
- illuminating or raising awareness of social injustices that need to be addressed (by governments, community groups, organizations, or other social units); and
- evaluating social policies, programs, or interventions designed to promote social justice or redress injustices such as discrimination, oppression, and trauma.

SWRs may also use postmodern and critical theories to inform their research and explore experiences of oppression among various diversity groups, including people with intersecting social identities (Drake & Hodge, 2022).

2-A: When determining what research questions to study, what methods to use, funding sources, how to analyze the data, and how to share the findings, SWRs consider how the research findings may be used, whose interests are being served, and how the research supports or hinders social work values such as social justice, empowerment, and respect for the dignity and worth of all people.

2-B: SWRs do not participate in research that contributes to discrimination or oppression, or excludes certain groups on the basis of culture, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, mental capacity, sex, sexuality, gender identity or expression, or other aspects of human diversity.

Social justice may refer to equity or fairness in the way that burdens and benefits are distributed in society (Anastas, 2020). Accordingly, SWRs ensure that the benefits and burdens of their research projects are shared equitably among various groups involved in or affected by the research (Flynn, 2021). They also ensure that burdens are not unduly imposed upon particular individuals or groups. SWRs promote social justice in terms of how their research is conducted and how their research may be used (Sobočan et al, 2019). To consider how their research may impact social justice, SWRs ask themselves:

- What is the purpose of the research?
- Who is deciding how this research will be conducted (e.g., the scope of the research, how data will be gathered, and how data will be analyzed)?
- Whose interests does the research serve?
- Who will benefit from the research?
- Who may be harmed by the research?

- Are the benefits and harms of the research being shared in a fair or equitable manner?
- Are any individuals or groups being put at an unjustifiable level of risk?
- Should the research address the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, or other aspects of human diversity?
- How will the research findings be written, disseminated, and used?
- What roles, if any, will research participants and their community play in the dissemination and use of the research findings?

(Anastas, 2020; Lauve-Moon et al., 2021; Nygård & Saus, 2016; Smith, 2012).

SWRs are aware of the implications of their research (Flynn, 2021). By analyzing the potential benefits and risks, SWRs strive to ensure that their research provides an equitable distribution of benefits and risks. SWRs consider both community benefits and risks, as well as individual benefits and risks (Nygård & Saus, 2016). When SWRs focus their research on a particular group or groups for one project, they may focus future research on other groups, so their overall research agenda supports the principles of social justice.

When disseminating research findings, SWRs make deliberate choices about how and where to share this information (Giordano et al., 2021). By ensuring their research is brought to the attention of particular audiences (e.g., government, community leaders, professional associations, or social advocates), SWRs can raise the likelihood that their research may be used to promote social justice or address particular injustices. In addition to disseminating research through journal articles and conference presentations, SWRs may consider creative options such as art, theatre, workshops, person-to-person consultation, traditional press, and social media to share their findings and promote social change (Danchev & Ross, 2014; Delva & Abrams, 2022).

SWRs avoid research funding from sources that foster discrimination, exploitation, or other injustices. Accepting resources from sources that engage in such practices may taint the research and may facilitate future injustices. When SWRs are deciding whether to accept funding from sources with a history of exploitation or discrimination, they consider whether the source's current practices are consistent with social justice and whether the proposed research will contribute to social justice. In particular, SWRs avoid accepting research funding from sources that attach conditions or controls that conflict with their professional ethical obligations (Jones, 2014), including promotion of social justice.

3-A: SWRs are attentive to how their research may be used by policy makers, programs, and others, particularly for issues that are politically or ethically controversial (e.g., abortion, gun safety, racism, immigration, sexuality, and gender).

3-B: SWRs do not participate in research when there is significant risk that the research will be used to foster discrimination or oppression, or to exploit individuals, families, groups, or communities.

SWRs use reflection to be aware of the perspectives informing their research (Danchev & Ross, 2014; Lyons et al, 2013), including the perspectives of the research participants and the theory that they are using. This awareness allows them to be honest and transparent about how and why they are conducting specific research projects. SWRs recognize that production of knowledge is not neutral. Research may be affected by its cultural and political context; research may also have an impact on these contexts (Nygård & Saus, 2016). By being aware of the potential uses of research, SWRs can take reasonable measures to ensure that their research is used for morally good purposes, including the possibility of promoting social justice and addressing oppression (Delva & Abrams, 2022). They can also take reasonable precautions to pre-empt situations where their research is used for immoral purposes, including promotion of injustices (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia, or xenophobia). For instance, SWRs may be studying factors

contributing to economic disparities between different ethnocultural groups. To promote social justice, SWRs may design and present the research in a manner that supports efforts to redress these disparities. Alternatively, if the research is designed to stigmatize or discriminate against certain groups, SWRs do not knowingly participate in such research. When there is substantial risk that research findings could be used to promote social injustices, SWRs could alter the way that the research is being conducted and presented. They could also decide not to participate in such research and discourage others from doing so.

Some research projects are clearly unethical due to their obvious and deliberate negative impact on social justice (e.g., research sponsored by a government intelligence organization to determine which types of psychological torture are most likely to produce admissions of guilt). SWRs do not engage in research designed to traumatize or emotionally manipulate people. Other types of research may have more ambiguous impacts on social justice (e.g., research on factors contributing to child neglect, which might be used to design more effective child neglect prevention programs but might also be used to stigmatize particular groups). SWRs can reduce the risks through their research design and manner of presenting their findings.

4-A: SWRs are attentive, caring, and responsive to the needs and wishes of research participants and other stakeholders involved or affected by the research process.

4-B: SWRs do not treat research participants with disrespect or violate their rights to self-determination.

As caring moral agents, SWRs treat people with kindness, compassion, attentiveness, and responsiveness (Danchev & Ross, 2014; Stout et al., 2020). In addition to attending to the needs of research participants, SWRs attend and respond to the needs of additional stakeholders, such as research assistants and research administrators. SWRs do not exploit people by extracting information from them and then ignoring their needs and wishes. They pay attention to people's needs and wishes and address them in an appropriate manner.

Some research textbooks and research regulations refer to people who participate in research projects as informants, respondents, subjects, or sources of information (Hugman et al., 2011). Unfortunately, using these terms suggests that people are passive objects or things rather than sentient human beings who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Referring to people who participate in research as “research participants,” “research partners,” “co-researchers,” or simply “people,” reminds SWRs to treat them with a caring, attentive, and respectful disposition. When SWRs view people involved in their research as active participants, then they may be involved as people who can act, change, and be changed by the research; further, the participants can take active roles in designing, implementing, and leading the research (Danchev & Ross, 2014; Serbati et al., 2019).

Research approaches such as participatory action research, emancipatory research, and community-engaged research are designed to involve people in various stages of research development and implementation (Brown & Strega, 2015; Danchev & Ross, 2014; Engen et al., 2019; Hollinrake et al., 2019; Nygård & Saus, 2016; Sobočan et al, 2019). Researchers and participants collaborate to gain a better understanding of a problematic situation and to spur action to improve the situation (e.g., through changes in social policies or interventions). Rather than designing research in a top-down manner, SWRs may collaborate with research participants to ensure their research is culturally informed, respectful, and responsive to their culture(s) and needs. When people have the capacity to design and implement research, they acquire greater agency and influence over what types of topics are studied. These approaches support social justice by empowering people most directly affected by the situation (Anastas, 2020). They also provide opportunities for SWRs and research participants to share ownership of the research and co-create knowledge (Andersen, 2019).

When SWRs use other research approaches, they can make use of some elements of participatory action, emancipatory, or community-engaged research to foster certain degrees of empowerment and social justice. For instance, SWRs may

- engage people affected by the research to gather meaningful input on the topics to be studied and the best ways to study them (Schroeder et al., 2019);
- invite people affected by the research to participate in meaningful research roles (e.g., research design, participant recruitment, interviewing, data analysis, monitoring to ensure the research is conducted appropriately, composing the findings, and sharing the findings through written publications, oral presentations, trainings, or other means);
- increase the capacity of groups or communities by offering training, mentorship, and support so research participants are empowered to carry out particular research roles (Greene et al, 2022; Hollinrake et al., 2019);
- approach research participants with cultural humility, recognizing them as experts in their own culture, perspectives, needs, and experiences (NASW, 2021, s.1.05[c]);
- engage research participants in open and honest discussions to ensure their needs and wishes are considered when making research decisions (Andersen, 2019);
- acknowledge role and power differences between SWRs and research participants, striving for equitable participation and mutual respect (Donnelly et al., 2019); and
- review research findings with people affected by the research to obtain feedback, make appropriate revisions, and determine the best ways to share the research findings and act on them (Danchev & Ross, 2014).

If SWRs conduct research without sufficient input from people affected by the research, they may not understand the local context of the research or its potential impact (Nygård & Saus, 2016). Further, they may be more prone to making research decisions that are disrespectful or exploitative. Consider

a research project in which researchers provide older adults with robotic dogs to explore whether relationships with robotic dogs assist with feelings of loneliness, anxiety, or depression. If SWRs remove a robotic dog from an older adult at the end of the research period, they may not be attending to the needs and wishes of the older adult. To avoid exploiting research participants, SWRs consider whether and how research participants will have access to services and resources not only during the research period, but also after the research has been completed. While SWRs are attentive, caring, and responsive to the needs and wishes of research participants, they also maintain their research role and do not cross boundaries into a therapeutic or helping role (Danchev & Ross, 2013; NASW, 2021, s.1.06[c]). For example, if a research participant requests or requires health or social services, SWRs could link them with services rather than provide services directly.

5-A: SWRs engage in critical self-reflection to raise awareness of their own biases, assumptions, and purposes for conducting particular research projects.

Critical reflection is a component of cultural humility (NASW, 2021, s.1.05) in which social workers strive for awareness of their social location and cultural affiliations, their personal biases and beliefs, and possible impacts of these biases and beliefs on practice (Taiwo, 2022). Within research practice, bracketing refers to being aware of one's biases and setting them aside to engage in research. SWRs may use research journaling, consultation, or supervision to reflect on how their social locations, thoughts, and feelings may be affecting their research (e.g., feelings of guilt, shame, or blame when studying the effects of poverty; D'Cruz & Jones, 2014). Through critical reflection, SWRs cultivate genuine curiosity and remain open to learning from their research participants, rather than basing their research on biases or preconceptions (Danchev & Ross, 2014; Lyons et al., 2013). By treating research participants as experts in their own cultures and lives, SWRs demonstrate respect for their dignity, worth, and ways of knowing (Anastas, 2020).

When developing literature reviews, SWRs are mindful of biases in the research and theories that they consider. They present multiple

perspectives (Giordano et al., 2021), paying particular attention to the perspectives and concerns of groups that have experienced oppression or are underrepresented in existing literature. SWRs are aware of the local contexts of their research to avoid misconceptions, discrimination, and biased knowledge (Nygård & Saus, 2016).

Before entering a research participant's home or community, SWRs consider ways to ensure that they are doing so respectfully. Prior to meeting, they learn about the community's customs, belief systems, and norms (Guedes & Guimarães, 2020; D'Cruz & Jones, 2014). For instance, it may be important to ask about the etiquette for asking permission to enter, for discussing potentially embarrassing topics, or for maintaining culturally appropriate boundaries. Upon entering a participants' home, SWRs may ask what they can do to be respectful of the participant's home. When leaving, they can ask if they have said or done anything that could have caused harm and offer to address said harm. Being respectful of communities includes being respectful of virtual communities and other digital environments (e.g., social media sites and online groups). Some digital environments may not welcome researchers. Others may require certain forms of administrative, group, and individual consent to the research.

Throughout all research stages, SWRs attend to the language they use to ensure that they affirm cultural meanings and address social injustices (Greene et al., 2022). They avoid stigmatizing or disrespectful language. SWRs use questions that appreciate diversity of experiences and perspectives. They avoid leading questions, including ones indicating which choices are socially desirable (D'Cruz & Jones, 2014). When interviewing, SWRs may mirror language used by research participants (Smith, 2012). To guard against assumptions or misunderstandings, they ask clarification questions. Before presenting findings, they may check back with research participants to ensure the findings accurately reflect their input and perspectives. SWRs provide proper attribution to their sources of information, including the voices of their research participants and partners (Craig, 2022).

6-A: When designing and implementing research, SWRs take appropriate steps to ensure their research samples are inclusive of people from various backgrounds, including people in vulnerable situations and people from historically underrepresented groups.

6-B: When designing and implementing research, SWRs do not discriminate against or exclude people in vulnerable situations or people from historically underrepresented groups, subject to ethically justifiable exceptions for focusing research on some groups and not others.

As the Common Rule §46.111(a)(3) suggests, SWRs ensure that selection of research participants is equitable, meaning that the research risks and benefits are shared in a fair manner. To ensure that benefits of research are shared equitably, SWRs strive to include people from various backgrounds. For some types of research, it may be easier or less expensive to study one particular group in society and exclude other groups (e.g., children, women, people of color, Indigenous people, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, people who do not speak English, people with compromised mental capacity). Excluding particular groups from society means the research findings and benefits may not be generalizable or applicable to the excluded groups (Flynn, 2021). Accordingly, SWRs consider whether and how to include diverse and often-underrepresented groups in their research, even when it may complicate the research or increase the time and costs of conducting the research (Stout et al, 2020).

When involving people from vulnerable situations in research, SWRs take appropriate steps to ensure they are treated with dignity and respect, their participation is meaningful, and they are not exposed to undue risks (Craig, 2022). SWRs do not view participants solely through the lens of vulnerability; they view participants as people first, with strengths and capacities as well as vulnerabilities (Danchev & Ross, 2014). SWRs may advocate for additional funding and resources to ensure their research is inclusive of diverse and often-underrepresented groups. To conduct research with people with communication disabilities, for instance, SWRs may request funding to pay for assistive communication technology (Anastas, 2020).

SWRs avoid selecting particular groups for participation in research solely because of their “easy availability, their compromised position, or

their manipulability, rather than for reasons directly related to the problem being studied” (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979, Part B). For example, people receiving social assistance, subsidized housing, or other government benefits may be vulnerable to exploitation, concerned that benefits may be withheld unless they consent to the research. When SWRs include participants with specific vulnerabilities, they ensure that participation is fully informed and voluntary (Craig, 2022). They do not use undue inducements to participate in research, for instance, compensation so high that participants agree to participate in research involving risks they would not ordinarily accept (Anastas, 2020; NASW, 2021, s.5.02[e]).

As the principle of nonmaleficence suggests, SWRs take appropriate steps to avoid or minimize harm to the people or communities they are studying. Some risks may be justified in situations where risks are balanced with potential benefits to the research participants (Sobočan et al., 2019). For example, research participants may be willing to discuss traumatic experiences, knowing that they may experience additional stress, but also knowing that their participation can help social workers or others provide better services to people who have experienced similar trauma. Particular ways of safeguarding research participants from harm depend on the particular research project and the participants’ specific vulnerabilities (e.g., cognitive, medical, financial, or social; Anastas, 2020). Examples of protecting participants from harm include safeguarding their anonymity or confidentiality, ensuring consent is voluntary and fully informed, assessing mental capacity and obtaining consent from an appropriate proxy when needed, inviting feedback about concerns throughout the research process, having an independent professional provide monitoring¹ and offer referrals or

¹ The choice of monitors depends on the particular situation. If conducting research within an agency context, the agency may have personnel who are already designated to oversee services and research. They may also have people responsible for

support (as needed), avoiding topics that may trigger strong emotional reactions to past trauma, and asking questions or performing procedures only as needed for the central purposes of the research. SWRs prioritize the well-being of research participants over their other interests in completing the research (Danchev & Ross, 2014). SWRs also consider international, national, and local laws and regulations concerning how to treat people in vulnerable situations (e.g., European Commission, 2020, 2021).

7-A: SWRs may promote social justice by using research to give voice to people whose perspectives should be heard.

7-B: SWRs do not blame service users or other people for problems they are experiencing.

Some researchers suggest that their primary role is to search for truths in an objective manner (D’Cruz & Jones, 2014). Still, SWRs are not impartial about social injustice and human suffering (Sobočan et al., 2019). Developing and using research to pursue social justice is not inconsistent with making the research as objective as possible. SWRs may make use of rigorous research methods, seek accurate information, and report findings accurately regardless of whether one of their research purposes is to promote social justice. For example, consider an SWR hired to identify service needs for people with bipolar disorder. The research findings are more likely to be persuasive if the research is based on sound methods. Note, however, if the research is intended to give voice to the perspectives of people with bipolar disorder, then the research will be structured to provide subjective views rather than objective information. As this example suggests, not all research is intended to procure objective truth. When research is designed to give voice to

assessing and monitoring risks. Monitors should have training and expertise related to the particular risks involved in the research (e.g., if the risks are related to mental capacity, then the monitors could be mental health professionals with expertise in this area). When researchers are selecting monitors, they should consult with the agencies or communities with whom they are working to ensure that the choice of monitors is appropriate.

particular individuals or groups (Hugman et al., 2011), SWRs disclose the perspectives upon which the research is based (Craig, 2022). They convey the perspectives of research participants in an honest, transparent, and accurate manner (NASW, 2021, 5.02[0]; Schroeder et al., 2019). They do not minimize or exaggerate problems to make political points or raise money (Sadzaglishvili et al., 2021). When using research to give voice to particular individuals or groups, SWRs ensure that they have informed consent to do so (Sobočan et al., 2019). Prior to disseminating research findings, SWRs may check with research participants to ensure the findings accurately reflect their views or experiences. SWRs may also empower research participants to present the findings on their own behalf, orally or in writing.

When research focuses on particular diversity groups, SWRs avoid “othering” members of the groups, treating them as intrinsically “different” or “alien” (Smith, 2012). SWRs demonstrate respect for the dignity and worth by using inclusive language and by avoiding language that blames, stereotypes, divides, or denigrates particular groups (NASW, 2021, s.5.02[e]; Sobočan et al., 2019). For instance, asking “Why do battered women stay with partners who abuse them?” is based on a stereotype and implies that women experiencing battering are at fault if they stay with partners who have abused them (D’Cruz & Jones, 2014). SWRs avoid language and questions based on sexism, racism, homophobia, or other discriminatory assumptions. SWRs do not focus only on problems or pathologies; they also explore strengths and resilience within individuals and groups.

8-A: SWRs strive for the highest standards of research ethics and social justice, whether they are working in well-resourced countries, states, regions, or organizations or in settings that with very limited resources.

8-B: SWRs do not engage in ethical dumping, the export of unethical research practices from a high-income setting to a resource-poor setting.

When designing research, SWRs attend to local requirements for conducting ethical research (Global Code of Conduct of Research in Resource-Poor

Settings, 2020). When certain research practices are prohibited as unethical in one country, state, region, or organization, then SWRs do not simply transfer their research to other locations that lack sufficient legal protections or structural resources to guard against unethical research (Schroeder et al., 2019). For example, if a well-resourced social agency deems certain research too risky for its clients, then SWRs do not simply find an under-resourced agency to conduct their research and expose clients to undue risks. Similarly, if it would be unethical in the United States for SWRs to conduct research without informed consent from each research participant, then ordinarily, SWRs would not conduct their research in another country that does not require consent from each participant.

If there are ethically justifiable reasons for conducting research in one location that would be considered unethical in another location, then SWRs articulate the ethical justification. In countries with communitarian cultures, for instance, it may be more appropriate to obtain community consent rather than individual consent (Dominelli & Holloway, 2008). Even when planning to request individual consent from research participants, obtaining prior assent from a community consent may demonstrate respect to the community (Schroeder et al., 2019). When conducting international research, SWRs may refer to the Global Code of Conduct to Counter Ethics Dumping for additional guidelines on how to avoid ethics dumping (European Commission, 2018).

9-A: SWRs use respectful engagement and input from the relevant Indigenous groups or communities.

9-B: SWRs do not expropriate Indigenous knowledge or exploit Indigenous communities or groups. Given the history of colonialism and exploitation of Indigenous communities and groups, SWRs take particular precautions to ensure that their research respects their dignity and worth and guards against exploitation (Craig, 2022). The principle of “nothing about us without us” suggests that Indigenous peoples have a right to be involved in decision making regarding research pertaining to them (Brown & Strega, 2015). SWRs engage

community leaders or other members as research partners to ensure that their research focus, methods, and other research decisions are respectful of the Indigenous community or group, including its spirituality, traditions, values, belief systems, and ways of knowing and understanding. As an ethics of care approach suggests, SWRs do not treat people as the objects of their inquiries, but rather, listen to and collaborate with people (D'Cruz & Jones, 2014), including Indigenous groups and communities (Smith, 2012). To respect the values and concerns of Indigenous communities, it may be appropriate to seek collective consent from the community, rather than just individual consent from research participants (Craig, 2022).

When working with Indigenous communities and groups, SWRs do not expropriate Indigenous knowledge (Anastas, 2020). When planning their research, they discuss concerns such as who will have ownership of the data and findings, how the findings will be presented, and whether and how SWRs will be permitted to present the perspectives or voices of Indigenous peoples on their behalf. SWRs ensure that Indigenous groups may benefit from the findings of the research (e.g., by sharing research findings and advocating together for changes in policies, laws, or interventions to benefit the communities or groups who participated in the research). SWRs recognize that Indigenous groups are not homogenous. SWRs strive to understand and respect cultural and individual differences within Indigenous groups (Craig, 2022).

10-A: When using artificial intelligence, algorithms, or other technology designed to assist with data gathering and decision making, SWRs consider how this technology can be used to facilitate understanding and enhance practice and policy, as well as risks related to social control, bias, and misuse of the technology.

10-B: When SWRs are using or studying technology as part of their research, they ensure that technology is not being used to facilitate discrimination, oppression, or other forms of social injustice

Technology may be used in ways that promote social justice, facilitate social injustice, or are neutral with respect to promoting social justice or injustice (Steiner, 2021). In terms of decision making, for instance, computers can assist with making faster, more comprehensive, and fairer assessments (Rahimzadeh et al., 2022). Technology can be programmed to avoid biases, stereotypes, and assumptions that might arise when humans conduct assessments. Consider risk-assessment decisions regarding suicide, homicide, child abuse, or elder abuse. Given that risk assessments may be used to make decisions about clinical and legal interventions, it is important that these assessments are valid and reliable. By gathering and assessing data from various sources and calculating correlations between various factors, algorithms can be developed to predict human behavior based on objective evidence (Devlieghere et al., 2022).

Although automated decision making has the capacity to promote social justice, SWRs understand the risk that automated decision making could be based on stereotypes, overgeneralizations, or other biases. Accordingly, it is important to have human oversight to evaluate the extent to which automated decision making and other technology are facilitating social justice or injustice (Hine, 2021). Rather than assuming that automated assessments are inherently better (or worse) than those conducted by humans, SWRs may explore how clients, social workers, and other professionals can make use of technology to improve decision making, while still maintaining the human components of assessments and practice. SWRs can play a vital role in working with computer scientists and other

researchers to ensure that the use of technology in assessment and practice is evaluated through a social justice lens. Technology may be viewed as a tool for practice which may be used in conjunction with other tools, including assessments and interventions led by social workers or other professionals.

Given that social justice means that the benefits and burdens of risks of research should be shared equitably, SWRs ensure that technology does not prevent fair access to and participation in research (NASW, 2021, 5.02[f]). SWRs may use assistive technology to facilitate access to people from diverse backgrounds, including people with disabilities and other groups that may otherwise face challenges in participating in the research. When SWRs use technology to engage people in research, they take steps to ensure that certain groups and individuals are not excluded from the research because they do not have access to technology, they are not comfortable using technology, they do not trust technology to gather information on confidential or anonymous bases, or there are other challenges in using the technology. Ways to improve access to research participation include

- providing research participants with technology (e.g., computers, tablets),
- offering training and support to use technology,
- ensuring the technology is easy to use for people with disabilities and people with lower levels of computer literacy, and
- offering participation without the requirement for using technology (e.g., having a researcher ask questions and submit answers on behalf of research participants).

Providing people with access to technology can also assist with more equitable access to research reports and findings (Marcum & Donohue, 2023).

Conclusion

The proposed practice standards highlight ways that social workers can promote social justice through research, paying attention not only to the topics that they study, but also to the research methods that they use, how they show respect for the people affected by and involved in the research, and how their research is presented and shared. When conducting research for this article, the authors consulted various SWRs and ethicists, inviting their feedback about developing practice standards. One challenge that they highlighted was how to ensure that social workers are aware of the standards. For the proposed standards to have a meaningful impact, social workers need to be aware of them, including how to implement them in their research endeavors.

The overarching theme of the proposed standards is that it is important for SWRs to consider how their research processes and findings may be used to promote social justice and address various forms of oppression. Social work research has the capacity to instigate and support social change, including the promotion of social justice. Although not all research needs to be geared specifically toward social justice, SWRs can, at a minimum, take steps to ensure that their research does not oppress, discriminate, or otherwise contribute to social injustices. Right from the moment of conceptualizing their research, SWRs may consider the potential implications of their research, not only for their research participants, but also for their organizations, communities, and broader society. Just as social workers respect dignity and worth of their clients, SWRs also respect the dignity and worth of their research participants and other stakeholders affected by their research. To avoid imposing biases, assumptions, and stereotypes, SWRs can use critical self-reflection to raise their self-awareness. SWRs can also promote social justice by ensuring their research is inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds, including people from vulnerable situations. SWRs may use research to give voice to people who might not otherwise have the power or opportunity to be heard. SWRs are aware of the injustices of past research practices, and the need to guard against unethical practices when

working with Indigenous peoples, people in resource-poor settings, and other people in vulnerable situations. When using artificial intelligence, algorithms, or other technology designed to assist with research, data gathering, and decision making, also take precautions to guard against social control, bias, and other potential misuses of the technology.

These practice standards may be used by national and regional social work organizations to stimulate discussions about the role of social justice in social work research through conference workshops, continuing education trainings, journal articles, and other publications. They may also be incorporated into research courses to ensure that the next generation of social workers learns how to view and construct research through the lens of social justice. Social justice is an integral guiding principle for social work practice. Given that social work research is also an integral element of social work practice, it is vital that social workers understand how to promote social justice and redress social injustices through research.

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