



Trauma- Informed Socially Just Research Framework

RESEARCH BRIEF

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THE CONTEXT

We approach this work with several acknowledgments. First, many people have been working to raise consciousness of systemic racism inherent in scholarly productions for many years, and numerous resources exist that contribute to anti-racist scholarship. Many of these contributors are Black, Indigenous, People of Color operating both within and outside of academia. The work we offer here must be put into this historical context. Second, we acknowledge that this framework is only one tool and is likely incomplete. We encourage readers to invest in as many tools as possible to advance their own understanding and interrogate their process of research. Finally, among both academics and local communities, the process of knowledge production has a long and rich history.

With this history, we acknowledge that there are many different ways of knowing. Our team seeks to center social justice and participant empowerment in our framework of knowledge production.

We build upon the legacy of frameworks like community-based participatory research that center the expertise of local communities and antiracist scholarship that aims to decenter whiteness and acknowledge racism inherent in numerous systems used to carry out research. Above all, we acknowledge the wealth of knowledge and experience that local communities bring into research. Reflecting on our direct experience in the field, our team aims to think and operate more relationally, rather than clinically, with study participants.

THE NEED

Research has shown a strong association between trauma and adversity and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, exposing the unequal distribution of trauma throughout society that is rooted in social inequities and systemic racism. Due to the link between trauma and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, working with these communities requires great care to ensure we empower, rather than disempower, the communities that we engage through research.

THE PURPOSE

As a profession, social workers must challenge social injustices committed against socioeconomically disadvantaged populations and work toward social change, while abiding by our professional code of ethics. This call to action requires social workers to uphold socioeconomically disadvantaged populations as the experts and stewards of their own lives in both practice and research settings.

Under this mandate, study participants in social work research must be active rather than passive agents in the research process. In short, researchers need to prioritize amplifying community voices and community-led solutions when researching solutions to social problems.

Researchers should refrain from prescribing outsider solutions to communities and aspire to go beyond the do-no-harm model of research. It is time to work towards a new model of partnership: knowledge co-production between researchers and study participants.

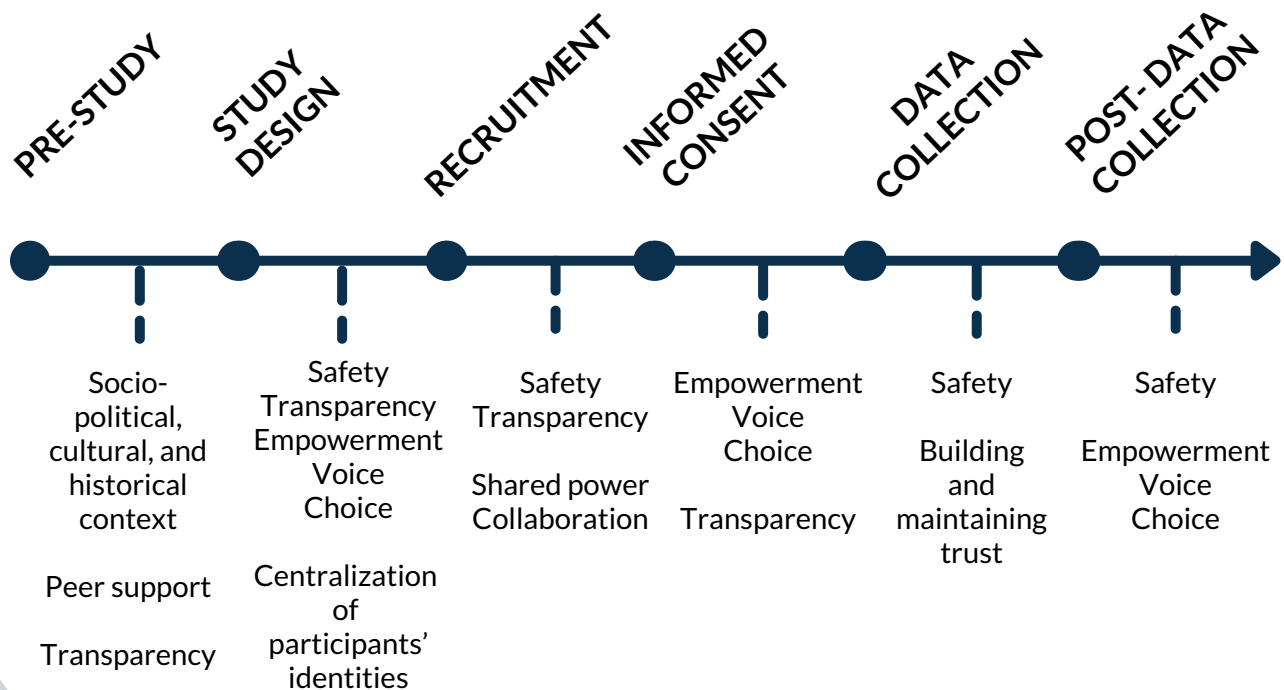
THE FRAMEWORK

Our model draws from trauma-informed principles, intersectionality, and healing-centered engagement to encourage trauma-informed socially just research (TISJR).

Taking into account the focus on socioeconomically disadvantaged populations in social work, the social justice orientation of the field, and intersection of trauma with socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, this framework encourages researchers to consider the following in their social work studies:

1. Assess the proximity to and power over socioeconomically disadvantaged communities through research
2. Uphold an ethical responsibility to prioritize social justice orientation in all work
3. Seek to understand trauma and adversity experienced by study participants and study team
4. Active commitment to alleviate trauma and harm experienced by study participants and study team
5. Center identities to resist re-traumatization and promote transformative interactions
6. Incorporate and embed anti-racist and decolonizing methodologies and approaches, in partnership with BIPOC communities

Each stage of the research process holds unique TISJR principles and steps, which prioritize the empowerment of communities that researchers work alongside.



TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE (TIC)

Applying trauma theory in practice shifts the orientation of the clinician from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?” To incorporate TIC, first researchers must realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand paths to recovery. Second, researchers must recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in both research participants and researchers. Third, researchers must integrate knowledge on trauma into research policies, procedures, and practices. Finally, researchers must seek to actively resist retraumatization in participants, staff, and researchers.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

To orient research toward social justice, we utilize the concept of intersectionality to identify a population’s social location in society along racial, socioeconomic, cultural, and historical contexts. The multi-lensed view of oppression through intersectionality assesses the structural inequalities that disempower certain populations.

HEALING-CENTERED ENGAGEMENT

Together, trauma-informed care and social justice perspectives create Healing-Centered Engagement, which is an inherently strengths-based political perspective. As a whole, this perspective moves away from a solely individual trauma focus and moves toward an intentional top-down, systems approach that assesses the structural inequalities that perpetuate trauma.

THE STEPS

This guide provides a step-by-step guide for how our team aligned the TISJR framework with a study that explored the lived experiences of low-income, predominantly African American men recruited from a criminal justice setting. The TISJR steps in this section detail our team’s process. We acknowledge that the example study provided is only one study and one way of applying TISJR. The checkpoint questions following each research stage are there to help your team reflect and consider how to incorporate more TISJR principles into your work.

RESEARCH STAGE	TISJR STEPS
<p>PRE-STUDY</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand the historical, sociopolitical, and cultural context of the study population 2. Select a study setting to promote a sense of physical safety, psychological safety, transparency, and empowerment 3. Participate in a trauma training to identify trauma in both the community and the researchers’ own social locations
<p><i>Questions to ask on your research team during the pre-study stage: How might systems of privilege and oppression affect my study? And how can I mitigate these effects to encourage a healing-centered engagement?</i></p>	
<p>STUDY DESIGN</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Give participants autonomy in surveys by build in a “refuse to answer” item for each question to respect participant autonomy 2. Enhance the privacy of disclosure by having a private room for the participants with a research assistant nearby 3. Provide self-administered surveys to reduce the stress of verbal self-disclosure
<p><i>Before moving on to the next stage, ask: How am I promoting safety, transparency, and choice among participants? Have I centralized the lived experiences and identities of participants while keeping in mind the research goals of the study?</i></p>	

TRAUMA-INFORMED SOCIALLY JUST RESEARCH

RECRUITMENT	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Minimize power differentials in the study environment by limiting role of participant probation officers2. Acknowledge the past harm research has committed against socioeconomically disadvantaged populations3. Ask participants to share their knowledge of research processes to start the research process on more mutual terms
<p><i>Before moving on to the next stage, ask: Have I promoted collaboration between participants and those involved directly or indirectly with the study? Is the study team ready to acknowledge and discuss the differences in social location between researchers and participants, acknowledging sociopolitical and historical contexts?</i></p>	
INFORMED CONSENT	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Provide a paper copy of the survey during verbal disclosure2. Provide the option for participants to receive results of the study upon its completion
<p><i>Before moving on to the next stage, ask: Have I accounted for potential challenges for trauma-exposed populations? Have I ensured the psychological and physical safety of the participants through the process?</i></p>	
DATA COLLECTION	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Promote emotional safety and self-regulation by offering food and a choice in the type of snack while participants complete survey2. Use strengths-based affirmations before and after survey completion3. Assist with self-regulation by offering opportunities to take breaks, guide breathing exercises, or conclude the study if necessary
<p><i>Before moving on to the next stage, ask: How can safety and security be addressed while collecting quality data? Is the study team equipped to maintain and promote emotional and behavioral regulation with participants?</i></p>	

POST-DATA COLLECTION

1. Mitigate stress response by conducting a brief check-in, acknowledging the challenging nature of the survey, and offering to lead the participants in a grounding exercise with breathing
2. Conduct warm handoffs to community resources if participants express they need additional support

Before saying goodbye to participants, ask: What resources are available to empower participants post-study? And how will I acknowledge the commitment each participant has shown to the study?

THE FUTURE

From these TISJR ingredients, we get strengths-based, healing-centered engagement in research. Through healing-centered engagement in research, study participants' voices become central to the study. In this model, we seek to elevate the expertise of participants' lived experience. This reorientation of power dynamics in the act of research not only resists the retraumatization of participants, but also builds platforms for disempowered groups to speak their truth through the application of qualitative, mixed methods, or community-based participatory research principles.

To accomplish this, we must build strong partnerships in order to invite and amplify the expertise of practitioners and community representatives, adapt measures and methods to enhance the cultural validity of measurements used in studies, and implement doctoral student training in the TISJR framework to develop future researchers' critical thinking skills through application.

Research *can* be a conduit of social justice when we shift our research processes to empower communities.

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