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The Politics of Data:Uncovering Whiteness in Conventional Social Policy and Social Work Research

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of a robust community based participatory research (CBPR) study in Multnomah County, Oregon, has detailed broad and deep racial disparities across 27 institutions and systems. The process of this research has led to the identification of numerous practices that misrepresent and negate the experiences and very identity of communities of color. The research draws from engagement with numerous databases from the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and various administrative databases. The core issues at hand are population undercounts, understudy of the unique characteristics of these communities, inaccuracies in how data are codified and analyzed, and data collection efforts that are infused with white centrism and a colorblindness that renders issues minimized and the experiences of communities of color obscured. Collectively, we analyze this experience to suggest that much conventional policy research while wrapped in a cloak of objectivity is in fact a reproduction of whiteness that renders communities of color invisible, marginalized and misunderstood. The impact of these practices is to extend whiteness into the arena of policy research, and correspondingly extend dynamics of oppression and white centrism. The paper profiles each area of the policy research process that reflects and reinscribes whiteness and concludes with an articulation the reach of such conventional practice and outlines an avenue to reduce the influence of whiteness.

KEYWORDS

Communities of Color, Measurement, Policy Advocacy, Policy Research, Racial Disparities, Whiteness.

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