

Sandy Rao

Her work has garnered recognition through prestigious awards, such as the Eyes High Doctoral Scholarship, Izaak Walton Killam Memorial Scholarship, Canadian Institutes of Health Research awards and finalist positions for the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship. Under the mentorship of leading academics, Drs. Gina Dimitropoulos and Scott Patten, her research addresses the intricate challenges young adults face in accessing mental health services. Employing a patient-oriented, sequential mixed-methods approach grounded in critical realism, her study not only advances academic discourse but also informs policy and practice. This methodology underscores her dedication to producing research that is both impactful and transformative. For further details on the HEARTS study, please click [here](#).


Educated at McGill University, the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and Rotman School of Management, McMaster University, and Harvard University, Sandy Rao has established a robust foundation in healthcare, social work, psychology, and leadership. She has seamlessly integrated these disciplines into her extensive professional and academic career. Her scholarly contributions are substantial, with her research featured on the Government of Canada website. Notably, her publication in the Community Mental Health Journal, "[Black Lives, Blue Shirts and 'Colourblindness': Application of Critical Race Theory in Police Response Models for Persons with Mental Illness](#)," exemplifies her commitment to addressing systemic issues through the lens of social work.

In her role as the founder and director of the [Mental Health Accessibility and Policy Solutions \(MAPS\) Lab](#), Sandy champions engaged scholarship that bridges the gap between research and real-world application. The MAPS Lab serves as a nexus for developing interventions that enhance access to mental health services, particularly for minoritized communities. Her work with the lab highlights her innovative approach to collaborative, interdisciplinary research involving stakeholders at all levels. Beyond her research, Sandy has shown exemplary leadership and management skills across various influential roles.

She has served as the Director of Mental Health & Addictions for Ontario Health, Executive Lead for the Centre of Excellence for Mental Health & Addictions in Ontario, Central Region COVID-19 Mental Health & Addictions Provincial Lead, and held several other directorial positions within the health system, spearheading significant initiatives aimed at redesigning service delivery to improve patient outcomes. Throughout her healthcare executive career, Sandy has continued a robust clinical practice, Sandy Rao Therapy, further demonstrating her commitment to merging clinical expertise with research and administration.

Sandy's vision extends to transforming the broader landscape of mental health services through interdisciplinary strategies that encompass public health, social work, and community engagement. This vision is passionately pursued through her social movement scholarship, which can be demonstrated through the national Storytellers' movement, an initiative that came out of the HEARTS study for young Canadians to share their experiences with mental health through storytelling. This program not only fosters a greater understanding of the human impact of mental health challenges but also serves as a powerful tool for advocacy and policy change. A committed educator, Sandy actively develops curricula focused on advanced social work research and theory, with a specific focus on critical realism. She is also the founder and lead of the North American Critical Realism Group. She is lauded for her innovative teaching methods and her commitment to mentoring the next generation of health professionals.

Her professional affiliations include registration with the Ontario College and Alberta College of Social Workers. She is a member of several leading health research and health policy organizations and supports the research ecosystem as a peer reviewer for leading academic journals and national and international conferences. She is also affiliated with the Ontario Association of Social Workers, the Canadian Association of Social Workers, and previously with the Canadian Association for Social Work Education. Additionally, she holds a teaching certification from the University of Calgary.



Driven by a passion for social justice and a dedication to public service, Sandy's career is a testament to her relentless pursuit of excellence and her unwavering commitment to improving health, well-being and healthcare for minoritized and equity-deserving/equity-owed populations. As she approaches the culmination of her PhD, Sandy is poised to continue her impactful work by collaborating with communities to advance research and science in ways that are emancipatory and genuinely beneficial.