

Book Review

Intersectional tools for building inclusive houses of knowledge: Review of *introduction to intersectional qualitative research* (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022)

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An extended book review of *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research* (2022) by Jennifer Esposito and Venus Evans-Winters (SAGE Publications Inc), which considers its relevance and application to CRT-based intellectual activism in Library and Information Studies.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, starting in approximately 2016, there has been a measurable uptick in the number of publications focusing on intersectionality, including a collection of classic intersectional work by the concept's originator, Kimberlé Crenshaw. *Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (2017), offers all of Crenshaw's foundational intersectional texts and an Introduction which pulls the classic works forward to address current issues.

Intersectionality by Patricia Hill Collins, first released in 2016 with the second edition published in 2019, is a testament to the ever-increasing interest and application of intersectionality. Noble and Tynes' (2016) edited work, *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online*, retroreviewed as a neo classic in this CRT special issue, offer chapters rich with critical perspectives within a more information-to-data driven setting towards developing what the editors refer to as Intersectional Critical Race Technology Studies (ICRTS) (Noble, 2016).

A range of new writings on intersectionality are also making an impact in the UK scholarly publishing landscape (Atrey, 2019; Bhopal, 2020; Bohrer, 2019), with an increasing focus on queer, disability, and gypsy justice movements (Corradi, 2018; Evans, 2022; Evans & Lépinard, 2020; Udonsi, 2022). The rise in interest in intersectionality can also be seen in the international policy landscape. In 2017, Dr. Emilia Zenzile Roig founded the Center for Intersectional Justice (CIJ): an

international think-tank “striving for equality across disciplines” by applying critical insights to policy issues related to intersectional discriminations (CIJ, n.d.)

The 2022 SAGE publication of *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research* by Jennifer Esposito and Venus Evans-Winters offers yet another progressive step in intersectional work. These authors have been collaborators for close to 15 years. Some of their previous co-authored publications, which were obviously stepping-stones to this innovative textbook, includes “Intersectionality in Education Research: Methodology as Critical Inquiry and Praxis”, a book chapter in *Qualitative Inquiry at a Crossroads Political, Performative, and Methodological Reflection* (Denzin & Giardina, 2019). In this work, the authors state “as a theoretical framework, intersectionality is not primarily about identity, but about being conscientious about the means by which social structures make certain identities vulnerable” (2019, p. 53). Esposito and Evans-Winter also collaborated in 2010 on a peer reviewed article, “Other People’s Daughters: Critical Race Feminism (CRF) and Black Girls’ Education.” CRF is clearly woven into the fabric of their ongoing discussion of intersectionality’s role in qualitative research.

2. Critical race feminism

Esposito and Evans-Winters cite Kimberlé Crenshaw as the CRT scholar who coined the term *intersectionality* with her analysis of how Black women are marginalized in the workplace and the legal system in doubly discriminatory ways due to the intersecting axes of racial and gendered oppression. Rather than using classical CRT and the development of Crenshaw’s and other founding CRT legal and education scholars’ work as the theoretical framework of their book, however, Esposito and Evans-Winters choose instead to build their approach on broader disciplinary and activist traditions of Black feminist and Afrocentric and Chicano womanist and abolitionist movements, for which they use the umbrella term Critical Race Feminism (CRF).

CRF is a term originally coined by Professor Richard Delgado in 1995, in the first edition of his anthology *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, to place scholarly emphasis on the legal status and rights of women of color around the world (cited in Wing, 2014, p. 162). As Esposito and Evans-Winters argued in their 2010 paper mentioned above, whilst CRF has evolved out of CRT and often overlaps with it, it is a distinct multidisciplinary field of scholar-activism which is resolutely anti-essentialist and multi-dimensional, insofar as it “asserts the multiple identities and consciousness of women of color” (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 20). The present book defines CRF intersectional methodology as a tool for understanding

how racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and xenophobia, and other interlocking systems of oppression impede on the rights and dignity of women of color, Indigenous communities, queer women, youth of color, poor and working-class people, and other similarly situated subjugated people. (pp. 5–6)

The book's focus on qualitative approaches to researching how these interlocking matrices of oppression manifest in social life is situated within early twenty-first-century methodological paradigms that cross "cultural bridges and epistemological borders" and apply critical and grounded theory to the specificities of the "cultural meanings, traditions, and understandings of the culture(s) under study" (p. 12).

CRF is particularly suited to educational and qualitative research, the authors argue, due to its alignment with the central importance of lived experience and narrative inquiry in curriculum theory and interview-based research methodologies. This is similar but also different to CRT's core tenet of counter-storytelling, since it is not simply about the *telling* and the *tale* of counter-stories, but also (and crucially) the pedagogical, epistemological, and methodological modes through which such intersectional experiential narratives are informed, designed, constructed, produced, and analyzed. This is particularly highlighted in Chapter 4 of the book, which focuses on narrative inquiry in ethnographic research and highlights how "our stories as researchers cannot be separated from the meaning we make of participant stories" (p. 68). They cite here an example from Robin Boylorn's ethnography of Black women's lives in the American South, in which

telling is not without controversy. There are multiple versions and multiple truths.

A common characteristic of these women's stories, including my own, is resilience. [...] I examine our lives, over generations, to determine how black women use narratives to cope and communicate about their experiences as acts of social resistance. (Boylorn, 2017, p. xxi, cited in Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 68)

This methodological tale from the field chimes with the inspiration Esposito & Evans-Winters take from Audre Lorde's well-known aphorism on surviving and transforming the infrastructural oppressions of white supremacy in academia: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (1979, cited on p. 12). The authors channel Lorde's teachings in the intersectional methodological toolkits that their book provides, which challenge the "state apparatuses of control, manipulation, and surveillance, including all forms of scientific investigation" (i.e., the proverbial *master's tools*), which are built into the biased foundational structures of traditional (colonial) academic inquiry (p. 13).

A book is a tool, and with this one Esposito & Evans-Winters have crafted a weapon which in careful hands can teach students of qualitative research methods how to collect and analyze the data needed to build intersectionality inclusive, decolonial and equitable houses of knowledge.

3. Teaching and learning the theory and ethics of intersectional research methods

This textbook is accessible to students and researchers across a breadth of disciplines and offers richly descriptive insights into how to understand and handle

qualitative research data through intersectional methodological frameworks. Each chapter opens with a short vignette illustrating a student's or researcher's dilemma, based on real examples from the authors' research methods teaching careers.

Chapter 2: Theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research pivots on the example of a graduate student who was inspired by a CRF theory course she had taken, which helped her to understand her own lived experience as a Black student and led her to develop an education research project on Black girls' literacies (p. 25). This chapter examines the ontological and epistemological dimensions of theory that are integral to all research methods and explains how they function in intersectional qualitative research. Drawing on this vignette, Esposito and Evans-Winters demonstrate how theory for this student was *lived* at ontological and affective levels before it was explicitly 'known' in an epistemological academic sense. The authors build on Gloria Anzaldúa's Chicana intersectional feminist work here, by arguing for transformational approaches to "theory in the flesh" for scholar-activist women of color who are all too often denied the White patriarchal sets of knowledges that structure colonial academic territories (pp. 26–27). They also inform this argument with other late twentieth-century feminist thinkers, including Patricia Hill Collins' and Donna Haraway's respective works on *situated knowledge*, which grounds research in embodied forms of knowing that defy the objective claims of positivist science and uphold the core tenet of intersectionality that lived experiences, particularly via identity facets of race and gender, are primary sources of empirical data.

Whilst intersectional scholarship advocates for the multiplicity or plurality of embodied and situated knowledges, this does not entail a regressive cultural relativist or postmodernist disavowal of Truth with a capital 'T', which still wields epistemological power (with material effects) across the world, through the hegemony of 'master narratives' which assume the form of 'common sense' by both the oppressor and the oppressed. The decolonial work of indigenous Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith further supports the pedagogical arguments of this chapter, specifically her (2012) point that "Our colonial experience traps us in the project of modernity. There can be no 'postmodern' for us until we have settled some business of the modern" (cited on p. 28). Esposito & Evans-Winters instruct readers how to apply this notion to intersectional qualitative research by illustrating how value judgments and epistemological assumptions are secreted within methodological theoretical frameworks and need to be self-reflexively identified, contextualized, and critically applied for the subjects and objects of the research in question.

Following Sara Ahmed and Patricia Hill-Collins' leads, the authors also show how attending to inclusive politics of citation is vital for building equitable intersectional methodological theory, not only to credit the marginalized scholars who have come before us and who teach us, but also to redefine and rebalance "what counts" and as valid intellectual knowledge and what constitutes research "impact"; thereby disrupting and transforming the social reproduction of hegemonic knowledge structures (p. 32).

Chapter 3 takes these knowledge justice methodological teachings to a deeper level by exploring ethics in qualitative research, closely examining what it means to “give voice” to research participants from intersectionally marginalized subject positions; how informed consent or assent works in this process; and the vital importance of safeguarding and protecting confidentiality of participants and places. Anyone who has done any kind of empirical research, (especially with human subjects) will be aware that the best laid plans are invariably beset by unexpected challenges in their implementation, which very often gives rise to ethical dilemmas. Ethical intersectional researchers are likely to encounter significant quandaries of this nature, particularly in the increasingly racist, politically polarized, and oppressive conjuncture of the present.

Esposito & Evans-Winters provide examples of such dilemmas and concerns, emphasizing the importance of understanding your own culture and its norms, assumptions, and values before claiming to understand or represent the cultures of your research subjects. The authors encourage students and researchers of intersectional qualitative research methods to cultivate and establish their own ethical stance, which “should include aspirational ethics, which are the highest ethical stance a researcher tries to attain” (Southern et al., 2005). This, they argue, is why it is necessary to go beyond minimal institutional ethical compliance frameworks and develop the academic integrity and skills required to be culturally responsible and self-reflexive change agents in the research process. To further guide this, they recommend reading Maria K.E. Lahman’s (2018) handbook on developing what she terms a Culturally Responsive Relational Reflexive Ethics (CRRRE) framework.

4. Methods of data collection and analysis for intersectional research

As the authors note, the beauty of this text is that it is a pedagogical tool for those who are intersectionality savvy as well as those just familiarizing themselves with the framework. That same continuum of experiences applies to both those who are established researchers and students at the introductory level. Chapters 4–7 are expertly laid out and written to accommodate the full range of audiences Esposito and Evans-Winter aspire to make use of this text.

Chapter 4 primarily discusses methodology within a range of ethnography contexts but also includes other methodologies that lend well to gathering other forms of storytelling data. That may not be as limiting as it might seem at face-value. Chapter 4 is written in a practical “how to” manner. Research design more broadly and ethnography more specifically are discussed with ample examples to assist those teaching qualitative research to use the text as an instructional tool for various levels of learners.

Chapter 5 discusses data collection in an engaging style; explicitly highlighting the way in which “Intersectional qualitative research focuses on the complex relationships between social identities, power, and knowledge (p. 82).” The authors then

outline five aspects of data collection within intersectional qualitative research: 1) Personal and cultural beliefs; 2) Emotionality in research pursuits; 3) Collective agency and resistance; 4) Research represents power and authority; and 5) Epistemological understanding (p. 82).

Chapters 6 and 7 are post-data collection discussions. In a teacherly manner, the authors discuss in plain digestible language the management, storage, and coding of data. Chapter 6 explains the importance of avoiding sloppy work; better stated, the diligence required to be able to conduct robust data analysis from wellmaintained and curated data. “There is no right or wrong way to organize and manage your data, but we do want you to understand that organizing your data is just as important as analyzing them” (p. 110). Chapter 7 offers what should be expected in a data analysis chapter within a qualitative research textbook, namely, a discussion of the breadth of data analysis methods. This includes an extensive data analysis table that offers a well populated list of qualitative data analysis methods with a description of each as well as suggested reading for each listed method (pp. 145–146). Yet, that is not the most noteworthy aspect of chapter 7. Before launching into the extensive data analysis sections, the authors discuss a highly salient point which is particularly relevant to the concerns of the present special issue.

After the opening vignette of Chapter 7 describing a research team analyzing focus group data on undergraduate women’s quantitative understanding of gender equity, the authors return to the discursive areas of epistemology and positivist ways of knowing introduced earlier in Chapter 2. To add context and depth to the discussion they bring in Delgado Bernal and Villalpando’s (2002) notion of *apartheid of knowledge*, which Esposito and Evans-Winters describe as denoting “the way that academic knowledge continues to value and perpetuate Eurocentric epistemologies at the expense of others. This has created legitimate and illegitimate forms of knowledge, ways of knowing, and methods/methodologies” (p. 136). Again, this draws attention to whose knowledge counts and how and invites ethical researchers to forge their own decolonial methodological tools to build intersectionally inclusive epistemic houses.

This textbook establishes intersectionality as a viable research method within a range of qualitative research methodologies. These include ethnography and its derivatives, narrative inquiry, case study, and arts-based research; all of which widen the range of possibilities of lived experiences that can be captured and expressed, and thus, authenticated. Qualitative research is often dismissed (and in some cases disrespected) by those with more positivistic interpretations of research as being biased because of the small, but better stated intimate, scale of the research. Critics of qualitative research further their resistance by stating that anecdotal approaches lack rigor. There are legitimate points to be made about the limitations of all forms of research, and the limitations only increase when research is poorly conducted be they qualitative or quantitative efforts. This text offers accessible explanations with understandable examples of how to enrich narrative descriptions by bringing together complex perspectives and contexts that impact the lived experiences of the most vulnerable to societal exploitation.

Innovations by their nature are often the discussion starters for bolder and broader possibilities. As the sayings go, you “have to start somewhere” and “lead by example.” As such, innovative textbooks, such as the one the authors offer, are open to critiques of what might be missing as opposed to what possibilities this innovative text offers. While the authors express quite well in Chapter 9 how to reimagine the possibilities of qualitative inquiry; there are additional possibilities as well. When considering the context of this special issue, it would be remiss of us not to suggest application possibilities related to CRT and information.

5. Potential mixed-methods applications for CRT and information studies

Information, in particular information’s relationship to data, clears a path for mixed-methods possibilities. Part of the nature of information and data is measurability. In turn, if we identify compatible nomenclature that connects the descriptiveness of intersectionality as a qualitative research method to the measurability of quantitative research, a mixed-method approach moves from possible to plausible. Intersectionality, for example, addresses multiple perspectives through descriptive means related to the research question or setting. In quantitative research terms, these multiple perspectives could be considered variables. Through descriptive means, intersectionality discusses the impact of each variable as a standalone (independent) specific occurrence or occurrences. Intersectionality, just as importantly, is designed to understand when multiple yet distinctly different specific occurrences happen concomitantly.

In quantitative research settings this would be analogous to regression analysis. For instance, we can establish discrimination within an identity or identities as the dependent variable(s) (e.g., discrimination against queer Black librarians) and then measure how independent variables such as recruitment bias or structural societal impediments (i.e., forms of segregation), and/or health to offer examples of disparities that could impact the dependent variable (discrimination against queer Black librarians). If we then bring in the information-to-data context to provide an information studies (IS) perspective, the mixed-method possibilities come into better focus.

That is, how information is generated, how it is captured and transmitted/distributed, along with how it is stored (as metadata).

To be more specific within IS, we can arguably locate and measure human engagement in ways that other disciplines cannot, such as social media content, search engine use, assessment of forms of categorizations, and multiple forms of surveillance data to offer a short list. Mixing the descriptiveness of intersectional qualitative research with the measurability of quantitative research within information settings implies methodological possibilities of exponential proportion. Incorporating other foundational CRT frameworks and tools (beyond intersectionality) such as microaggressions, interest convergence, and racial battle fatigue, would considerably strengthen the power of this intersectional IS mixed-methods model, when conducted by critically conscious and culturally component researchers and scholar-activists thoroughly immersed in CRT praxis.

6. Intersectional research and (re)imagination for liberation

Before concluding, Chapter 9 The Reimagining and Possibilities of Qualitative Inquiry, poses the question: “what if our research projects were connected to larger liberation movements?” (p. 190). The CRT collective agrees this important question is worthy of consideration and response. Like the authors who offer *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research* as a contribution to liberatory movements; we offer this CRT special issue as a disruption to traditional scholarly communication models and ways of producing scholarship.

The authors point out the real-world contemporary societal dynamics that continue to damage and marginalize the lives of racially minoritized and intersectionality oppressed people. In the wake of the ongoing Covid pandemic which disproportionately harms these groups, the erosion of civil rights, and continued state-sanctioned violence and murder of Black people; Esposito and Evans-Winters conclude their book with an urge to deploy intersectional research (beyond the obvious pedagogical methodological frameworks discussed throughout this review) as a vital “scientific and political tool for documenting a social group’s humanity, including their struggle against all forms of oppression” (p. 189). We too, as the CRT collective aspire to push beyond the status quo of scholarly communication and knowledge production, towards multiple evolving forms of intellectual and pedagogical activism. We conclude our review of this remarkable book with an urge for you all to read it and apply your learning to the fertile world of intellectual activism.

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