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“Advancing our Collective Awareness in Doing Social Justice Research”: A Book Review of Anna CohenMiller and Nettie Boivin’s Questions in Qualitative Social Justice Research in Multicultural Contexts

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“Advancing our Collective Awareness in Doing Social Justice Research”: A Book Review of Anna CohenMiller and Nettie Boivin’s Questions in Qualitative Social Justice Research in Multicultural Contexts

Abstract

In the book, *Questions in Qualitative Social Justice Research in Multicultural Contexts*, the authors, Anna CohenMiller and Nettie Boivin, ask provocative questions meant to stimulate us as qualitative researchers to strengthen options for conducting “better” research which is likely to advance inclusion and equity for communities who have been historically marginalized, colonized and/or oppressed. The book is adeptly structured so to invite us to (re)consider possible answers to their questions posed. As part of explicating the diversity of approaches to questions that can and should be asked regarding the doing of inclusive qualitative research, they include vignettes of a range of additional contributors who thoughtfully present/narrate their “reflections from the field” towards the end of each chapter. The book re-opens discussion on topics such as: owning our power (and rebalancing power relations), developing trust through building relationships, reconsidering the “insider/outsider” divide, activating transformative research, working with cross-disciplinarity in a research team, undertaking ethical online research, and credentializing different ways of “knowing,” including arts-based productions. Readers of this book should surely be inspired to consider new possibilities for practicing social justice research. The book is about social justice research and as such does not directly address ecological justice from a non-anthropocentric perspective, but some of the reflections from the field refer to caring for non-sentient beings and other “being,” thus paving a way for us to include this in our considerations when pursuing a justice agenda in the research process.

Keywords

critical self-reflection, learning as a collective enterprise, transformative research, decolonizing research practices, ethics and ethics review boards, arts-based research as forwarding knowing

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“Advancing our Collective Awareness in Doing Social Justice Research”: A Book Review of Anna CohenMiller and Nettie Boivin’s *Questions in Qualitative Social Justice Research in Multicultural Contexts*

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In the book, *Questions in Qualitative Social Justice Research in Multicultural Contexts*, the authors, Anna CohenMiller and Nettie Boivin, ask provocative questions meant to stimulate us as qualitative researchers to strengthen options for conducting “better” research which is likely to advance inclusion and equity for communities who have been historically marginalized, colonized and/or oppressed. The book is adeptly structured so to invite us to (re)consider possible answers to their questions posed. As part of explicating the diversity of approaches to questions that can and should be asked regarding the doing of inclusive qualitative research, they include vignettes of a range of additional contributors who thoughtfully present/narrate their “reflections from the field” towards the end of each chapter. The book re-opens discussion on topics such as: owning our power (and rebalancing power relations), developing trust through building relationships, reconsidering the “insider/outsider” divide, activating transformative research, working with cross-disciplinarity in a research team, undertaking ethical online research, and credentializing different ways of “knowing,” including arts-based productions. Readers of this book should surely be inspired to consider new possibilities for practicing social justice research. The book is about social justice research and as such does not directly address ecological justice from a non-anthropocentric perspective, but some of the reflections from the field refer to caring for non-sentient beings and other “being,” thus paving a way for us to include this in our considerations when pursuing a justice agenda in the research process.

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“Advancing our Collective Awareness in Doing Social Justice Research”

The title of this book *Questions in Qualitative Social Justice Research in Multicultural Contexts* aptly conveys that the book does not revolve around a set of answers, but around a set of pertinent questions that encourage critical self-reflection and a deeper examination of research issues than might otherwise be considered important in qualitative research practice – that is, especially if we were to rely on dominant visions in the academy. One of the contributors to the book (Sharon Ravitch), with whose narrative account CohenMiller and Boivin (2021) end the book, indicates how she incorporates “Black Lives Matter” principles in her research. She sees these (anti-racist) principles as crucial to incorporate in the light of what she calls the “hegemonic codification of academic texts, research processes [and] norms of

field work.” Critical self-reflection means, in Ravitch’s account, that we must reflect upon “how dominance is [all-too-often] conferred upon so-called experts” [including professional researchers as experts] so that we can (re)consider ways of evincing “critical dialogical engagement” as part of our research practices when engaging “in the field” (p. 218).

When defining critical self-reflection on page 2 of the book, in a way which still leaves its meaning open to continued renewal, CohenMiller and Nettie Boivin state: “Here’s one perspective of the term that moves beyond reflecting on the past into a commitment to making positive change [in our research practices].” Otherwise put, critical self-reflection is a process in which we reflect upon “where we want to go” so as to “move our research and practice in a constructive and beneficial direction” (2021, p. 2). CohenMiller and Boivin clarify – in keeping with the dialogical approach endorsed in Ravitch’s narration at the end the book – that this is not an enterprise to be handled by individual researchers isolated from others: it involves listening to and learning from others who have engaged with the question of what might be considered a “beneficial” way of organizing research. That is, it involves learning from other transformative researchers who offer us lessons and tips, and it involves learning from research participants (co-researchers in various communities with whom we are, or have been, involved) by being opened to hear their perspectives on what a beneficial project might embrace.

CohenMiller and Boivin state that it is through such a dialogically oriented reflective process, that we “have an opportunity to look at ourselves and our work” (2021, p. 2). With this starting point, where they encourage readers to become aware of possible issues previously not taught in theoretical research methods courses, CohenMiller and Boivin proceed to indicate to the reader that there is no one “right” way of doing socially-just qualitative research. Their book therefore provides a myriad of examples of different ways to move forward and conduct qualitative research within and across multicultural contexts, all with a view to helping us to reflect more deeply on how to “do” research in a way that will be meaningful and experienced as beneficial in the movement towards more social justice.

For example, Nettie Boivin’s work on the “Building Bridges project” (a two-year collaborative arts-based ethnography) offers an instance of her utilizing art (moviemaking, hip-hop events and multi-modal storytelling and art) to bridge local arts and community members with migrant artists from Iraq, Iran, Syria, Cameroon, and Afghanistan, as part of a research endeavor. CohenMiller and Boivin (2021) use this example also as a springboard to suggest that initiating researchers who set up research projects can use their position to show care while also encouraging a stance of caring on the part of all involved. Boivin explains: “When a transitory migrant (without residency) participant, explained how to make an Iranian food dish, she began to cry. The translator, Shania, eventually asked why she was sad, and they spoke for a while. Then Shania informed us that she was remembering her brother and how he used to love her cooking; she was remembering people she had lost.” Boivin felt this as a moment that was “emotional, and a powerful example of allowing a participant to feel their truth.” CohenMiller and Boivin go on to interpret that, as a researcher, “we can negotiate our power to allow emotions to exist, not to contain or infer from them, but instead to care for the participant” (CohenMiller & Bovin, 2021, p. 18).

This story is presented in the first chapter called “owning our power,” where CohenMiller and Boivin (2021) raise several questions asking us as readers to reflect on how we might balance power relations during the research process. What is also important about this example is that it is an example of “knowing” by involving people in arts-based research, thus breaking the conventional (dominant) view that arts-production cannot become a means to knowing (in this case about migrant experiences and as transformative research, building bridges between other community members and the migrant artists at the same time).

The chapter, like all the chapters in the book, is structured around a set of provocative questions, followed by some chosen contributors’ “Reflections from the field,” which in turn

are followed by further reflective questions posed by the CohenMiller and Boivin (2021), intended for us to “engage more deeply” on the theme of the chapter. The initial reflective questions for Chapter 1 are:

1. How can we understand the changing nature of power?
2. Do we understand ourselves?
3. Who has the power?
4. What’s privilege got to do with it?
5. How do we become more aware and reflective?
6. How can we rebalance power dynamics?
7. Are my practices amplifying or diminishing voice?
8. What ethical dilemmas should we be prepared for relating to power?

The discussion in the chapter includes a reflection from the field on “Owning my power” by Kakali Bhattacharya. Bhattacharya concludes her story by suggesting that she owns her power when:

I can activate my life force to engage in actions that are ... in integrity with my being. From there, working with participants, colleagues, researchers, and students in academia and beyond seem to come from a space of being in flow, interconnected, and in critical compassion with each other. (CohenMiller & Boivin, 2021, p. 34)

This reflection is offered as a resource for readers to consider how compassion can become part of our research (and life) agendas; and the narration suggests that this is linked to “owning our power.” Another reflection from the field is then offered by Polina Golovátina-Mora and Raúl Alberto Mora, who critically self-reflect on what research in multicultural contexts means to them. Their storying offers, *inter alia*, a perspective on culture which is important for the book because it tries to indicate/express that “culture” is not static or homogenous but can be regarded as an “ever-mutating multiplicity rather than a centric structure as it is often perceived” (p. 34).

Again, the composition of the book, through the different storying as supplied through CohenMiller and Boivin’s own and others’ reflections, undercuts dominant visions of central terms as used in the book, such as “culture.” Nevertheless, while appreciating that cultures are not monovocal, CohenMiller and Boivin also sound the caution – in their chapter on “exploring the meaning of trust” – that when engaging with people with cultural heritages with which we may not be familiar, we need to recognize that the imagery that is provided as part of their heritage cannot be appropriated and must be recognized as “theirs” (while they are also understood as continuing to “create their own culture”). This insight they draw from Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith (well-known for developing decolonizing research theorizing and associated methodologies), whom they cite as lamenting that:

The West can extract and claim ownership of our way of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture. (Smith, 2012, as cited in CohenMiller & Boivin, 2021, p. 57)

This does not mean that people cannot learn from one another by engaging respectfully cross-culturally as a matter of making connections (as expressed via Bhattacharya’s story in

the first chapter). In another chapter on working across disciplinary divides in cross-disciplinary fashion in research teams, CohenMiller and Boivin (2021) present a reflection from the field entitled “Working across disciplinary and multicultural contexts” by Roxanne Henkin, Gopal Krishna Sharma, Purva Gopal Sharma, and Mashaba Mashala. They cite (for example) Mashala’s expression of her learning from this team project:

When you live in another culture, it teaches you that there are different ways of doing things. You learn to see things from other peoples’ perspectives. It would go a long way to have peace around the world, if more people traveled to different parts of the world and/or participated in interdisciplinary workshops and learning experiences. (p. 145)

Meanwhile, apart from showcasing this example of learning by being exposed to different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds, CohenMiller and Boivin (2021) also point out that many people do not feel they have a clear-cut cultural identity, as they may be, as they call it, “multi-ethnic.” They indicate (pp. xxi) that they themselves both are multiethnic (linked also to marginalized communities) and that this has affected their commitment to designing inclusive research agendas.

Chapter 2 of the book delves into “unpacking the meaning and practice of trust” and poses questions for us to consider such as:

1. What is trust?
2. How to develop trusting relationships
3. What do we need to consider in building relationships?
4. How can I work with gatekeepers?
5. What ethical dilemmas should we be prepared for relating to trust?

Their way of unpacking these questions (and at the same time inspiring our further reflections) is followed by a Reflection from the field by two authors: Jennifer Wolgemuth discusses in her critical self-reflection how ethics, trust, and power intersect, while Fatma Said narrates her reflections on co-constructing trust and working with multilingual, multicultural, conservative, hard-to-reach families. CohenMiller and Boivin (2021) then, in their section entitled “Engaging more deeply: concluding thoughts on unpacking the meaning and practice of trust” offer us some further “reflective questions about trust” to consider.

All the chapters follow the same structure of posing questions in such a way that we recognize they do not have obvious answers but are nevertheless crucial questions to consider. Chapter 3, whose title is: “Uncovering the spectrum of insider-outsiderness” already indicates that this divide can be reworked and that it depends on the context as to how it is “worked.” The questions posed in this chapter are

1. How can we understand our insider-outsider roles?
2. What is the changing nature of being an insider-outsider?
3. Are we seeing and understanding our roles?
4. What ethical dilemmas should we be prepared for relating to the spectrum of insider outsiderness?

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, whose citation on “culture” is referred to in the chapter on trust (indicating why certain Indigenous people may have good reason not to trust disrespectful “outsiders”), is the person whom CohenMiller and Boivin chose to offer the first Reflection from the field in the chapter on the spectrum of insider-outsiderness. Linda Tuhiwai Smith

entitles her reflections “Inside the inside.” She states that the concept of insider-outsider could be considered a useful concept in the sense that it “covers some of the obvious challenges for researchers working across boundaries or bridging the academic world with Indigenous community contexts or working across categories and groups of race, gender, and class” (p. 85). But she indicates that the practice of entering the worlds of “others” meant that a “researcher operating from a settler colonial knowledge system” was trying to “get through the borders to those outside the system as expediently as possible to carry out whatever research the researcher wanted to do” (p. 86). In this sense, the practices were exploitative. She continues: “They exploited hospitality and generosity, destroyed trust, and took important parts of a community, their material objects, their voices, and a part of their being.” Now she suggests that:

For decolonizing and Indigenous approaches, the objectives for navigating borders are both different and more challenging in terms of learning to become and to be a researcher. This can range from overcoming the anxieties of returning “home” to a traumatized history, people, and community; understanding how to be patient and wait for the invitation to cross a border; building or rekindling a relationship.” (p. 86)

In short, it is a different way of developing a relationship in which participants (co-researchers) are not exploited for “data.”

This reflection is followed by Arceli Rosario’s reflections, based on her research in the Philippines. Rosario speaks to her experience of traversing both insider and outsider roles within a family community. Through her narration, she provides insight into how our membership roles can shift in unexpected ways – that is, one’s “status” as seen by oneself and others is not static (p. 87). As in the layout of the other chapters, CohenMiller and Boivin (2021) continue the chapter with a section entitled: “Engaging more deeply: Concluding thoughts on insider-outsiderness,” which is followed by more provocative questions!

Chapter 4 is the next main “theoretical” chapter and is entitled “Awareness in social justice and transformative Research.” They begin the chapter by asking somewhat rhetorically: “I care about social justice, but how do I create a project incorporating this as a central tenet? I want to create transformative research that will create positive change, but how do I do this?” (p. 96). The questions posed as headings of this chapter are:

1. Where does social justice fit?
2. Why transformative research?
3. What dilemmas of ethics can we consider related to social justice and transformative research?

As part of the chapter, they present a Reflection from the field as proffered by Donna Mertens (famous for coining the term “the transformative paradigm”). The reflection is entitled: “Expanding social justice through transformative research?” In this reflection, Mertens traces how her values led her “to want to work to improve conditions for people who were poor or being marginalized for whatever reason” and how these values have permeated her research endeavors. She notes that at first when she wrote her first book about the transformative paradigm, “One reviewer ... said his ‘hands were shaking with rage’ because of the deliberate inclusion of political issues in framing research questions and methods” (p. 110). (At the time, it seemed outrageous to admit that all research is political, and never neutral in political consequence). But now “the transformative paradigm continues to evolve based on interactions with members of many marginalized communities.” She explains how, “in this

paradigm, the researcher starts with the ethical question: “how does my research contribute to increased environmental, economic, and social justice and enhanced human rights?” (p. 111).

Another Reflection from the field in this chapter is undertaken by Tineke Abma, who entitles her piece “Researcher’s reflexivity in a multicultural context: the role of framing and emotion work” (p. 111). She elucidates in this reflection how “ways of seeing, listening, and feeling are decisive for what is learned from a studied context but also influence the relationships with participants in the field.” She elaborates that “certain frames may reestablish unequal power relationships and feelings of stigmatization.” She indicates that her commitment (and by implication that of others) to participatory research requires “a serious effort to realize underlying values such as respect, inclusion, democratic decision-making, mutual learning, collective action, and integrity” (p. 111), with attention to “framing” and to “emotion work” (p. 111). She offers details on what she means by “framing” and by “emotion work.”

Yet another Reflection from the field in this chapter is offered by Nupur Samuel, whose piece is entitled “Reflections on teaching in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms: social inclusion and equity” (p. 116). She explains how she managed to encourage students to use reflection as a learning tool, helping them not only to become more proficient in English but also more developed critical thinkers.” She learned through this experience that “my earlier impressions that they did not have much to contribute were incorrect, and that equal opportunities also meant empathy and patience” (p. 116).

With all this as basis, CohenMiller and Boivin (2021) again ask us as readers to “Engage more deeply in relation to questions of how a justice agenda can be incorporated in our research” as they offer their concluding thoughts on social justice and transformative research, followed by more reflective questions. Via this chapter, CohenMiller and Boivin emphasize that overall, if we employ a lens of social justice as qualitative researchers, we can aim to “provide equity, inclusion, and voice for marginalized, underrepresented populations” (2021, p. 97). They point out that part of this effort means that we need to consider seriously the terminology used to refer to people with whom we are working in the research/learning process. For example, they note that we should be aware of how the term “immigrant” has been used over time, and with what social consequences. CohenMiller and Boivin ask: “what does it mean for communities referred to in this way? And they ask: “how does the alteration of terminology to transmigrants, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, or settlers affect the identity of those within the community”? (2021, p. 97). Using this example (as other examples) they indicate that we need to become more aware of how, wordings/framings are never neutral “descriptions” but influence the realities supposedly being referred to.

To encourage our continued reflections/awareness of the “power” of words, CohenMiller and Boivin encourage us to ask ourselves: “might I be inadvertently hurting the community I’m trying to help? Who could I talk to better understand my thinking process? So, you can ask, where am I using terms to label people (and myself)? And which terms are acceptable and welcomed in the community or with the individuals I’m working with?” (2021, p. 107). They apply these considerations also to the power of the words that we use to “describe” research participants, proposing for serious consideration words such as co-researchers and co-producers (including co-producers of action options).

All in all, CohenMiller and Boivin make the point that the ways in which we use words is never without social and political consequence. They carry through this argument in a further chapter that they devote to considering the ethical implications of moving towards more online engagement with people, further to the COVID-19 era. As they note, “the ways in which we use words come into play in further significant ways as we move into online spaces. In such virtual or socially distanced research, we may find ourselves using modes of data collection such as discussion forums or texting groups, and these provide deep considerations for our choice of terminology and the ethics around them” (2021, p. 107).

This is addressed in detail in their chapter entitled “moving between face-to-face and online engagement” (Chapter 6). But first in Chapter 5, as I indicated earlier, they discuss in depth issues and questions arising from crossing disciplinary boundaries (and indeed rendering these more porous) in qualitative research teamwork. In this chapter they also offer tips on how one might navigate dealing with ethical review boards, where members of such boards may be working with narrower visions of research.

CohenMiller and Boivin’s (2021) penultimate chapter (Chapter 7) is devoted to exploring the fruitfulness of integrating the arts into research practices. This is another way of questioning hegemonic definitions of research, where such an integration (and rendering credible arts-based ways of knowing) is all-too-often regarded as anathema to practicing “research.” They sound a caution, though, that “while creating arts-based research, collaborative projects, and co-produced work can be valuable, it’s essential to consider potential ethical challenges as related to the multicultural context in which we’re working.” Therefore, it is important that as part of critical self-reflection, we “think about how our own vision, sense of aesthetics. or social agenda for participants could [possibly] downplay community interests and needs, undermining authentic community cultural development” (p. 191). In the light hereof, they argue that we need to “cultivate skills promoting collaborative engagement and participatory stances grounded in an experience of working in solidarity with the community, [and in this way] undoing injustice” (p. 191).

CohenMiller and Boivin (2021) organize these more “practical” chapters (Chapters 5,6, and 7) via the same layout as in all the other chapters: with initial questions posed; followed by a discussion in which they foreground ethical issues for (re)consideration; followed by some Reflections from the field where the contributors engage with the questions and issues, followed by their own invitation for us to continue to “engage more deeply,” prompted also by further reflective questions.

In the final chapter of the book (Chapter 8), they round up the book by revisiting the questions of: “What does it mean to research across multicultural contexts? And “How do I ‘best’ conduct research within and across such varied contexts?” They note that as presented through the various chapters “we’ve seen that there aren’t straightforward answers for this type of work” (p. 207). However, this should not lead to despair because “through questioning ourselves and our approaches individually and collectively,” research processes and outcomes thereof can become “better” in terms of advancing social justice research. It is with this in mind (and heart) that they have created their provocative text, sprinkled throughout with ethical questions for us to consider anew.

I have signposted at some points that their focus on social justice research could be said to overshadow ecological justice concerns, albeit that some of their contributors’ “reflections from the field” do allude to the importance hereof – for example, Kakali Bhattacharya expresses in her narrative that she tries to “cultivate an understanding of self in relation to others, to the world, environment, sentient and non-sentient beings, and to the universe” (p. 31); and Donna Mertens asks herself “how does my research contribute to increased environmental, economic, and social justice” (p. 110). (The question of environmental justice became foregrounded for Mertens also through her work with Indigenous authors from certain colonized geographical contexts, who stress the importance of developing a sense of spiritual connection with “all that exists” – cf. Cram et al., 2013; Cram & Mertens, 2016.) An ecological perspective, as emphasized in the decolonial quest to undercut Western treatments of nature as a resource to be exploited, could in future be opened up further in additional work expanding upon decolonial research agendas pertaining to ecological justice and intersections with social justice. (Such a work could be laid out in similar fashion to this book, structured around stimulating questions.)

In short, as you can discern from my review of this book, I strongly recommend reading of this book, which instils a sense that as qualitative researchers we need to strengthen our learning engagements with one another in relation to critical questions, including our ways of engaging with those not located in “academia,” as routes to advancing our collective awareness regarding options for doing social (and ecological) justice research.

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