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## **A book review of Betty M. Merchant and Arlette Ingram Willis' *Multiple and Intersecting Identities in Qualitative Research***

**Rashmi Gangamma**

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The book *Multiple and Intersecting Identities in Qualitative Research* published in 2001 by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates is a concise and resourceful collection of commentaries by researchers on the impact of multiple identities on their research. The editors invite the reader to “learn the songs of our souls- for recalling the past, altering the present, and transforming the future” (p. xiii). The contributors are all women, some women of color, and all are immersed in the process of dissecting the personal meaning of research. In this book, the authors examine the intersection of their identities of gender, race, religion, and status with their research agendas. As the editors note in the preface, “Our unique positionality allows us to understand relationships across many boundaries” (p. ix). This exercise in self-reflexivity is vital for qualitative researchers to situate themselves in their research.

The book begins with an engaging narrative of a White woman, Betty Merchant, examining her role and relationship with a Mexican American research assistant in a project that is experienced differently by them. It is an honest exploration of some of her struggles with her identity as a person committed to the cause of emancipation. An important message of this chapter is that self-reflection may be insufficient and that collaboration may be essential to examine one’s inattention to biases. Following this account is a passionate description by the research assistant, Martha Zurita, of her struggles as a beginning researcher caught in the conundrum of roles and identities. Drawing extensively from her journal, she explores the intricacies of her involvement in a project where she was seen as a representative of the “researched”. Her status as a Mexican-American in a study, which sought to examine schooling experiences of Mexican-American children, provides a rather unique opportunity to explore the difficulties of establishing boundaries in “insider” research. Her questions about whether it is ethical for researchers not to intervene in their hermeneutic enterprise raise pertinent concerns about politics and ethics in qualitative research. The inclusion of both accounts is a gift to the reader. The description of the struggles faced by the novice (the latter) and the relatively experienced researcher (the former) make the reader more cognizant of the intricacies of a qualitative study.

Continuing the theme of “blurred boundaries” is a critical commentary on the dilemmas faced due to issues of confidentiality, choice, and agency. The author, Lubna Nazir Chaudhry, a Pakistani Muslim female in the United States, calls attention to pertinent questions on the nature of feminist/critical theory research. Drawing on her experiences researching Muslim women, she notes that “unless agendas of empowerment are seen as arising from the specificity of women’s lives and experiences, feminism becomes another hegemonic system of meaning” (p. 40). She questions the meaning of empowerment and who really gets empowered through research. This debate is also taken up by Beloo Mehra in her chapter where she discusses her status as an “insider” in her

research. Similar to the chapter by Martha Zurita, the author here examines whether it is really possible to separate roles as the researcher and the intervener. She also provides an examination of researchers' motives as suggested by the title of the chapter "Research or Personal Quest? Dilemmas in studying my own kind."

In her chapter, Arlette Ingram Willis provides a glimpse of her journey in finding her "voice." She says, "I have been preparing to write this chapter all of my life..." (p. 43), which is an indication that this is a culmination of sorts in her exploration of her identity as a researcher. Her account talks about an important issue of how we situate ourselves as researchers, and warns us about the dangers of intentionally or unintentionally, succumbing to the so called standards of practice in the academy. She further challenges us to remain "suspicious of the dominant culture's interpretations" (p. 56). The following chapter by Annette Henry describes her experiences as a "Black feminist" researching the African Caribbean community. She maintains that remaining reflexive is a goal she strives to achieve. Her reflections on the impact of her "hybrid identities" on issues of accessibility, subjectivity-objectivity, and role as a researcher are succinctly presented.

In the chapter by Anya Dozier Enos on her research with the Pueblo communities, a fairly detailed account is presented on the impact of dual roles. She provides an elaborate account of her background to situate herself as a researcher, and examines her "levels of comfort and discomfort" that arise from her identity as a Pueblo person and as an academic. Her conscious effort to use accessible knowledge, while interviewing natives, resonates with an earlier account by Arlette Ingram Willis in the book, where she recounts "warnings about being an educated fool" (p. 54). Enos also touches upon an important process of distancing that sometimes occurs in "insider" researchers. The realization of "how much I am an outsider" (p. 91) she says, created more distance from some traditions of her community.

The final chapter by Judy HeeSung Kim seemed to be an outlier, mainly because of the traditional format of presentation, which is not followed by the other authors in the book. This chapter examines the status of Asian-Americans as a "model minority". It provides a report of "a case study of the educational experiences of a group of Korean American students in a large university" (p. 116). She provides an extensive report of her field observations, and in her discussion explores the different meanings associated with being a Korean woman.

This book in many ways follows the struggles of the insider-outsider identities of a researcher. The preface notes, "We make no apologies for bringing to the table ways of knowing that are not part of the mainstream of academic life" (p. x). True to this statement, many of the questions raised by the authors are thought-provoking, and the authors have to be commended for their honesty and courage. By acknowledging the tension in the researcher-participant relationship, the authors force the reader to examine the challenges of "hybrid identities" in qualitative research. Another unique feature of the book is that it provides accounts of both the novice doctoral student and the relatively experienced faculty member. As a doctoral student, I found myself identifying more with the struggles of the novice researcher. Further, the accounts of the experienced researchers did little to alleviate my anxieties with the questions raised in the book. Soon enough I realized this book was not about providing simple answers to my struggles with multiple identities. It however, forced me to raise questions and to disrupt my comfort

levels. This process I believe is beneficial to any researcher who aims to be self-reflexive in his/her work.

While the accounts of the authors' struggles are enlightening, I wondered why perspectives of male researchers were not included. All contributors are from the field of educational research and except for one, all are women of color. Due to this factor, the book runs the risk of being repetitious in certain places. For instance, the issues raised by Martha Zurita and Beloo Mehra on the dissonance in the roles of the researcher as an interpreter and intervener seem similar. In light of this, I felt the book would have truly examined multiple perspectives if there had been more heterogeneity among the authors or at least in the exemplars cited.

Overall, I think this is an excellent resource for any researcher seeking to make sense of his/her multiple identities. While there are few books and book chapters on issues of positionality and hybrid identities (for instance, Limb & Dwyer, 2001), this book makes a unique contribution to the field of qualitative research in several ways. First, it provides an unpretentious presentation of the challenges faced by researchers in understanding their intersecting identities. Next, the narratives serve as prime exemplars of self-reflexivity that provoke the reader to "disrupt" their ideas of research as a project outside of oneself. Finally, the most important contribution of the book, the interface between the "novice" and the relatively experienced researcher, exposes the complexities involved in the journey as a qualitative researcher. This aspect alone would make the book appealing to students, particularly to those in the beginning stage of learning qualitative research. Considering the many insights provoked by this book, I would also suggest using it as a required textbook for teaching basic qualitative courses. With a total of 146 pages, it presents a succinct account of the intersection of researchers' multiple identities and offers plenty of food for thought.

### Reference

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