Case Study Inquiry & Black Feminist Resistance: Reflections on a Methodological Journey in the Furtherance of LIS Social Justice Research

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Abstract

This article explains the researcher ownership of tools of inquiry. Using personal narrative, the text highlights the elements of case study development presenting the familial as the impetus for an alternative mode for LIS social justice research in an ethnic, racial, gendered community. Using the researcher journey as an example, the approach is explored through a theoretical and methodological iterative case development process. Implications in the furtherance of LIS social justice inquiry models utilizing a critical-qualitative approach are explicated towards the development of a case study in the pursuit of community-focused research.

Keywords: case study; iterative approaches; social justice; qualitative methods

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Introduction

In critical feminist circles, an often-used quote from Black feminist poet, essayist, activist, and librarian Audre Lorde (2007) elucidates, "for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 112). The power embedded with the brevity of the phrase is adaptable as both a call to action and a mantra for social justice mobilization. This article resituates "tools" to represent resistance to the prescriptive Library and Information Science (LIS) research paradigm in the furtherance of locating and examining communal social justice. To accomplish this, the text recounts the journey of development and implementation of a select critical-cultural case study by exploring the information environment of African American activist mothers in 1960's Chicago Public Housing (Gray, 2019) using archival texts. The paper is methodological explicating a multi-layered approach to the development of a social justice LIS case study.

The ideation of the study is connected through familial ties. While conducting genealogical research, I discovered my grandmother in a Chicago Defender newspaper article. She was featured with other women in her public housing community for organizing justice activities. Although unique and personal, the development of the case study illuminates racial, ethnic, gender, and geographic approaches to the field of information study. Utilizing Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000) in concert with LIS social justice (Mehra et al., 2006, 2009; Mehra & Rioux, 2016) and information community theoretical perspectives (Fisher, et al., 2003), this iterative approach demands the researcher focus on the matter at hand in the treatment of the text in honor of the women in the community. This stance requires resistance to formulaic

approaches in methods examining communal information practice, through a deconstructive inquiry process.

This reflective essay explains this journey using personal narrative. A narrative approach provides the researcher the opportunity to use storytelling to examine life experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is a process where "oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story" (hooks, 1989, p. 43). It's important to note that the use of the term 'subject' here does not align with positivist research traditions. The quote encourages so-called marginal communities to repel narratives and research that addresses their experiences without their input. Utilizing my voice as an African American woman, studying my ancestral public housing community and recounting my narrative, resists external bias and subjectivity. My role in naming, defining, and shaping the narrative illuminates my researcher voice. The resulting text is my story within a story. I share my own resistance journey using creative and iterative research approaches, while studying the information activist properties of a Black feminist collective. Resistance occurs through deconstructive acts combating linear approaches to the research field, thereby creating my own pathway to greater understanding of phenomena. The use of first person reinforces my possession of the story and aligns with the use familial in the furtherance of research.

To better explain the embrace and researcher ownership of tools of inquiry, this article will first discuss the beginnings of the journey of developing the case using familial ties. Secondly, this text will situate the case in Black feminism, information, and LIS social justice theory. Next, I explore milestones and deconstructive application of the iterative case development process, highlighting iterative elements of case study development presenting alternative modes for LIS social justice research in ethnic, racial, and gendered communities. Lastly, implications in the furtherance of LIS social justice inquiry models through a critical-qualitative approach will be explicated towards the development of research and the researcher in the pursuit of social justice **and** community-focused research.

Familial Inspiration

The exemplar study of activist-mothers in Chicago Public Housing grew from an archived newspaper article found about a group of women fighting for a library to be built in their community. The article, entitled "Blast City for Lack of Near Southside Library" (1963), featured my grandmother's voice blasting city officials for their apathy toward community needs. The article detailed the plans of a committee of mothers to organize a protest march and meeting.

The text contained in the article is both personally inspiring and historically fascinating. Personally, the fascination of a previously unknown circumstance involving my grandmother induced pride. My assumptions about the life she lived and public housing community where my mother grew up was demystified in ways I had not anticipated. Historically, this activist spirit within a community of urban poor and working class African American women in public housing is not told in the context of library history or examined in the context of information environments. The discovery of the document ignited a curiosity which led to inspired research through the development of a unique case for study.

From the discovery of the newspaper article, I began to explore and situate the historical setting of the case. The activist mothers in the case study are situated historically in the experiences of

African American poor and working-class communities of the first half of the 20th century. My family, like many other African Americans in Chicago, migrated from the southern U.S. to escape racial apartheid (Wilkerson, 2010). The migrants to the city were described as "refugees from the bondage of America's cotton kingdom in the south" (Drake & Cayton, 2015, p. 32). In the city, migrants were able to explore economic opportunities, pursue education, and participate civically. Housing shortages for the African American population continued to be a problem during the population booms before and after World War II. There was little housing built and the South-side black belt of the city was described as blighted with extended families sharing spaces in kitchenette apartments in overcrowded converted early 20th century homes (Drake & Cayton, 2015; Fuerst & Hunt, 2005).

As the number of migrants grew, there were limitations to housing because of geographical segregation. African American overcrowding in certain areas of the city was attributed to restrictive covenant housing policies and red lining of neighborhoods (Hirsch, 1983; Rothstein, 2017). Segregation was maintained by providing African Americans with new public housing made up of high-rise buildings in formerly blighted areas (Hunt, 2009). A unique feature of the lives of the women in the public housing communities examined (Harold Ickes Homes and Dearborn Homes) is the presence of a Henry Booth Settlement House (Gray, 2019). The settlement house movement in Chicago began in the late 19th and early 20th century progressive movement, where resident workers developed programs to foster aid, education, and democratic activities amongst community members (Addams, 1910). By the mid 20th century, urban renewal in the form of systematic state and local policies to improve housing conditions, expand city infrastructure, and counter urban blight, saw the relocation of Henry Booth house from a traditionally Jewish, German, and Mexican service area, to the new high-rise public housing communities (Hunt, 2009). This *second ghetto* (Hirsch, 1983), often described as *paradise* by early residents, saw the proliferation of community engagement to enhance the lives of its members (Fuerst & Hunt, 2005). The settlement house acted as both a point of service and a space for agency. Although traditionally situated in terms of lack and deficiency this case study uncovers agency through the women constantly striving for the betterment of community.

Familial community-based activism was the flame that ignited my interest LIS social justice research. The embrace of inspiration and ideation from under-examined communities is a primary feature of situating a case that allows for a bottom-up rather than administrative view of LIS research. The recognition of the individual life of my grandmother grew into an understanding of her being a full participant of a community. My decision to further explore the information dynamics of such a community provided the impetus of the case development. The goal of the research simply became persistence and discovery. My continual examination of the women in public housing drove me to situate them theoretically, historically, and situationally. The task was scaffolded through reflexive examination of my role as a researcher and the story that would unfold. This iterative take on research design involves risk, but trust in the process of resistance enhances fulfillment. The next part of the text theoretically situates the journey using LIS social justice theory and imagining an information activist community.

Black Feminism, Community, & LIS Social Justice

To decipher the voices of the African American women, I looked to Black feminist theory. Patricia Hill Collins (1998, 2000) describes Black women as outsiders-within. These women, by their ethnicity, color, and social class are outside of white patriarchal, hegemonic spaces, but have access through working in the system. It is like physically being within spaces of those that are

privileged, but never belonging. bell hooks (1990) refers to this marginality as places of resistance. These marginal homeplaces became desirable outside spaces and represented a place of struggle invoking courage and strength. Outsiders must stand alone or collectively with others on the outside to bring change. The outside spaces are where African American women come to voice (Gray, 2019; Collins, 1999). The activism and work of the women in public housing demonstrate the outsider status in resistance and struggle. For the women, the public housing community became an information space of social justice.

The idea of community as a site for information draws on the concept of information community (IC). An IC is described as a "partnership of institutions and individuals forming and cultivating a community of interest around the provision and exchange of information, or knowledge, aimed at increasing access to that information or increasing communication, and thereby increasing that knowledge" (Durrance, 2001, p.64). This definition exists in the realm of internet based online communities. In my development of the case study the term *community* within the concept was attractive to making sense of what was occurring on the ground with the women in public housing. The case extends this meaning to increase capacity building in the interest of knowledge and understanding of what occurs in dynamic communal space. In doing so, I recognized the mobilization aspects of an IC, by incorporating galvanized structures in a contained geographic space. My emphasis on the application of information to the resistance activities in the physical environment shifted the view of the mobilized collective from an activist group to an information-based community system that informs action. A spatial-traditional interpretation of information communities creates a new application and analysis that supplants the virtual with the physical.

Utilizing Fisher et al.'s (2003) characteristics, I explore how the traditional community activism within geographical space is representative of an information-activist community (IAC) (See Table 1). Collaboration is a common feature of IC and IAC applications. The IAC extends IC in that collective use and need for information supports mobilization necessary for activism. Collectivity is the main feature of IAC by viewing the community and its relationship in terms of purpose reflecting a participatory force for the mutual good. Information in the IAC operates similarly to IC in focus and intent, but information in IAC flows from within the collective. In the context of the activist-mothers in public housing, the application of IC characteristics demonstrates the influence of community-based information systems and structures.

Table 1. Information Activist Community

IC Characteristic	IAC Application
Information Communities emphasize collaboration among diverse information providers	Collaboration is a function of information community activist participation—diverse providers include both internal and external sources
Information Communities anticipate and often form around people's needs to get and use information	Information use and need are purposeful to issues and intentions for the collective good
Information Communities effectively exploit the information	Exploitation of information as aspects of performance in

sharing qualities of available technology and yield multiplier effects for stakeholders	mobilization and galvanization around community participation and activities
Information Communities transcend barriers to information-sharing	Information-sharing is democratized and used as a tool for dismantling divides for collective purposes
Information Communities connect people and foster social connectedness	Collectivity and connectedness are essential to the social structure and necessary for activist community praxis
Information Communities emphasize collaboration among diverse information providers	Collaboration is a function of information community activist participation—diverse providers include both internal and external sources
Information Communities anticipate and often form around people's needs to get and use information	Information use and need are purposeful to issues and intentions for the collective good

Social justice research in LIS is rooted in communities that are serviced by library institutions. Connecting community to research provides another opportunity to exercise engagement within a social justice theoretical framework. The social justice theoretical perspective in LIS collates communal ideals in the service of the collective good. It is at once both philosophical and practical. The previous theoretical discussion on IC constructs demonstrates collective community mobilization in naturalistic non-technological mediated environments. Here I extend that discussion from a social justice information perspective. The LIS social justice meta-theoretical assumptions communicate fairness, empowerment, equity, and change agency. The distinction in the activist-mother community context is that information-as-service is transformed to information-as-collective.

When used as a tool, social justice becomes operationalized in information spaces. It functions within environmental structures that inform practical activities in information centers. The library is often seen as the manifestation of where the tools are utilized in the service of information need, access, use, and evaluation. Within libraries the implementation of social justice is mediated by the physical institution, staff, policies, political, and community structures. The case of the activist-mothers opens the concept of operationalization of social justice within community spaces. The case embodies social justice information frame by considering a community activist structure. My work is situated similarly to the Mehra et al. (2006) article that outlines social justice frames in LIS that include underserved population needs, communities of practice, action, empowerment/change agency, and diversity. My interpretation of the frames centers the community, without incorporating the lens of the information professional. The theoretical threads indicated through concepts provide the structure for the framework. The language collectively illustrates the elements present in social justice LIS research and practice.

The IC formed by the collective work of the members require grounding from social justice

informational tools into an interactional space where they gather. The marginalized homeplace of the activist-mothers embodies the use of information as a social justice tool. This departure from the institutional frame posits a spontaneous informal mechanization of information in the context of the greater good through social justice activities.

Understanding the case both through the lens of information activism and social justice provides a way forward in the construction of this case study. The use of theory to inform how information activism is placed within the community using a LIS social justice frame supports case development in resistance to linear research design. I understood that reframing of IC to an information activist community changed the language and brought with it a reframing of information concepts. At the same time, I explored the case in a variety of mini projects reflecting qualitative milestones. To make sense of this process of iterative case construction, I studied principles of historical research and qualitative approaches from a critical perspective.

Case Development

Qualitative research using a critical paradigm reflects socially constructed knowledge that uncovers historical insights. It is an alternative view of society, where centrality is focused not on institutions but the participants in history. Critical-historical research views history as a living process confronting issues of stability and revolution. It challenges long-held confirmed views of what we are and how we came to be (Brennen, 2013). An example of this is the long-held view that libraries were designated in poor, rural, and racially segregated communities through philanthropic, municipal, and white middle-class values being imposed on groups (Mehra & Gray, 2020). I embarked on a revisionist telling of how empowered community members utilized their voices within an information environment to gain library facilities (Gray, 2019). The case study viewed the women and the community through a lens of abundance rather than deficit. Deficit positioning demotes the persons under study to a marginal space, devoid of information (Ford et al, 2001; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). An abundance perspective takes the researcher beyond discourse that pre-defines communities. Abundance is situated in terms of an equilibrium of embodied systems and networks within a community, countering imposed hegemonic aspirational outcomes (Gray, in press). This positioning allowed for greater understanding of the community as free with the ability to control their destiny.

The tools of a qualitative academic inquiry involve a rigorous philosophical exercise of exploring lived experiences utilizing text, theory, and methods that contribute to greater understanding of phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Replication of approaches provides a guide while limiting effectiveness by bounding the researcher in the inquiry process. In qualitative social science research, a case study is defined as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 37). In my study of the IC of activist mothers in public housing, the case is bounded by the time where the activism took place through the auspices of the aforementioned Henry Booth Settlement House. It is representative of a community case study which "is small enough to permit considerable cultural (or subcultural) homogeneity, diffuse interactions and relationships between members, and to produce a social identification by its members" (Berg, 2009, p. 331). The geographic location of the near south side Douglass community in Chicago bounds a marginalized community identifiable by a segregated and predominantly African American public housing community. The identification of the information space as a clustered community of women participating in justice work, clarified my intention to discover the unique nature of the public housing environment (Gibson & Kaplan, 2017).

Illuminating the critical-historical and geographical components of the case evolved throughout the development process.

Journey Milestones

The case study represents both continued development and the culmination of experience. I began my journey through milestones of the treatment of data in different ways. An initial failed foray into historical narrative propelled me to continue to research the women's movement for library facilities. I then expanded my work to focus on the entirety of the community and the information properties found in grassroots social justice mobilization. Each milestone expanded my understanding through examining data using different approaches. After developing the historical narrative, I mapped the community and examined the discourse through an exercise that conceptually grounded the campaign for a library facility in the greater public housing community. I dissected the elements to better grasp past work. Each milestone in my research journey consistently used the same data (*Chicago Tribune* Newspaper Articles n=1; *Chicago Defender* Newspaper Articles n=7; Chicago Public Library Archival Manuscripts n=12; Henry Booth House Manuscript Collection n=4). Each phase was a separate mini project on the campaign for library facilities by the collective of women in the public housing community.

In each phase I read the evidence differently. In Phase 1, my question focused on what happened. In Phase 2, I outlined which entities shaped the information environment. In Phase 3, I searched for the voices of the women. The treatment of the evidence throughout the milestones brought me closer to understanding how to honor the women and their activities. Utilizing a Black feminist epistemology, I searched for, read, and analyzed the documentary evidence using an abundance lens to view community and social justice practices. This stance reinforces centering of the African American community, and their voices in the iterative process.

Phase 1: Library Campaign History

This phase involved writing a historical narrative that chronologically examined the activities of the library committee's effort to establish library facilities. The initial exploratory project examined the available historical evidence related to the campaign for library facilities. The project was limited by time constraints and relied on direct access to newspaper database sources and archives housed at both the University of Illinois Chicago and the Chicago Public Library. I had only a week to explore the contents of the archives and decided to limit document review to those items that clearly related to the community's push for a library. Contextual historical evidence about the community was noted, but not used. The study was itself anti-theoretical, but established a curiosity for feminist, specifically Black feminist epistemology, in understanding how the community structures impacted the actions of the mothers of the library campaign. Findings showed a building of momentum and social movement strategies and their effectiveness. It also provided the lens of the community from a non-administrative perspective in terms of the need for libraries.

Phase 2: Community Information Network (Visualization)

The project used qualitative social network analysis by employing an exploratory inductive examination of documents related to the library campaign. The analysis created data visualization by highlighting the complexity of communication and relationships in social movements (Miles et al., 2013). Data represented individuals, organizations, and political

structures that were present in primary source documents (Scott & Carrington, 2011). Each primary source document was analyzed and organized according to communication lines, relationships, influence, and collective attributes. Each document was coded for relevant organizations, groups, institutions, government/municipal agencies, and significant individuals. The resulting relational network showed the community and municipal divide. It also centered the women and allied community connections and overlapping activities. This phase mapped the relationships of the community. Through the exercise, I saw the hegemonic complexity of the municipal agencies and how the women used tactics from the grassroots level to campaign for a library. The mapping showed the collective empowerment at the community level.

Phase 3: Activist Community Collective-Determination Model

The Activist Community Collective-Determination Model was developed through grounded theory inductive analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of documents related to the campaign of library facilities. The study was *exploratory* and empirical in nature. Units of analysis included the entirety of news articles and sections of the meeting minutes applicable to the campaign for facilities. The findings of the constant comparative analysis of evidence texts revealed the following concepts: *Coalition Building*, *Equity of Access*, *Learning Spaces*, and *Performance*. In this phase I was able to clearly define what community-based social justice properties were present in the activities of the women. I clarified a framework for defining the elements of collective advocacy for community betterment. The impetus for the activities of the women was education. The library was seen as a vehicle for community development.

The phases looked at the issue of petitioning for a library. They represented stops in the journey to understanding informational aspects of the community. The next step in the journey focused on broadening the case to examine the community as a whole. The phases told the story, mapped relationships, and defined the elements of social justice activities. An informational examination of the community as a whole would provide a complete picture of the justice activities of the women.

Iterative Case Construction

The deconstructive approach to the research field follows an iterative process ignited through the discovery of the familial document. The familial document, a newspaper article, was the initial evidence piece that linked persons, place names, organizations, and institutions. The document revealed the link to the Henry Booth settlement house and the network of community-based representation from various organizations which led me to manuscripts in the archives and other media documents. The cyclical aspects of the case development process began with critical text inquiry. There are seven elements related to case development: idea and inspiration, evidence collection, concept development & pilot projects, exploratory investigation, emerging questions, research objectives, and exploratory evidence gathering. Each part represents research actions. The actions are not mutually exclusive and occur in no specific order. The practice is dynamic and can begin at any point, not following any prescribed flow. The developmental aspect of case development is iterative by nature and represents the culmination of previous works, theoretical examinations, and reflection.

The inspiration occurred through the connection of my grandmother to the need for libraries in the public housing community in which she lived. There are subsequent inspiring and idea generating documents which pushed the research forward, for example, the Henry Booth House

report on the committee, and the news articles on the planned protests. The gathering and examination of details within documents generated new questions and influenced the objectives of research. The case development activities represent the exploration of the unknown and learning to trust myself as a researcher. The development requires attention to everything that is known and discoverable.

Idea and inspiration involved open-ended inquiry and discovery. As mentioned in the beginning of the text this occurred with the discovery of the familial document. It led a questioning beyond the personal and subjective to a more observational view of my grandmother's experience in the context of activism and libraries and the community she lived in. Each step into the rabbit hole uncovered more inspirational artifacts that showcased not only her involvement in community-based working structures, but the community mobilization structures. Subsequent inspiring finds include a scrapbook of photographs, a conference paper written by the social worker on the role of the settlement house in a public housing community, and an adult education leadership class report found in the archives.

More inspirational finds guided me towards *evidence collection,* which involves continuous data gathering. I found materials through archival and online searching. Closer inspection of individual documents led to related materials that further explained the historical-contextual aspects of the public housing community. This continuous exercise helped to establish boundaries for the case geographically and historically by time period.

Concept development occurred through theoretical readings of the evidence. Readings from Black feminist texts, information theories, sociology, history (geographic and racial), and cultural studies, provided a matrix of theories to draw from. *Exploratory investigations* were signified by researcher generated milestones. These investigations occurred with each examination or study previously mentioned. The diversity of the exercises inspired the researcher to utilize various types of methodological approaches toward framework development.

Emerging questions requires the continuous process of questioning of evidence, processes, and the phenomenon. This is found both in the questions informing research tasks and questions of evidence which inform a grounded theory approach to research. In this study, questions changed and developed over time, and as more evidence was collected and concepts were developed, the questions evolved. A similar process emerges with the development of *Research objectives* that are adapted throughout case inquiry. When performing milestone mini projects, the objectives were adjusted and modified as evidence and preliminary analysis occurred. *Exploratory evidence gathering* involves data collection at crucial points throughout the iterative cycle. Each element is addressed in terms of deconstruction including cultural community aspects (race, gender, geography), social justice information science research, (re)defining methodology, and the role and posture of the researcher (as an objective/neutral observer).

Conclusion: Reflecting on a Journey

As a researcher, I struggled with scope, approaches, and tools. As I became close to the development of what my intentions were, I struggled to name the approach. I settled on calling the exercise a critical-cultural historical case study. I explored how this qualitative investigation of a historical phenomenon would be represented theoretically in the literature and decided to detail that journey through the documentation of milestones. With that documentation done, I furthered my discovery through rigorous analysis by presenting a case that repels descriptive

limitations. My intent became to expose the voice of the women, and ensure their values are accounted for in LIS research and discourse. The challenge and struggle became an opportunity to develop a creative and innovative approach to research. My empowerment as a human being and as a researcher pushed boundaries of LIS research and theory towards social justice. My work challenged the perceived imbalanced power dynamics on many levels including the content of the topic (i.e. African-American women), what information science research is, methodology, and the role of the researcher (as an objective/neutral observer). In the future, I will continue to trust the immersive iterative nature of revelatory practices through critique of the knowledge structure of the discipline of information science.

Denzin and Lincoln (2013) stress that qualitative research is "endlessly creative and interpretive" (p. 30). My creative turns often provided a pathway to designing a case study rooted in social justice in a marginalized community. My reflections on this journey offer a narrative of development in the construction of a case study, trusting oneself as a researcher. In lieu of prescribed recommendations or suggestions I offer the reader the following lessons-learned:

Follow Inspiration: The location of my grandmother's participation in a campaign for a library branch in a public housing community was an inspiring story and great family artifact. As I considered areas of study, I returned to the artifact as a point of reference to reflect on myself and heritage. It became a passion which supported a curiosity to apply research to a familial ancestral community. My knowledge of the community from familial stories at times hindered questioning and limited the observational eye. In the pursuit of this research and the process of developing the case, I recognized my internal tension of what is "known" based on my closeness to the community and the assumptions that creep into my evidentiary discovery and examination. My persistence in discovery of the complexities of the artifact, and how it led me to others strengthened my ability to interrogate the informational aspects of the community environment.

Creativity and rigor can coexist: Often times in the case construction process, I looked to established templates by qualitative scholars to follow a rigorous exploration in studying the community. I trusted my inclination to approach the archival research field creatively and iteratively. Each element used did not simply follow prescriptive steps. It required me to be reflexive in the furthering my process.

Consider the journey: The case is built on the milestones developed from the mini-projects. I knew in each application of inductive coding, relational mapping, and the historical narrative that I was on to something. The ability to learn from each phase and apply that to the iterative case development allowed me to embrace the process and surrender intellectually to next step in the journey. I often return to small projects to inform larger questions in determining how to investigate the informational world around me.

Illuminate LIS social justice: The matrix of theories used complement the gender, race, and informational aspects of the community of women under study. My journey contributed to my framing of the case utilizing an epistemology of resistance and social justice in LIS. The library was the tool, but the community of women represented the information nexus. My initial desire to limit the case to the campaign excluded the promise of developing the case around the information activist community.

Researcher discovery through iterative rigorous analysis extends descriptive limitations by seeking to expose the activist-voice of the subjects, ensuring their belief systems and values are

accounted for in LIS research and discourse. This challenge and struggle provide opportunities for the development of creative pathways for research. The master's tools are tossed aside and new tools in support of constructing new modes that defy replication in research are developed. This pushing of boundaries allows for expanded social justice LIS research, theory, and model development. Challenging perceived imbalanced power dynamics on many levels including ethnic, race, gendered, and geographic, case study development requires a resistance mindset, which is at the heart of LIS social justice research.

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