

# Catherine D'ignazio And Lauren F. Klein: Data Feminism

## Book Review

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Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein: *Data Feminism*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020.

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### ABSTRACT

This book review examines Data Feminism by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, a transformative text that challenges traditional notions of neutrality and objectivity in quantitative research. Grounded in intersectional feminist theory, the book presents seven principles of data feminism that call for examining and challenging power structures, valuing emotion, rethinking binaries, embracing pluralism, situating data within context and making labor visible. For Ed.D. programs committed to equity and social justice, Data Feminism offers a critical framework for reimagining research methods curricula, equipping scholar-practitioners to interrogate power, embrace reflexivity, and foster more inclusive and just data practices.

### KEYWORDS

*critical quantitative methods, data feminism, research methods curriculum*

Quantitative methods in educational research, rooted in positivist and postpositivist epistemology, have been considered as neutral and objective tools, distant from critical inquiry. Traditionally, these methods were mainly used to validate theories and explain processes within "fixed theoretical frameworks" (Stage & Wells, 2014, p. 2). The emphasis on objectivity as the main path to obtaining absolute truth (Strunk & Hoover, 2019) often ignores the ways in which these methods mostly operate from a deficit perspective, perpetuating inequities (Arellano, 2022). As Oakley (1998) notes, the perception of neutrality and distance from critical perspectives in quantitative research is deeply grounded in a "gendered history" (p. 724), in which these methods have been framed as inherently objective and unbiased, what Oakley (1998) states as "mainstream/malestream" (p. 707) approaches, thereby limiting opportunities for instructors to integrate critical perspectives. Quantitative methods courses have traditionally been delivered in a context-free manner, focusing almost solely on statistical tests and reinforcing the assumption of objectivity in quantitative data analysis. However, in recent decades, critical quantitative researchers have begun to challenge these assumptions utilizing quantitative methods to address inequities and pose critical questions within educational research (e.g., Baker, 2019; Lopez et al., 2017). This movement represents an important step toward integrating critical perspectives into quantitative research, disrupting historical assumptions of neutrality and objectivity that have shaped these methods.

One of the guiding principles of the CPED frameworks emphasizes that "[the professional doctorate in education] is framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice" (CPED, 2021, para. 5).

This commitment to social justice in educational research necessitates a critical lens. Recent scholarship, such as the latest themed issue on "Reimagining Research Methods Coursework for the Preparation of Scholar-Practitioners" of *Impacting Education: Journal on Transforming Professional Practice*, highlights a growing trend toward reevaluating and redesigning research methods curricula in CPED member EdD programs. Given the emphasis on social justice and the evolving scholarship on research methods in CPED-aligned programs, EdD programs centered on social justice and equity need to explore and reimagine critical quantitative methods to address complex problems of practices in concert with qualitative methods. With this book review, I aim to introduce the principles of *Data Feminism* by D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) to EdD programs interested in developing and adopting a critical research methods curriculum that includes critical quantitative perspective. Catherine D'Ignazio, an associate professor of urban science and planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and a former software developer and experimental artist, and Lauren Klein, a professor at Emory University specializing in computational and critical methods around questions of social justice, both identify as data scientists and data feminists. In *Data Feminism*, they draw on intersectional and Black feminist theories to examine inequalities at the intersection of gender and race, emphasizing that data feminism is not exclusively about women's issues but rather addresses broader systemic inequities.

D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) introduce seven principles of data feminism, structuring each chapter around an in-depth exploration of a specific principle. Chapter one introduces the first principle, examining power. D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) describe power as the



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structural functionalist system in which the dominant social groups hold unearned privilege, while minoritized groups face systemic disadvantages and oppression. They discuss the importance of examining these power systems, their intersections, and the complex ways they influence our lives. Examining power calls for naming and explaining oppressive forces, which are embedded deeply in our daily lives “and into our datasets, our databases, and our algorithms” (D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 24), making them difficult to identify, particularly for those who hold power and operate from a position of privilege. The authors refer to this situation as “privilege hazard” (p. 29). Using numerous examples of hidden oppression in daily life, D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) demonstrate the interplay of privilege and power from a feminist data science perspective. They argue that we need to approach these issues with a critical eye, constantly questioning power dynamics by asking: “Who does the work (and who is pushed out)? Who benefits (and who is neglected or harmed)? Whose priorities get turned into products (and whose are overlooked)?” (D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 47).

Chapter two focuses on the second principle of data feminism: challenging power. D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) argue that after identifying and naming the forms of structural oppression, we must take action against these forces to work toward socially just futures. The authors propose four forms of action to challenge power: *collect*, *analyze*, *imagine*, and *teach*. *Collecting* counterdata is essential to understand the extent of structural oppression, especially for those in position of privilege. *Analyzing* this counterdata is a critical next step, as it uncovers patterns that perpetuate inequity and enables data practitioners to hold institutions accountable for structural oppression. D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) argue that we need a shift in language, adopting concepts from critical and intersectional feminist perspectives such as justice, oppression, equity, co-liberation, and reflexivity rather than terms that maintain the status quo (e.g., fairness, bias, fairness, accountability, transparency). This reframing will help us see the root cause of issues as products of systemic oppression rather as isolated problems. D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) emphasize that the focus should extend beyond identifying systemic biases in datasets or algorithms; instead, it should center on *imagining* co-liberation for both privileged and minoritized groups. They recognize that we hold different identities and *teaching* and disseminating this knowledge might be challenging for those in dominant groups, yet they underline the importance of persistently exposing systemic oppression, even when it feels unsettling, and “teach data like an intersectional feminist” (p. 65).

Chapter three introduces the third principle of data feminism: elevating emotion and embodiment by challenging the neutral presentation of data. The argument of neutral data visualization typically excludes tools that evoke emotion, affect, or embodiment as these human experiences have historically been feminized and framed as contradicting with reason within dominant knowledge systems. However, by asserting neutrality, we default to the dominant group’s perspective, primarily the perspective of White heterosexual men, while excluding the perspectives of minoritized groups, thus further perpetuating inequity. D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) propose an inclusive approach, defined as feminist objectivity, which seeks multiple perspectives and embraces lived experiences and emotions rather than favoring a single perspective.

In chapter four, centered on the fourth principle of data feminism, D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) question the classification systems and data collection practices, emphasizing how these systems, largely controlled by dominant societal structures, shape

power dynamics and reinforce structural inequalities. They emphasize the limitations of rigid or standardized categories commonly used in large-scale government and institutional datasets, arguing that these frameworks fail to capture the complexity and fluidity of people’s identities. D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) offer compelling examples of the widespread use of gender and sex binaries, as well as the varied use of racial categories in public databases. These examples prompt a deeper discussion on whether the issue lies with the inadequacy of the individual categories or with the entire classification system, which often conceals “false binaries and implied hierarchies” (p. 105). To address these issues, the chapter advocates for more inclusive and participatory approaches to data collection and classification. Contrary to the common misconception that classification is inherently restrictive, they argue that quantifying data can be empowering, especially when used to address large-scale systemic inequities. By continuously rethinking and re-evaluating the underlying assumptions and beliefs that shape out systems of classification, we can use leverage these tools to dismantle oppressive structures.

In chapter five, D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) highlight the importance of pluralism in data work, arguing that incorporating diverse voices and expertise results in more inclusive representation and a deeper understanding of complex societal issues. They emphasize positionality and reflexivity as the initial step in embracing diverse perspectives. Rather than imposing data practices onto communities, pluralistic approaches to data for co-liberation are grounded in the needs raised by the communities themselves. D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) describe participatory data collection and analysis as a collaborative space, like a metaphorical campfire, where information is exchanged, promoting connection and shared understanding. This approach challenges deficit-based narratives about underserved communities by reducing the risk of *epistemic violence*, a term Spivak (2010) uses to describe the harm done when outsiders interpret communities without understanding their local contexts. At its core, this chapter argues that embracing pluralism through transparency, reflexivity, and participatory approaches, at every stage of the data process, from collection to the dissemination of the findings, can challenge dominant power structures and, in turn, foster more just and equitable data practices.

Chapter six explores the sixth principle of data feminism, consider context, where D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) assert that “the numbers don’t speak for themselves” (p. 149). From a feminist perspective, they argue that “all knowledge is situated,” meaning that “context matters,” (p. 152) and that data must be connected to its origins by acknowledging the power structures that may hide the truth. For data to be fully understood and interpreted ethically, contextual information is necessary, as it is influenced by the social, cultural, and institutional conditions in which it is created. Allowing data to stand alone without context risks misinterpretation and can perpetuate harmful narratives, particularly when the data reflects issues tied to systemic oppression, such as structural racism and sexism. The authors emphasize that individuals from dominant groups must make intentional and explicit efforts to recognize and address these oppressive structures within datasets. By prioritizing the context in which data are produced and recording and sharing this information alongside open data practices, we can better identify power imbalances and prevent silences and omissions within datasets.

In the final chapter, D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) present the last principle of data feminism, make labor visible, as a way to uncover

the often-overlooked labor involved in data processes. They argue that in today's capitalist society, only visible work tends to be recognized and valued, leading to the undervaluing of "invisible labor" essential in creating data-driven tools. This type of hidden work along with its most common contributors, women and people of color, is often devalued due to systemic inequalities. The authors point out that showing your work means tracing each phase of a data project, from data collection to publication, and acknowledging all contributors, thereby revealing the full labor involved, including technical tasks and the emotional work of collaboration. Through a feminist lens, D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) emphasize the power of transparency and acknowledgement at every stage of data work to create a more just and sustainable data ecosystem.

In *Data Feminism*, D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) offer a transformative framework that challenges conventional data practices, advocating for a more inclusive, ethical, and socially just approach to quantitative research methods. By presenting data feminism principles that emphasize power analysis, contextual understanding, pluralism, and the visibility of labor, they provide an essential framework for integrating critical perspectives into quantitative data work. This book is an invaluable resource for academics and scholar-practitioners who seek to reimagine quantitative data practices with a focus on equity and social justice. For EdD programs, *Data Feminism* offers an opportunity to rethink and reshape research methods courses, encouraging future scholar-practitioners to challenge traditional paradigms associated with quantitative methods and to prioritize critical, feminist perspectives in their work.

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