

FESTSCHRIFT FOR CHRISTINE M. PORTER | INTRODUCTION

Triple rigor: An introduction to the special section celebrating Christine Porter's Work and life

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Christine Porter, Wyoming Excellence Chair and professor of community and public health at the University of Wyoming, centered her scholarship on community food systems strategies for improving equity, health, democracy, and what she called “the capital-W Work” of social and food justice. She led the Food Dignity¹ and Growing Resilience projects, helped to develop the Wyoming Food Coalition,² and served as the national executive executive committee chair for the Inter-institutional Network for Food, Agriculture, and Sustainability (INFAS).³

In 2023 and 2024, as Christine was moving through a five-year journey with stage 4 breast cancer, I proposed a special section of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (JAFSCD) to celebrate her life and work. Christine

means so much to so many who worked with, learned from, and knew and loved her. And her transformative scholarly contributions, aimed at investing in, diversifying, and amplifying those leading the Work, are worthy of celebration. She was honored by the proposed celebration, but she was most interested in inviting contributions from her personal and professional networks to extend the Work and especially her concept of triple-rigorous storytelling and research; that is, research that aims to achieve not only typical academic *epistemological* rigor, but also *ethical* and *emotional* rigor.

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Christine's affiliation at the time of her original contributions is included here. She passed away on July 31, 2024.

¹ <https://www.fooddignity.org/>

² <https://www.wyfoodcoalition.org/>

³ <https://asi.ucdavis.edu/programs/infas>

JAFSCD is easily the most fitting outlet for this extension and celebration. Not only did her article, “Triple-rigorous storytelling: A PI’s reflections on devising case study methods with five community-based food justice organizations” (Porter, 2018) appear in the journal, but—as JAFSCD editor-in-chief Duncan Hilchey put it when I proposed the special section—“Christine’s DNA is infused throughout JAFSCD.” As Christine frequently noted, she found JAFSCD’s open access, scholarly-but-not-academic, practice-based (i.e., featuring and honoring people doing the Work), and ethically committed approach to be more rigorous (triple so) than any other journal she had previously encountered. Beginning in 2011, Christine co-developed JAFSCD’s first action-centered equity agenda;⁴ served on the editorial board;⁵ published a special issue on her U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)–funded Food Dignity project (Porter et al., 2018); contributed numerous other articles; and collaborated via INFAS to co-edit a special section on justice and equity approaches to student food (in)security (Budowle et al., 2023). Accordingly, the JAFSCD editorial team was eager to support this *festschrift*, a celebratory collection of writing in honor of Christine as both a scholar and a person.

Christine initially served as a co-guest associate editor with me for this special section, as she hoped to read the contributions. She passed away on July 31, 2024, before being able to do so. Before that, she further shaped her concept of triple-rigorous research as part of the semi-open call for papers for this section, building from her presentation at the 2024 JAFSCD Shareholder Consortium meeting (Porter, 2024). She argued for triple rigor as a framework for identifying truth and fostering transformation, in direct alignment with JAFSCD’s efforts to support more transformative work (see Center for Transformative Action, n.d.). Additionally, we co-developed triple-

rigor peer review criteria (below) for JAFSCD’s consideration.

Before introducing the contributions included in this special section, I share Christine’s more fully developed concept of triple rigor and potential criteria for review, which we co-authored together before her passing. Christine is posthumously included as a co-author of this introduction, accordingly. Additionally, I weave in elements of a one-on-one conversation that I had with Christine in March 2024, which she requested that I record.⁶

Triple-Rigorous Research

Christine’s initial triple-rigor concept emerged from case studies with community-based food justice organizations in her Food Dignity project as a method for storytelling and enhancing relational accountability within community-academic partnerships (Porter, 2018). She built on Food Dignity graduate students’ concept of emotional rigor (Bradley et al., 2018) with the ethical and epistemological rigor that she had long strived for in her own research. She argued for leading first with ethical rigor—“fronting ethics,” as she often described it—followed by epistemological and emotional rigor to shape and conduct every part of a study, from team and research question formation to action and sharing. Her working definitions for these three types of rigor include:

Ethical rigor: Ethics is often considered last in research, to guide whether and how to apply it to results (Pelletier et al., 2013). However, Christine argued that research not only should but *does* begin with ethics. Individually and collectively held values shape our behaviors and decision-making, such as what research questions we, as academics, deem worth asking, with whom and how we collaborate, and how we gather and analyze data (Harding, 1991). Our dominant cultural values and ethics shape the entire research enterprise.⁷

⁴ <https://www.foodsystemsjournal.org/index.php/fsj/equity-agenda>

⁵ <https://www.foodsystemsjournal.org/index.php/fsj/jeb-members>

⁶ This proved to be the last time I would ever see Christine in-person, during a long weekend visit with her and others who considered themselves her mentees. As I write this, I realize this introduction is the last of the scholarly work that we collaborated on together.

⁷ Consider the horrific example of the so-called Tuskegee study, in which the U.S. Public Health Service recruited hundreds of Black

In research, ethical rigor includes building and deepening equitable research partnerships with those most affected by and knowledgeable about an issue; explicitly articulating, discussing, and agreeing upon those values and ethics that underpin partnerships and projects; using those values to guide, assess, and adjust collaborations; and drawing on values to strive for emotional rigor (see below).

Epistemological rigor: This is conventional academic rigor (i.e., this is what we, as academic researchers, usually mean by the word “rigor”). Epistemology is an academic way of saying the study of knowledge, or “theory of knowledge and understanding, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Academia values using systematic and, ideally, replicable methods in research with the goal of maximizing the chances of findings being true. For example, in medicine, the randomized controlled trial (RCT) is considered the gold standard of this kind of rigor (Bothwell et al., 2016).⁸

Emotional rigor: For academics, who are trained to exclude and even deny emotion (Blakely, 2007), emotional rigor may be the most difficult of the trio to understand and/or embrace. It is also a relatively novel concept; outside of a few examples in mental health, the Food Dignity graduate students (Bradley et al., 2018) may even have been the first to use the phrase (although certainly not the concept, which has a long history in feminist, post-colonial, community-based, and other types of work [Blakely, 2007; Wilson, 2008]).

The students describe emotional rigor as *praxis-from-the-heart*, “a strategy for using emotions rigorously and productively to combat academic

supremacy”⁹ (Bradley et al., 2018, p. 222). A social worker employs the phrase to denote “a process that invites us to feel deeply and fully, while challenging us to skillfully and constructively work with our emotions and all their nuance and contradictions. The process involves emotional honesty, humility, persistence, and flexibility” (Lee, n.d., para. 2).

Christine suggested that there are at least three reasons to strive for emotional rigor in research. One is to achieve what science philosopher Sandra Harding (1991) calls ‘strong objectivity.’ There is no such thing as a view from nowhere. If you are human, you have a lens and framework through which you perceive the world emerging from life experience that informs that perspective and necessarily affects your work. Instead of pretending to ignore this perspective and experience, strong objectivity asks us to account for how it affects our work, thereby strengthening epistemological rigor via improved objectivity.

Another reason is to strengthen relationships. Science philosopher Shawn Wilson (2008) argues that research is about creating stronger relationships—between each other (including in research collaborations), between us and the truths we seek, and between us and the systems and ecologies of which we are a part. Emotions are key to relationships (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Thus, emotional rigor enables us to discover and create ever more understanding and insight, including in research. And, as one relationship that research can engender is between us and those systems of which we are a part, emotional rigor is necessary for doing transformative work that aims to dismantle those systems and create more just ones.

Finally, Christine suggested that emotional rigor leads to the strongest ethics, since ethics involve the practice of our individual values through a confluence of heart and head (Dewey

men in Alabama who had contracted syphilis previously and intentionally left the participants untreated for 40 years to study the progression of the disease (Ford et al., 2024). Christine named two values underpinning that “research”: white supremacy and an extreme prioritization of the formal systems of knowledge-generation used in academic research.

⁸ RCTs are an excellent way to answer relatively narrow questions about, for example, cancer drug effectiveness. (As an observational study, even the Tuskegee syphilis study design was relatively weak in terms of epistemological rigor—and certainly, ethical rigor.)

⁹ Academic supremacy encompasses all the systemic, institutionalized inequities experienced by community partners when working with academic partners in research (Porter & Wechsler, 2018).

& Tufts, 2012/1909). Emotional rigor is where the rubber of our ethics hits the road, so to speak, as demongrated by the Food Dignity graduate students using it to combat academic supremacy in that project.

Rigor, tripled: Interpersonally, we, as academic researchers, can only be trustworthy as researchers and research partners if we work with strong ethical and emotional rigor. The combination of all three types of rigor broadens and recenters our view of what, how, and why we are researching: from components to systems, from projects to people, from problems to solutions, from study to action. If we combine emotional and ethical rigor with epistemological rigor, then our work will yield results with the maximum trustworthiness and relevance, including the most potential for fostering transformation. Moreover, Christine held that epistemological rigor is one—but not the only—way of understanding truths; in fact, there are many truths we can't reach with epistemological rigor alone.

Not only did Christine argue that embracing triple rigor is the most truth-revealing and transformation-fostering way to do any research with stakeholders and communities, but it is also the *only* way to do research that tackles wicked problems or contributes to the transformation of food and other systems.¹⁰ Emerging from Indigenous paradigms (Thiessen, 2025) and shared with Christine specifically by Dr. Virginia Sutter, who was an enrolled member of the Northern Arapaho Tribe and food sovereignty leader in the Wind River Reservation with whom Christine worked on both Food Dignity and Growing Resilience, triple-rigorous research means doing research “*in a Good Way*.”

Proposed Triple-Rigorous Review Criteria

How we assess research in peer review affects how we conduct it. Currently, other than meeting institutional review board and similar ethical requirements, epistemological rigor is what academics primarily look for in papers. As noted above, however, values necessarily come into play in both

research and its review. In part, I proposed this special section to Christine and JAFSCD to support the journal's transformational goals, including by considering all three forms of rigor in research with communities. Changing journal peer-review criteria to include all three forms of rigor, when appropriate, could help shift research practice. Together, Christine and I developed the following criteria for each form of rigor, which I hope will foster further discussion within JAFSCD and beyond. Below are these criteria, which provide examples that could be incorporated into the current review form completed by JAFSCD reviewers.

1. How would you rate the overall *ethical* rigor of this paper? For example, it:

- is explicit about the values driving the research questions, methods, and sharing of outcomes and approaches.
- strives for equity in the process and how the outcomes are shared.
- discusses strategies for or the experience of developing equitable partnerships with the most affected stakeholders.
- plans or implements action related to the research.
- provides other explanations of alignment of values with practice.

2. How would you rate the overall *epistemological* rigor of this paper? For example, it:

- situates the research within both the specific context and existing knowledge on the topic and approach.
- uses methods well-matched to the research questions.
- is explicit about data collection and analysis methods.
- systematically presents results.
- closely ties discussion to results and situates them within previously reviewed existing knowledge.
- identifies limitations and opportunities for future research and practice.

¹⁰ All of this said, Christine recognized that she never “achieved” triple rigor; rather, she considered it a journey and aspiration as opposed to a destination or end.

- names specific epistemological paradigms from which methods and results emerge, whether dominant or not.

3. How would you rate the overall *emotional rigor* of this paper? For example, it:

- explicitly discusses the author(s)' perspectives and feelings about the research, including but not limited to honesty, humility, persistence, and flexibility.
- discusses strategies to combat academic supremacy.
- mentions the quality and quantity of relationships relevant to the research endeavor, including the research team, partners, stakeholders, and the systems and ecologies of which the research and topic is a part.
- names and accounts for how the researchers' positionality affects their relationships with any part of the research, from people to findings.

4. Additional comments on criteria #1–3, including whether and how authors explicitly acknowledge or include a statement of their application of triple rigor.¹¹

The rating scale for the first three criteria would include *Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor, or Inferior*. These ratings differ from those in other JAFSCD review criteria, in which the middle ranking is *Average*, for two reasons. One, reviewers do not generally have enough (or any) experience with evaluating emotional or ethical rigor, which would make it difficult to evaluate against something approximating an average. Two, given that these forms of rigor have yet to be explored or evaluated, any “average” is likely to be lower than what is considered average for epistemological rigor.

Triple-Rigorous and Celebratory Contributions to the Special Section

Beyond the rationale and review that we present above, Christine maintained that wicked prob-

lems—and the systems transformation required to address them—are, fundamentally, problems of equity and justice. She said that working toward this transformation gave her life meaning and joy, connecting her with other people and systems. For her, this linked back to emotional rigor, in that “justice is what love looks like in public” (West, 2011).

She embraced that connection here by inviting a range of different authors and contribution types to this special section, including both those that are more traditionally academic and others that are not. The call for papers invited reflections on working directly with or learning from Christine or engaging in shared Work; creative work; and peer-reviewed papers explicitly applying or exploring triple-rigorous research to yield truth and transformation by reexamining previous work using a triple-rigorous lens, extending the above triple-rigorous framework, or contributing a new study explicitly using triple rigor. Thanks to 21 authors, the papers described below respond to this invitation. The special section also shares again some of Christine’s work around the triple-rigor concept, including her original article on triple-rigorous storytelling (Porter, 2018), her co-authored piece with Food Dignity graduate students on emotional rigor (Bradley et al., 2018), and her presentation on triple-rigorous research to JAFSCD shareholders (Porter, 2024). The first two are included as supplemental files to this article; see this article’s landing page for links to all.¹²

The first new contribution is an edited collection of first-person vignettes about Christine (Provance et al.) by “twelve authors who considered her a mentor, colleague, collaborator, and/or friend” (p. 1). The vignettes illuminate and celebrate first-person lessons and legacies learned from and with her about food and social justice, triple rigor, and more.

Next, Alyssa Wechsler Duba’s program brief describes Christine’s role in helping to develop the Wyoming Food Coalition (WFC). While the WFC is a collaborative endeavor emerging from stake-

¹¹ JAFSCD is exploring the creation of a Triple-Rigor Editorial Circle composed of scholars and practitioners whose first task would be to refine and operationalize these new review criteria.

¹² <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2025.151.021>

holders' shared work across the state, Duba describes Christine's key role in using her Wyoming Excellence Chair position and associated funds to help catalyze its initial formation and organizational structure, including its emphasis on equity and sustainability. This brief provides an example of how Christine leveraged her academic position to bring more money to support and amplify the knowledge and the wisdom of people doing work on the ground.

In a peer-reviewed reflective essay, Lesli Hoey details an interview she conducted with Charity Hicks, a Detroit-area food justice leader who was killed in 2014 shortly after the interview. In Lesli's last in-person conversation with Christine, Christine urged Lesli to publish more of it in Charity's own voice. This article does just that, interpreting the interview using the triple-rigor framework and drawing parallels between Charity's work as an activist and Christine's work as an academic for food justice, both of whom engaged in love as praxis.

Keith et al. contribute a research article, which details a talking circle drawing on an Indigenous research paradigm to holistically evaluate *Growing Season*—a USDA-funded program at the University of Wyoming and Central Wyoming College that aimed to support American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students on pathways to undergraduate education in food systems and sovereignty through mentoring and recruitment. Co-authors, including Christine, who shaped the program pivoted from the planned evaluation approach informed by a more typical dominant research paradigm amid institutional barriers and disruptions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to instead explore “what it would take” to do this work, including successes, challenges, and hopes that go beyond this specific program. A blessing in disguise, this pivot revealed the relevance of Indigenous evaluation methods, a focus on relationships, and institutional support for better supporting AI/AN students and partners.

Katie Bradley's peer-reviewed reflective essay describes her journey of leaving academia and eventually becoming an eighth-grade science teacher. She combines lessons learned from her time as a graduate student working with Christine

on the Food Dignity project with others from Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2015) *Braiding Sweetgrass* and the triple-rigor framework to interpret her teaching practices across three main goals that she has for her students. These include understanding science as a worldview, applying systems thinking to understand complex problems, and exploring science's role in social and environmental justice.

Budowle and co-authors, who are current and former members of the INFAS executive committee, share a peer-reviewed reflective essay on “strategic storytelling.” This alternative to strategic planning, which draws inspiration from triple-rigorous storytelling (Porter, 2018), tells the story of the past, present, and future of INFAS, including by celebrating Christine's leadership role in it. The multichaptered story aims to enhance connections with current and prospective members and partners to better achieve INFAS's vision of an ecologically sustainable and socially just food system. Simultaneously, it helped the executive committee members share their own personal stories and build stronger relationships with each other during a moment of transition within INFAS.

Finally, this festschrift closes with *Comfort*, an essay that Christine wrote and shared with loved ones, friends, collaborators, and close colleagues in 2023, lightly edited for inclusion here with her family's permission. She describes a vision of her house and bench in the meadow, where we can find her and be buoyed by her love now that she has walked on. This vision inspired the cover art for the special section, a linocut print created by one of her mentees, Shannon Conk, titled, “An Invitation: Christine's Bench in the Meadow.”

In closing, I share my own memory of one of my last conversations with Christine during our work together on this special section. As her health continued to decline, I told her that I was struggling to come to terms with losing her as my closest collaborator in the “little-w” academic work that we shared—my most intellectually invigorating and meaningful partnership—and that I didn't know how I would continue to do it without her. She acknowledged this special form of loss and expressed that she would likewise feel it if our situation were reversed, but she knew that I would find

a way to continue using the “little-w work” to contribute to the “capital-W Work.” Now, over a year since her passing, I often find myself sitting with her on the bench to do just that. I hear her urging me to try to name, navigate, and contribute to transforming unjust and inequitable systems, including by ameliorating academic supremacy (see

Porter & Wechsler, 2018) and amplifying communities’ work, just as described in many of the above pieces. I hope this special section provides fertile ground for others to do the same, joining Christine on the bench to grow the meadow—connecting with and extending the Work to which she devoted her life with love. 

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