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Engagement, Advocacy, Empowerment, and Inclusion: A Review of Patricia Leavy and Anne Harris's Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice

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Abstract

Feminism is a broad and often misunderstood concept; for some it harks back to the suffragette movement, to others the 1960’s and 1970’s, some to today’s current political climate, and other still to something else. *Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice* takes a look at the *herstory* of feminism, feminist approaches to research, and responsibilities of feminist researchers. Leavy and Harris do a wonderful job of engaging the reader throughout the book. While each chapter builds on one another, they also stand alone, allowing for both a full-scale immersion into feminism and research, as well as essential nuggets for quick learning or bolstering knowledge. Throughout the book, the authors continue to expand on the conversation and responsibility of feminist researchers to think and approach research as “inter- and transdisciplinary” (p. v), in an effort to enlighten the reader to the multi-perspectives and opportunity to support other suppressed or minority perspective. This book is well suited for anyone interested in learning about or expanding their knowledge and application of feminist research.

Keywords

Feminism, Feminist Research, Feminist Practice, Feminist Research Practice, Contemporary Feminist Research

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Engagement, Advocacy, Empowerment, and Inclusion: A Review of Patricia Leavy and Anne Harris's *Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice*

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Feminism is a broad and often misunderstood concept; for some it harks back to the suffragette movement, to others the 1960's and 1970's, some to today's current political climate, and other still to something else. Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice takes a look at the herstory of feminism, feminist approaches to research, and responsibilities of feminist researchers. Leavy and Harris do a wonderful job of engaging the reader throughout the book. While each chapter builds on one another, they also stand alone, allowing for both a full-scale immersion into feminism and research, as well as essential nuggets for quick learning or bolstering knowledge. Throughout the book, the authors continue to expand on the conversation and responsibility of feminist researchers to think and approach research as "inter-and transdisciplinary" (p. v), in an effort to enlighten the reader to the multi-perspectives and opportunity to support other suppressed or minority perspective. This book is well suited for anyone interested in learning about or expanding their knowledge and application of feminist research. Keywords: Feminism, Feminist Research, Feminist Practice, Feminist Research Practice, Contemporary Feminist Research

Review

What is feminism? Many of us know "something" about feminism but not its full story—the history, connections, research approaches and feminist researcher responsibilities. This book was an easy read (a cross-country flight kind of read) that, for me, was eye opening in my limited knowledge of feminism, as well as educational in the various connections and interdisciplinary and inter-relational perspectives of feminism. As a graduate student, one learns about the various types of research approaches that one can take and lenses to view perspectives through, but often they are touched on quickly as an overview or quick introduction to the topic in basic qualitative courses. It is not until you start working towards the research path that one really starts to understand more fully what an approach is all about. I chose this book as an opportunity to understand more about feminism and feminist research. As a grad student and full-time working mom, the structure of the book was a welcome relief. As a reader, you can select particular chapter to dive right into a topic and they stand-alone well enough to start anywhere. I chose to read the book from cover to cover and found that each chapter built upon the previous one in a way that really showed the landscape and feminist research today and the *herstory* of feminism. I can see coming back to this book in future research.

The preface opens the book with a note from the authors around their approach to the book and reasons for contributing to the feminist research literature. They make a conscious conversation of letting the reader know that the book transcends Western perspective of feminism and "highlights the multiperspectival and socially constructed nature of

contemporary feminist research, including global feminisms, transnational collaboration, digital media and virtual embodiment and feminist ‘publics’” (pp. v–vi).

The first third of the book is dedicated to exploring the feminist theoretical framework—What is feminist theory?; What does the research landscape look like?; intersectionality; feminist epistemology; standpoint feminism; and post-modern/post-structural theories. I found the inclusion of current day events in the descriptions to be very helpful not only for my understanding of the conversation, but also for the application and connection to my learning and experiences. Given the authors’ focus on showing feminism as a discipline in-and-of-itself, but also one that is inclusive and aware of other disciplines that touch on similar concepts from a different perspective, I found the constructivist approach to sharing feminism helpful and a demonstration of more than just inclusive words.

We first jump into the concept of feminism, which starts with the concept of gender in chapter 1. This conversation continues to expand to include pieces that address the various “multiple aspects of privilege or oppression” (p. 4) to include LGBTQ, gender pay gap, racism, ableism, class inequity, and much more. This broadens the concept of which feminism is defined as and forces the reader to think beyond the “he/she” of gender but to the concept of oppression/privilege in a manner that not only applies to feminist perspective but also applies to other perspectives as well. While feminist research is focused on the female, the authors ensure that by the end of the first chapter that the reader understands we are all in this together as individuals and as participants in multiple groups, all of which require each other’s support, understanding and continued evolution. Chapter 2 really gets into the heart of feminism’s roots and its connection to scholarship and politics. I really liked the chart on the 3rd page of the chapter (p. 15) that showcases feminist research across a wide range of disciplines, coupled with the chart on page 31 that addresses feminisms relationally. To me, it brought home the conversation that feminist research is diverse—it has been and can be conducted anywhere not just on topics that are often considered “feminine.” Chapter 3 builds on this concept and also starts to narrow in on the feminist empiricism and standpoint feminism. Here, we start to really understand what feminism is, along with why feminist research is so important; or as Leavy and Harris say “equality” and “enlightenment” (p. 47). Chapter 4 closes out the exploration of the feminism portion of the book with the conversation about postmodern/poststructuralist theoretical frames to feminist research and emerging feminist epistemologies with explanations and critiques. This chapter was a bit more of a heavy read than the preceding three chapters, in part because there were topics that I hadn’t been previously exposed to. I appreciated the building conversation and constant circling of global inclusion for feminism and the build between “gender studies” and “feminist studies” as my world expanded in the understanding. I think this chapter, as I become more aware of feminist research, will provide additional nugget on a subsequent read as my knowledge base grows and I can make stronger connections to the material.

The second third of the book was dedicated to research, the how-to of feminist research. Here Leavy and Harris dedicate chapters to ethics, and types of research (participant/nonliving data). These chapters (5-7) cover much of the same conversation for any type of research that is conducted with academic integrity. Feminist research, as we learned in the first section of the book, not only needs to be on-point, but it has a duty to be engaged, aware, purposeful and power sharing. The ethics chapter stresses “it’s not necessarily about what we do . . . but it is necessarily about *how* we do it and *why* we do it” (p. 126). Chapter 7 continues to build with a focus on working directly with participants. Suggestions and guidelines for conducting qualitative and quantitative research are provided here. As a newer researcher, the examples provided for research how-to’s such as recruitment letters, the role of researcher image (p. 113), to ways and reasons of representing the research and reports helped to bring connections to the forefront that are essential to ensuring proper research in a way that is true and supports the

feminist perspective. The chapter calls to the reader's attention the importance of representation and intersectionality while providing the reader insight into the approaches of "doing research." This chapter created an opening into research that I hadn't considered before—how does everything interact and what responsibilities are there beyond the research and advocacy?

The final third of the book was dedicated to being a feminist researcher—the how to of writing, publishing, performing public scholarship and examining critical perspectives. Throughout chapters 8 and 9, the reader is exposed to the writing and publishing of feminist research. Consistent with the book, these chapters provides the tools and suggestions necessary to do the job but also the perspective of how to provide robustness to bring home the importance of the research and message such as (1) show not tell, (2) the importance of language and how the story is told, (3) metaphors and similes, (4) rhetorical devices, and (5) finding your voice. Chapter 8 is a quick reference guide for how to write and publish research. Today's climate, like many other political times in our history, has both positive and negative connections and perceptions of feminism. Chapter 9 brings home the conversation of sharing one's results and the public, activist components/implications of such research, how sharing research has changed particularly as digital sharing is common place now, as well as the impacts of doing so. This section made me face some of the challenges and concerns head-on—something that I think in my nature and environment I sometimes avoid. But I think that the point of the conversation, as the authors intended, is to bring yourself to your research and represent the message in a manner that is true to you, while honoring those who you research and share their data/stories, while also being aware of the oppressions and working to break those barriers.

As a life-long learner, I find that reading books helps me to consistently broaden my horizons and refine my knowledge in areas. Feminism and feminist research is a topic that for me was covered in graduate school. Maybe it was the timing or my time in life, or maybe that's now—but this book came into my life at a time where I needed to hear and see the messages, not only for me as I look to incorporate some of them into my own research, but also for me insofar as necessitated by my responsibilities as a female and mother: the advocacy, empowerment, and inclusion conversation woven throughout the book by Leavy and Harris are the golden nuggets that I will take from this read and build upon when re-reading the book and in my future learning.

Reference

Leavy, P., & Harris, A. (2019). *Contemporary feminist research from theory to practice*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Author Note

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