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# Feminism as an Evolving Culture of Inclusion and Affirmation: A Review of Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice

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## Feminism as an Evolving Culture of Inclusion and Affirmation: A Review of Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice

### **Abstract**

In *Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice*, Dr. Patricia Leavy and Dr. Anne Harris (2019) translate feminist principles into good research practice to offer learners of all career stages a concise and lively blueprint for bringing feminism out of the realm of theory and into that of application. Their constant critical thinking and consistent attention to detail orient readers to feminism as a dynamic, continuously evolving culture of inclusion and affirmation.

### **Keywords**

Book Review, Contemporary Feminist Research, Patricia Leavy, Anne Harris, Textbook

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## **Feminism as an Evolving Culture of Inclusion and Affirmation: A Review of Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice**

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*In Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice, Dr. Patricia Leavy and Dr. Anne Harris (2019) translate feminist principles into good research practice to offer learners of all career stages a concise and lively blueprint for bringing feminism out of the realm of theory and into that of application. Their constant critical thinking and consistent attention to detail orient readers to feminism as a dynamic, continuously evolving culture of inclusion and affirmation. Keywords: Book Review, Contemporary Feminist Research, Patricia Leavy, Anne Harris, Textbook*

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Translating feminist principles into good research practice requires constant critical thinking and consistent attention to detail. In *Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice*, Dr. Patricia Leavy and Dr. Anne Harris (2019) offer learners of all career stages a concise and lively blueprint for bringing feminism out of the realm of theory and into that of application. The authors orient readers to feminism as a dynamic, continuously evolving culture of inclusion and affirmation. This philosophy pervades the text from start to finish, operationalized by engaging discussion questions and hands-on practice activities. Although this volume certainly has the architecture of a textbook, both authors show their roots in the arts and humanities thoroughly. The text reads with all the brightness and curiosity of a quickly paced novel, while leaving readers with a feeling of firm command over the material. When reading your methods textbook feels breezy and enjoyable while also instilling empowerment and mastery, you know you have a true gem in hand.

Leavy and Harris organize the text into three sections. Part I provides historical and theoretical context for feminist research, including the evolution of feminism itself and its nuances in global context. Part II delves into practice examples with different instrumental and philosophical focus areas, including human research ethics and community program evaluation. Part III covers the legacy of research after its formal activities conclude, including the sharing of findings through various types of writing and the broader impact of public scholarship. Throughout the book, the authors weave in timely examples that illustrate different intersectionalities within feminist research practice. This attention to the immense diversity of what feminist research can mean across different communities and contexts makes the book both exciting and relatable. I also found the authors’ explicit intent for different chapters within the book to stand alone if needed both cleverly conceived and well executed. Even with limited instruction time, small portions of this book could easily be used to orient learners to basic principles of feminist research.

Being familiar with the authors’ other work, I felt both joyed and unsurprised to be thoroughly *seen* by this book. I consistently found notes and anecdotes that mirrored the experiences of both myself and many of the other intersectionally marginalized people I meet in my own daily practice. My work in both research and evaluation focuses on health equity in aging with chronic disease, with a particular focus on inclusive representations of sex, gender, and sexuality minorities as well as people with progressive conditions. This practice emphasis steeps me regularly in complex stories of discrimination and hardship across multiple domains of health and social life. It also leads me to reflect continuously on my own experiences, and

how they prepare me to show up for my research participants with support and affirmation. Leavy and Harris use thoughtful and fun discovery exercises in each chapter to help learners build this culture in their own thinking and practice. They also provide an expansive vocabulary to help learners describe different forms of marginalization relevant for feminist inquiry.

The inclusive language used to describe diversity of sex and gender offers an excellent example of this practice. I particularly appreciated the attention given throughout the book to the experiences of intersex people. Until recently, the concept of intersex identity only appeared in positive contexts in texts penned by people who themselves identified outside of the male/female binary. Leavy and Harris introduce intersex experiences early and often, and always with a casual tone that communicates the normalcy and validity of being intersex. Likewise, gender nonbinary people get plenty of positive exposure in this text. As an agender person, I found a lot of affirmation in seeing my own value affirmed so clearly by the authors. Leavy and Harris write about our experiences with both compassion and familiarity, assuring readers that gender diversity is both nothing new and an exciting opportunity for creative inquiry.

In the chapter on “The Feminist Research Landscape” I appreciated the broader emphasis on connecting feminist research to critical social theory. Justice-oriented scholarship too often gets criticized for being atheoretical; it felt refreshing and empowering to see that inaccurate perception handily refuted. I likewise valued the attention to diversity in feminist theoretical traditions. Leavy and Harris cover a broad array of cultural and historical approaches to feminism, and note the relevance of each for practice in contemporary global context. I likewise appreciated the discourse on “ethics of representation” in the chapter on “Writing and Publishing Feminist Research” toward the end of the text. These passages neatly summarized the importance of centering a variety of traditions—both theoretical and practical—in public discourse on research. And in the ensuing chapter on “Public Scholarship and Critical Perspectives” the authors use topical examples like the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the US and the Russian activist punk conglomerate Pussy Riot to illustrate the complex and deeply intersectional array of how feminisms show up in popular consciousness all over the world.

In their “Feminist Ethics” chapter, the authors offer an accessible and engaging overview of the informed consent process. I wish I could show this to everyone who is new to doing research with living people. Likewise, I found the conceptual visualizations scattered throughout the book extremely helpful. I especially liked the Venn diagram example on Page 226 relating self-esteem and social media. Qualitative scholars often struggle to bring our data to life in pictures without first translating it into quantitative proxies for graphing or charting. Leavy and Harris present some lovely alternatives for illustrating relationships between different concepts from qualitative inquiry. Of course, the book also includes robust content on feminist quantitative work. In particular, I resonated deeply with the section on survey research in the “Working Directly with Participants” chapter.

The authors make clear throughout the text that any research method can affirm feminist principles with the right guidance and accountability. Indeed, this is another key strength of the textbook and a cornerstone of its unique value. It will perhaps also be the most compelling feature of *Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice* among readers of *The Qualitative Report*, given the journal’s emphasis on creative bridging of different ways of knowing through narrative consciousness. *TQR* readers generally know that to make a positive impact in storytelling, you need to explore your own standpoint as part of the narrative. In that spirit, I deeply valued the discussion of Black feminist epistemologies in the chapter on “Intersectionality, Feminist Epistemology, and Standpoint Feminism”. Critical inquiry into how we produce and canonize knowledge lies at the heart of justice in research. Often

qualitative methods of exploration help us understand these processes in depth—and offer prescriptions for amplifying voices historically left out of the development of scholarly canon.

I hinted earlier at my biggest critique of this book, which likewise invokes notions of audience selection and engagement. Specifically, I see a need for greater differentiation between research and evaluation in portions of the text that reference both sets of practices. In nearly 12 years of professional practice of evaluation for health programs engaging marginalized populations, I have learned the importance of clearly defining the relationship between these two constructs with active attention to the boundaries on each. And in a book that so beautifully centers the concept of participant ownership of study findings and impacts, I definitely would like to see this distinction developed further. My own practice as an evaluator has taught me that often the core feature distinguishing evaluation from research is not the technique or its grounding, but rather the audience and its role. In an evaluation project, findings should feed directly back into the programming itself while centering the culture of that specific initiative and its unique participants. Attempting to generalize from information gained during an evaluation project not only strays from the spirit of evaluation, but may even contradict it in some cases. Good evaluation is profoundly, gloriously context-specific. By contrast, research seeks to extrapolate lessons from the few to possibilities for the many. Of course, it often does so using many of the same approaches that evaluation uses to prescribe internal program improvements. Evaluation projects can also illuminate broader opportunities for research inquiry. I appreciated the inclusion of evaluation as an area of practice where feminist inquiry can afford unique value. However, the question of ownership evoked by these nuances in research versus evaluation practice would certainly be wonderful to explore in greater depth in a future edition.

I would also love to see the inclusive vocabulary terms and case examples from this first version of the textbook expand even further on future iterations. For example, the diversity of terminology used to describe various queer sexualities could grow to explicitly include asexuality and demisexuality as broad areas of experience, and explore some of their specific nuances. Likewise, a future edition could explore consensual nonmonogamies and diverse family structures within this general framework. Increased attention to multigenerational households and their variations across culture and geography would add tremendous value as well. And I would love to see the authors build on their excellent discussion of indigenous populations—for example, the #NoDAPL protests against a large oil pipeline in the northern Plains states—to include information about societies with more nomadic features, whether by choice or by necessity. These are all minor critiques of a solid and wonderfully affirming first edition that sets high standards for inclusion in research.

Leavy and Harris describe this book as “appropriate for undergraduate and graduate courses in feminism(s), feminist research, research methods, qualitative inquiry, theory, and women’s or gender studies” and say that “it may also be of value to individual students and researchers working on a thesis, a dissertation, a research study, or public writing, or those who wish to engage in activism.” I generally agree with this assessment. For undergraduate or graduate courses in research methods, this text would work perfectly as a guidance resource for a full semester of learning and practice. For special topics courses at the graduate and undergraduate level, selected individual chapters would make perfect readings for an integrated syllabus. I would also use individual chapters in a similar way to prepare learners of all career stages for workshops or seminars.

Given the above caveats about differentiation between research and evaluation, I would probably *not* use this book in its entirety for a program evaluation course. However, the sections on public engagement would absolutely fit well in that context, as would the hands-on practice activities. I would also use the suggested exercises from each chapter’s back matter as stand-alone discovery activities for the medical students I teach. This speaks to the versatility of

Leavy and Harris's text, as activities designed primarily for students in more research-oriented programs often require extensive adaptation before use with learners pursuing other types of credentials. Overall, *Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice* offers tremendous flexibility as a learning resource for courses ranging from the very conceptual to the very applied. I recommend it strongly for a wide variety of learner demographics and teaching activities within and beyond qualitative methods. Likewise, this textbook offers wonderful support for both seasoned feminist scholars and those just beginning to discover what feminism means for them.

### References

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### Author Note

Alexandra "Xan" C.H. Nowakowski is a medical sociologist and public health program evaluator. Their work focuses on health equity in aging with chronic disease. Dr. Nowakowski uses mixed methods to explore the experiences and needs of intersectionally marginalized people with chronic conditions. They currently serve as an Assistant Professor at the Florida State University College of Medicine and edit the *Write Where It Hurts* blog on trauma informed scholarship. Please direct correspondence to [xnowakowski@fsu.edu](mailto:xnowakowski@fsu.edu).

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