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Research Beyond the Ivory Tower: A Book Review of Researching With: A Decolonizing Approach to Community-Based Action Research

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Abstract

This is a book review of *Researching With: A Decolonizing Approach to Community-Based Action Research* by Jessica Smartt Gullion and Abigail Tilton. The authors are both university professors and Deans who respectively specialize in Sociology and Social Work. The book uses qualitative research as it seeks to merge academia with the professional world. *Researching With* teaches academics to come alongside their study participants and apply research in professional contexts. I offered a critical analysis of *Researching With* by identifying themes and concepts that will benefit both expert and beginner researchers. The book will help readers frame research questions and understand the role of oppression in research.

Keywords

research, qualitative, community-based, colonialism, oppression

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Research Beyond the Ivory Tower: A Book Review of *Researching With: A Decolonizing Approach to Community- Based Action Research*

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This is a book review of *Researching With: A Decolonizing Approach to Community-Based Action Research* by Jessica Smartt Gullion and Abigail Tilton. The authors are both university professors and Deans who respectively specialize in Sociology and Social Work. The book uses qualitative research as it seeks to merge academia with the professional world. *Researching With* teaches academics to come alongside their study participants and apply research in professional contexts. I offered a critical analysis of *Researching With* by identifying themes and concepts that will benefit both expert and beginner researchers. The book will help readers frame research questions and understand the role of oppression in research.

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An essential part of any research starts with the type of questions asked because it will influence what the researcher does. In their book *Researching With*, Jessica Smartt Gullion and Abigail Tilton provide a different way to ask research questions while also challenging readers to put research into action. The authors wrote the book for people who want to engage in public and collaborative scholarship. By the end, you realize that the type of research they are proposing is for everyone, not just community-based action researchers. The book's overall purpose is to shift research from a pure cerebral endeavor to something that practically impacts communities.

While people are not supposed to judge a book by the cover, I initially judged this book by its title. I robotically kept thinking, "They cannot end the title with a preposition." It was not until I dived into the text that I realized that the authors provided an invitation with their title. The "Researching With" meant researching alongside those we are studying. As I continued to read, the book brought my hidden robotic tendencies related to colonialism and research to the surface. The title and the book take our preconceived ideas and norms about research and gently offer an alternative way to conduct ourselves in the field, academia, and how we see our roles in the communities where we live and work.

The book is an easy read divided into five chapters, a conclusion, and an appendix that offers a short article on teaching community-based action research to students. The resources at the end of each chapter are valuable. The book provides ideas for discussion, learning activities, self-reflection, and additional resources. These tools helped me digest the material that I just covered and engage with the authors in a new way. They are beneficial for a classroom setting or private use.

In the first chapter, the authors examine community-based research. Researchers spend a significant amount of time becoming experts in their field, but they can forget that the communities where they conduct their studies have a unique perspective. The authors invite researchers to contextualize their research and include participants as co-researchers who

possess unique insight into their problems and solutions. The authors' give-and-take research relationship benefits the community and the applicability of the research.

The second chapter builds on the first while emphasizing a decolonizing approach to research. The authors advocate for self-awareness and reflexivity for a world scarred from colonialism. This chapter was my favorite in the book because it changes how people do research. Decolonization research helps reframe research questions. The authors suggest that most social research "studies down," which they define as studying the most accessible population, usually the one with the least power. This type of approach continues to colonialize marginalized participants. Shifting to a decolonization approach, the research focus and question shift for equitability.

The concept of decolonization and studying down in research was simple yet profound. It is self-evident yet at the same time hidden and not applied by many. If embraced, decolonization will help seasoned and novice researchers form different types of questions and approaches. For example, studying abortion rates of people below the poverty line could put those who have abortions on trial. A decolonization approach would examine the socio-economic factors and institutions that contribute to abortion and keep people in poverty. This type of system reframes the research question and researches those in power.

The third chapter calls the readers to action by emphasizing community-based action research. The authors challenge how those who operate from a positivist perspective engage in research. This chapter can make seasoned researchers uncomfortable for a few reasons. Some researchers will struggle because they will feel that the authors invite them to disregard objectivity and replace it with transparency. The chapter is a call for researchers to partner with communities for research that is applicable and useful. It attempts to tear down the hierarchical structure of researcher and participant and establishes a cooperative learning environment.

The fourth chapter covers research ethics, which is standard for most research books. This chapter is the shortest. In only ten pages, the authors cover procedural, situational, and relational ethics. The authors' approach to ethics mirrors their philosophy throughout the book. The research section is practical, and it emphasizes research ethics that the researcher may experience. They provide a short refresher and practical examples, but they offer very little depth or theory regarding ethics.

The entire book is a call for the researchers to get involved in the public. The authors highlight that the research conducted by academicians is not making it to the practitioners. Currently, research is neither accessible nor useful to those working in the field. The push to publish results in deeper and deeper naval gazing instead of professionals reading and using the findings. The book does an excellent job of pointing out this systematic short-coming and suggests a new model. The relationship between academician and practitioner needs improvement. Instead of two separate groups, there needs to be a symbiotic relationship between the university professor in the ivory tower and the practitioner in the trenches.

The book concludes by emphasizing the need for readers to apply the authors' theories about research. Both authors have careers in academia, and they acknowledge the institutional politics and pressure that force researchers away from community-based research. Their solution is for readers to find ways to make community-based research work within their institution, which is perhaps the book's weakest part. The structural oppression that creates and encourages the "publish or perish" culture is the problem. Therefore, the solution needs to occur at the institutional level. By putting pressure on the readers to fix this institutional error, the authors fail to collaborate with their readers. I value their idealism and the change that the authors desire, but they do not challenge the academic system to initiate lasting change.

Even with that weakness, the book's strengths and contribution far outweigh any of its negatives. The decolonization approach to research, collaborative community-based research, and warning against "researching down" positively impact research practices. It allows new

researchers to slow down and identify oppressive systems, which will change how they ask questions and frame their studies. After reading it, I revisited my journal of research ideas to see how they would differ if I employed some of the authors' thoughts in my projects. The book will also challenge experienced researchers to get out of their comfort zones and publish beyond the academy. The result is that it will create research that has a genuine impact and change on society, instead of research that securely tucks itself away and is only accessible to a handful of elites.

References

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Author Note

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