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Book Review

Mark A. Giesler

RECONSIDERING FEMINIST RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP. Michelle D. Young, & Linda Skrla (Editors). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003

Reconsidering Feminist Research in Educational Leadership is rich feminist food for thought for both the novice and experienced researcher. Dubbed as “a critical reflection on the field of feminist research in educational leadership as a whole” (p. 3), the work is a three-part collection of articles edited by Michelle D. Young and Linda Skrla. In Part 1, four authors expose methodological dilemmas that “contradict and unsettle the foundational beliefs of many feminist researchers” (p. 4). Part 2 explores alternative, expanded methodologies based on the criticisms of Part 1. Part 3 is an application of the “reconsidered methods and epistemologies” (p. 4) offered by three researchers on educational leadership.

Michelle D. Young and Linda Skrla’s text is more than a critique of traditional, androcentric notions of educational leadership. It casts a critical eye toward feminist responses to such perspectives. Theirs is a book by researchers for researchers that provocatively questions and challenges the theoretical underpinnings of past and present feminist research practice.

Margaret Grogan (Chapter 2) takes a feminist/postmodern perspective on the problematic way research has framed the superintendency. Using the work of Foucault, Grogan identifies four paradoxes of the superintendency. She challenges the reader to identify new theories of leadership based on the paradoxes and lays the groundwork for a “reconception of the superintendency.” Grogan avoids essentializing leadership and takes into account the contradictions and tensions inherent in its construction.

In “Considering (Irreconcilable?) Contradictions in Cross-Group Feminist Research” (Chapter 3), Michelle D. Young applies the issue of ambiguity to the subject of difference. She sketches a broad overview of the problems involved in cross-group research, the idea that all research involves irreconcilable “crossings” (p. 36) between the researcher and the researched. To her credit, Young neither condemns nor condones cross-group research. Rather, she hopes “to explore the complexity of the issue” (p. 36). As a response to her critique, then, she offers concrete, provocative suggestions

About the Author

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for feminist qualitative researchers. Her suggested alternative conceptual and textual strategies represent the kind of research that narrows the gap between the researcher and the Other: “Ambiguity may breed creativity and innovation” (p. 69).

Jennifer Scott (Chapter 4) frames the traditional dichotomous approach to research about gender as too simplistic. The “difference, deficit, and dominance” models of gender representation have ignored the “ambiguities, multiplicities, and contradictions inherent in sexual and gender identity” (p. 83). Scott utilizes a social constructionist perspective to give voice to the experiences of two women superintendents. According to Scott, women superintendents may consciously use stereotypically male leadership strategies, but they respond to discursive fields bound by social factors that tend to be viewed as gender-neutral.

This construction of genderlessness, Scott further points out, is harmful because it creates a “bifurcation of consciousness.” Two worlds—the public and private spheres—coexist, but not peacefully. In the private sphere, for example, emotion can be expressed, whereas in the public setting, it must be repressed. The result is loneliness, despair, inadequacy, guilt, and a “fragmented identity” (p. 98).

Skrla’s “Mourning Silence: Women Superintendents (and a Researcher) Rethink Speaking Up and Speaking Out” (Chapter 5) applies Derrida’s work about mourning and the theme of institutional-individual silence to her own study of three female superintendents. Her use of “empowering research methodology” (p. 107) invokes a three-tier approach that she claims breaks down the researcher-researched dynamic. Each participants left the profession and mourned both her own career and the superintendency profession. Skrla further incorporates a feminist agenda in her description of “mourning one’s research.” She notes how the women in her study changed as a result of their participation in the initial interviews. Skrla breaks the silence of the women in the process; she allows them to “reflect, learn, grow, and ultimately, heal” (p. 127) through the research act.

The authors represented in Part 1 articulate a common theme in literature about the superintendency and educational leadership: the silence and silencing of women in higher education positions. Their work demonstrates the important task of feminist research, to give voice to such women. Yet, the effective means to that goal, in their views, is a matter of contention. Perhaps the only area of agreement among the authors is their acceptance of ambiguities, paradoxes, and complexities in that endeavor.

Part 1 does well to “unsettle the foundational beliefs” (p. 3) of feminist researchers. In Part 2, Young and Skrla locate the source of the unsettling. The six chapters in this section of the book suggest that research in educational leadership has been grounded in white, male, and heterosexual epistemologies at the expense of complexity and diversity.

Cynthia Dillard (Chapter 6) and Sylvia Mendez-Morse (Chapter 7) take the criticism one step further and implicate feminist research in educational leadership as centered in White feminist thought. Dillard explores an “endarkened feminist epistemology” (p. 132) a substitute for the term “enlightened” as it refers to the well-established canon of feminist research. Mendez-Morse, in her advocacy of Chicana feminist epistemology, explicates a “Pan-American” perspective. Both Dillard and Mendez-Morse call for a reconception of the “recipe metaphor” of research, where the researcher is set apart from the subject (the recipe) and the final outcome is “objective.” More useful, from their perspectives, is a metaphor that takes in the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and language.

Dillard writes of “research as a responsibility” (p. 134). Her use of life notes—“broadly constructed personal narratives such as letters, stories, journal entries, reflections, poetry, music, and other artful forms” (p. 134-135)—empowers African-American women to represent their ways of knowing in multiple and complex ways. Dillard outlines what “research as responsibility” might look like in her list of assumptions of an endarkened epistemology. Key to this approach is a researcher’s participation in his/her community. Dillard regards research as a spiritual pursuit of purpose, a vibrant, interactive dialogue, and foray into the everyday life meaning-making for African-American women. Dillard calls for a desire to place the power asymmetries that keep the racist, sexist, and classist structures in place at the center of the African-American research project. For Dillard, life note narratives signify the emergence of a silenced voice that will bring such power inequities to light.

Mendez-Morse’s survey of Chicana feminist work brings to light a similar expansiveness of educational leadership research. She focuses on one of three aspects of her Pan-American perspective, the application of multiple oppressions to the conversation of educational leadership. Mendez-Morse

explores how Chicana feminists have negotiated the oppressions of sexism and patriarchy, race/ethnicity, class, language, religion, and sexual orientation. She offsets a rather bleak picture by her discovery of hidden strengths and talents of Chicana women unrecognized by the mainstream culture.

Mendez-Morse's work warns of the one-sided nature of studies of gender in educational leadership. She aptly points out that most studies consider only "one form of difference"—gender. The significance of the other forms of difference she outlines and, more important, how they intersect to create the social construction of women in educational leadership, are vital additions to the feminist research project in the field.

The final chapters in Part 2 comprise a dialogue among several researchers about yet another epistemological framework, Julie Laible's concept of a "loving epistemology" (p. 179). The editors republish one of Laible's last pieces of scholarship (Chapter 8). Soon after she delivered the transcript she was killed in a car accident.

Laible assumes an explicitly Christian stance to "solidify a theory of knowing others that are human imperatives of living in the world as compassionate, loving human beings" (p. 182). Her speech considers what in the profession of educational leadership hampers that vision. She poses two rather controversial assertions: (a) that research on Others is fundamentally unethical, especially Euro-American research on people of color; and (b) that universities in the United States function in such a way that benefits Euro-American, middle-to-upper-class males. Rather than talk about systemic change in the university setting, she brings the discussion back to her research. She calls for the placement of ethics and responsibility at the center of the research process. She further discusses the need to "travel," drawing upon Lugones's idea that identifying with our subjects means understanding what it means "to be ourselves in their eyes." She concludes, "Only when we have traveled in each other's worlds are we fully subjects to each other" (p. 190).

Following the reprint of Laible's speech are responses from three fellow researchers. The articles are part memorial, part critical perspective of Laible and her idea of a "loving epistemology." Inspired by Laible's work, Catherine Marshall (Chapter 10) reflects on the evolution of research and policy approaches as they have perpetuated the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership. Marshall calls for "social activism as research." Researchers must take advantage of "activism-embedded agendas" that "equip people to resist oppression and move people to struggle" (p. 217).

Colleen A. Capper (Chapter 9) expresses concern that Laible's criteria for responsible research implies a pecking order approach: "Why can't some

forms of knowledge production just be different from other ways?" she asks (p. 197). Capper builds on the notion of "loving" as movement beyond a "good guy-bad guy" perspective and toward "a sustained dialogue with multiple intersecting others, including those traditionally in power" (p. 199).

Laible's responders raise questions that get to the heart of research theory and technique. They enhance Laible's work in their recognition that research is a mutually engaging process. Responsible feminist research sees the Other in the self and vice-versa. To be sure, there is discomfort in this dance. Yet, a true "loving epistemology" requires researcher and researched to be close enough to step on each other's toes a bit.

Part 2 of *Reconsidering* uncovers an unsettling notion in the world of feminist research: that feminist research itself can be sewn into the "cloth of interwoven oppressions" (p. 167). It is not enough, the authors remind us, to write about the prominence of androcentric epistemology. This project is merely one fiber in the cloth. Attempts to unravel all of the fibers, even those perpetuated by single-minded feminist researchers, are necessary and "endarkening" pursuits. Laible's "loving epistemology" may be one way to approach this task. To speak the truth in research involves the courage to travel to other worlds, despite the fact that, as Laible's responders point out, the journey is fraught with epistemological difficulties. Part 2 inspires the feminist scholar to struggle with what "responsible research" entails on his or her own academic journey.

Young and Skrla characterize Part 3 of their collection as a demonstration of "the type of knowledge about school leadership that can be generated by researchers who are guided by reexamined feminist epistemologies and who use reconceptualized feminist methods" (p. 4). The represented authors apply the issues raised in Parts 1 and 2 to produce a vision of what a reconsidered feminist epistemology might look like. Of the three articles, Young's description of how Iowa education task forces and policy documents constructed a proposed shortage of school administrator, and in the process left gender out of the picture (Chapter 14), is most instructive.

Young points out that the omission was not intentional. Her point gets at the heart of the relationship between dominant discourse and feminist inquiry. Young places gender back into the discursive framework. She uses qualitative findings from interviews to unearth institutional gender discrimination and lack of role models as partial explanation for the shortage. Moreover, she asks the bigger question that underscores the feminist agenda as a whole: What impact does male-dominated ideology in constructions of educational leadership have on feminist critical thought?

The articles in *Reconsidering* suggest that dominant ideology must be challenged. How that happens is more a matter of dispute than agreement, a notion that falls in line with feminist inquiry. It is ironic that the cohesiveness of Young and Skrla's collection stems from the ambiguities and multiple complexities that dominant ideology ignores and/or subverts. The idea that a researcher can never ethically represent his/her subject is radical, but worthy of exploration nonetheless.

At times the authors in *Reconsidering* run the risk of ghettoizing feminist research epistemology. Grogan, at least, admits that her research should have addressed the systemic forces that make it difficult for women to reach and thrive in the superintendency. Young fails to address why the academy has been closed to her feminist alternatives of scholarly writing and thought. Nor does she discuss strategies to counter the preponderance of androcentric research in the nation's postsecondary institutions. Skrla avoids discussion of how she has mourned her own research, reflection that would illuminate struggles as a feminist researcher in an androcentric world.

The editors state that their book serves as a source for feminist researchers in educational leadership. Certainly, they have created a thoughtful forum for feminist researchers to reconsider their own methods of inquiry. But the book fails to address in any length the important issue of how such reconception might function in the real world of academia. How do feminist researchers negotiate a professional terrain that by most accounts remains the most male-identified of all the human service professions? How does the researcher use the ethical and political tensions identified in the text to empower, not paralyze her? How might the epistemologies represented in the book shatter the glass ceiling that the academician encounters each day?

Two authors in *Reconsidering Feminist Research in Educational Leadership* use the metaphor of a cloth to describe their hope for feminist research. Compared to dominant constructions, the cloth of feminist research is laden with a myriad of fabrics. They are fabrics of many textures and colors. They all have the potential to create a piece of clothing that will expose the oppression of hegemonic constructions of educational leadership research. The women and men who have the courage to adorn the result will be richer researchers indeed.