

Book Review: Embodied Inquiry: Research Methods by Jennifer Leigh and Nicole Brown

In Embodied Inquiry: Research Methods, Jennifer Leigh and Nicole Brown offer an introductory, practical guide to embodied research. Laura Shobiye recommends the book to anyone who wants to understand how embodied inquiry might be approached and how it relates to established theoretical frameworks and methodologies.

Embodied Inquiry: Research Methods. Jennifer Leigh and Nicole Brown. Bloomsbury. 2021.

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[Embodied Inquiry](#) is a relatively short book in which Jennifer Leigh and Nicole Brown provide an introduction to the concepts of 'embodied' and 'embodiment' in the context of research projects. In keeping with the book's themes, I have read and reviewed the book in line with its stated aim of providing an introductory, practical guide, influenced by my own embodied experiences and perspectives.

The book is based on three key principles of the questions 'what?', 'why?' and 'how?' in relation to conducting embodied inquiry, with a continuous emphasis on reflexivity. The reader is encouraged to dip in and out of the book and its chapters to find help answering those three key questions at the relevant stage of a research project. The authors state that they intend to provide both critical and practical insights and suggestions for these three key principles/questions. They succeed in that core goal.

Leigh and Brown also give clear definitions of key terminology, providing a novice researcher or someone approaching embodied inquiry as a beginner with a definitive starting point. One example of useful definitions is in Chapter Three, where the authors discuss four types of bodily/embodied experiences that might be relevant for embodied research. The authors do not claim this is the only way to explain or define bodily experiences, but the inclusion of such suggestions is useful for a researcher new to the concepts.

The authors provide clarity on what 'embodied inquiry' is within a wider context of social research theories, methods and approaches. The authors are explicit that embodied inquiry is not a theory or a single method itself. It is an approach that follows phenomenological and interpretivist epistemological and ontological theories. Leigh and Brown demonstrate that positioning using case examples, primarily (but not exclusively) from their own work. These examples include the use of drama and performance, sandboxing and photography, with projects exploring experiences of academics, people with chronic illness and participants at a dance school. The authors' approach of illustrating points with a variety of case studies is a key factor in making the book a genuinely useful practical guide, as well as an introduction to the topic.

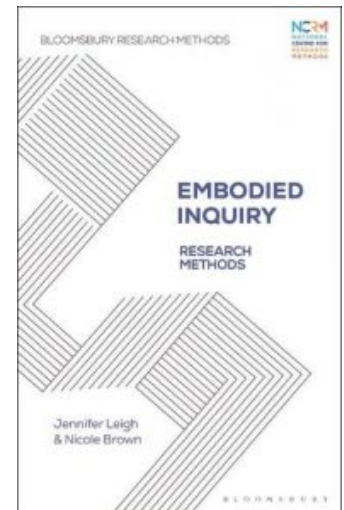




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The practical information Leigh and Brown discuss includes some useful insights into some of the potential challenges of embodied inquiry. In Chapter Six, for example, they write about methodological and ethical considerations, again using practical examples from their own work and issues such as anonymity with photographs. In this chapter, the physical nature of embodied inquiry is emphasised again, with examples of art-based, movement and photography projects. The connection is made with researcher reflexivity, a core theme for the book overall. Leigh and Brown emphasise just how much reflexivity is an ongoing process and not a linear journey. Throughout the book, the authors discuss the importance of reflexivity and how they practise it themselves. However, it is in this discussion that I found some of the most noticeable gaps and where most of the questions I had arose.

Leigh and Brown raise a very important point about the effects on participants of sharing their stories. However, they do not highlight that this perhaps should be a consideration for any qualitative project that requires participants to talk about their experiences. Relevant epistemological and methodological approaches – for example, feminism and particularly embodied feminism – are mentioned in this book but clear connections are not made. This link may be implied but it is not explicit.

I found this lack of explicitness was also present when the authors discuss cultural matters in Chapter Six, and when they reflect on their own experiences and positioning throughout the book. Leigh and Brown discuss who they are and what they have experienced, but they do not really discuss some of the most obvious characteristics they do not have or some of the obvious gaps in their knowledge. While it is not possible for an author to discuss everything they are not, I think this book would be improved if Leigh and Brown did that in areas of race, for example, as they choose to include some limited content on the topic. The authors make a point that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the way Black and Brown bodies are othered. As a Black/Brown person, I can confirm that both lived experience and existing research meant this knowledge was well-established in some relevant communities – the pandemic meant White people started to notice more. That distinction is an embodied one for me, so it should be acknowledged.

The matter of cultural understanding arose elsewhere in the book, again arguably undermining some of the authors' emphasis on embodied reflexivity. In Chapter Two, the authors provide an overview of some embodied practices, divided into 'Western' and 'Eastern' practices, based on the authors' knowledge and experiences. Capoeira is listed as an Eastern practice, when everything else in that section relates to, as one would expect, traditions from the 'east' side of the globe, primarily Asia. Capoeira, therefore, cannot be accurately described as an 'Eastern' tradition. Its origins lie with enslaved West Africans (primarily Yoruba) in Brazil. I have never seen West Africa or Brazil described as 'Eastern'. It would have been better if the authors had either excluded the example or included another section for practices from the 'Global South' (to use a current term that could incorporate both Brazil and Africa). Instead, they have included a culturally insensitive error, which may emotionally impact some Black readers, in a book that emphasises embodied reflexivity and consideration of emotional impact on participants.

However, these issues do not detract from the book as a whole. Overall, *Embodied Inquiry* is a useful introduction to the concept its title addresses. While there are possible gaps and even, in my view, a notable error, the authors are explicit that the book is an introduction and is not intended to be a comprehensive guide. In fact, the nature of embodied inquiry arguably makes it an impossible topic on which to write a definitive guide with every possibility or option addressed fully. This book gives a researcher some key starting points through which to consider embodied inquiry. It is structured in a way that makes it easy to find ideas and tips on specific aspects of a research project as and when required. The topic is presented very much from the authors' perspectives, which they approach reflexively. I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to understand how embodied inquiry might be approached and how it relates to established theoretical frameworks and methodologies.

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