

Book Review: The Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis

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*The second edition of the **Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis** presents both a theoretical and practical approach to conducting social science research on, for, and about women. **Emma Smith** believes the Handbook effectively highlights the connection between feminist research and social change by drawing upon the range of existent feminist epistemologies, methods, and practices. While accessible for both research and teaching purposes, it draws our attention to the need to be critically aware in the process of conducting feminist research.*



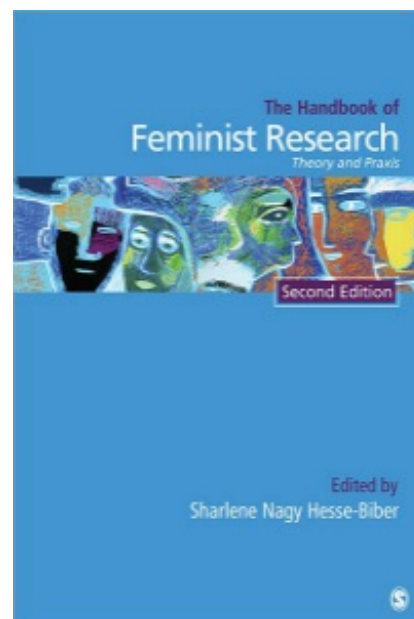
Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis. Sharlene Nagy Hesse- Biber (ed.) Second Edition. Sage.

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The Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis, edited by [Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber](#), seeks to integrate discussion of the varying theoretical and practical approaches that can be applied to research concerning women, for women, and by women. An enhanced understanding of feminist research is developed, by reference to a variety of competing methodologies, epistemological standpoints, and methods, explored by leading scholars in the field with the aim of further establishing the link between feminist research and the potential for social change.

This interdisciplinary book proposes to further inform our understanding of the social world, particularly from the perspective of women's lived experiences. This is to be achieved by exploring the intersection of epistemology and method with a particular methodology in order to inform research practice. According to Hesse-Biber, particular feminist perspectives are not necessarily opposed to the inclusion and use of certain methods and/or perspectives; rather, each, in their own way, serves to direct how a certain method is conceptualised and practised.

The division of the text into three sections, 'Feminist Perspectives on Knowledge Building', 'Feminist Research Praxis', and 'Feminist Issues and Insights in Practice and Pedagogy', allows for many useful case study examples, discussion questions, and full reference lists. Readers are exposed to the range of existent feminist epistemological perspectives, a diversity further reflected in the selection and use of methods, and other research practices and decision making processes covered in the following sections.



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Despite some clear differences amongst perspectives, however, there are some elements that are common to all of the feminist perspectives presented. This largely pertains to a belief that feminist research should seek to fully consider, and where possible, empower the women involved. De Vault and Gross explore this point in some detail in their chapter, 'Feminist Qualitative Interviewing: Experience, Talk, and Knowledge'. While mindful of the background of qualitative and feminist research, the authors appear to more fully support the future development of feminist research, indicating their awareness of the need to ensure ongoing current and future development of research within the field. Within their discussion, De Vault and Gross suggest that one of the most pressing questions to emerge from recent feminist debates relates to the need to create more collaborative opportunities for participants (including seeking participant feedback), regardless of background or commitments. Further, the authors highlight that feminist researchers should aim to avoid interviewing women who are vulnerable or in socially marginalized positions, and also in cases where the information required might otherwise be more easily accessed from sources other than interviewing. Another suggestion covers actively seeking to interview women who are in some way challenging oppression, either as an individual, or as part of a group.

The above points would indicate the need for more critical thinking within current and future feminist research. Specifically, the authors appear to endorse the notion that feminist researchers should seek to consider the practices and consequences of their methodological decision-making, so as to both empower and minimise the possibility of distress for their participants, and ensure that the wellbeing of participants is respected and forms a key focus of the research; whether this involves them having more of a proactive role in determining the type of methods to be used, or being excused from research if it is likely to cause them further harm. In fitting with the book's aims, the discussions within this chapter promote social change and seek to inform an understanding of the social world as experienced by women through innovative suggestions on how women may actively shape how their experiences are studied and subsequently represented.

Similarly, in their chapter on 'Feminist Research Ethics', Preissle and Han adopt the position that feminist research should aim to consider, involve, and empower the women involved. In exploring this position, the authors draw upon a number of frameworks, predominantly an ethic of care and relationship. The authors observe that while some feminist researchers are still influenced by ethical principals including justice, most have adopted an ethic of care and relationship into their research practices, enabling them to more closely monitor the quality of their roles as researchers, and in their human interactions with others more generally, as well as ensure that they have fully considered and respected the views of the women they research. The authors also note the benefit of feminist research ethics, particularly in the context of advances in technology, notably the internet, which may enable researchers to be more aware of their positioning, and alter their ethical practices accordingly, to the benefit of participants. One concern with this particular discussion was the possibility that the authors may have rejected, or sidelined, other significant ethical principals, or challenges, in favour of adopting a solely feminist ethics, based on the care ethic that informs much current feminist research.

To their credit however, within this chapter, the authors have not attempted to suggest that adoption of feminist research ethics will necessarily resolve all moral dilemmas inherent in research, nor will adoption of this approach necessarily transform or greatly enhance our understanding of the social world as experienced by women. The authors fully acknowledge the complexities of women researching other women, and highlight that feminist ethics may often create as many issues as it seeks to eliminate or draw focus to. Their suggestion with regards to feminist ethics, in particular the care ethic, is not to sideline the ethic of principle, but instead consider it in the context of a dual framework with the care ethic; with the latter providing a means for us to adopt more critical thinking on the roles of emotion and relationship in the moral choices we make, and in turn, ensure ongoing feminist preoccupation with the lives and statuses of all women.

In summary, *The Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* is a well-developed contribution to the body of feminist literature. It effectively highlights the connection between feminist research and social change by drawing upon the range of existent feminist epistemologies, methods, and practices, all of which adopt different means of conceptualising, researching, and ultimately representing the lived experiences of women, varied across the lines of race, class and/or other demographics. The text, while accessible for both research and teaching purposes, perhaps most importantly draws our attention to the need to be critically aware in the process of conducting feminist research. One must address the challenges, research developments, and, crucially, the diversity amongst women, that may be incurred in attempting to research, understand, and accurately represent the lived experiences of all women.

Emma Smith is a PhD student within the Department of Applied Social Science at the University of Stirling. Her PhD explores victim and statutory/voluntary agency responses to violence against sex workers. Other research interests include: health, policing, equality, sociology and research methods, particularly qualitative based methods. She has a MA Hons in History and Sociology from the University of Glasgow, a PGDip in Social Research from Glasgow Caledonian University, and an MSc in Applied Social Research from the University of Stirling. [Read more reviews by Emma.](#)