

Decolonial Feminist Community Psychology: Centering the Margins

[B O O K R E V I E W]

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Decolonial feminist community psychology is a recent and emerging form of psychology. As a sub-discipline in the field, community psychology – the applied study of the relationship between social systems and individual well-being in the context of community (Hanlin et al., 2008, p. 524) – dates back only around 50 years.

Decolonial Feminist Community Psychology, edited by Floretta Boonzaier and Taryn van Niekerk, takes these efforts one step further by advancing a concerted investigation of the relationship between decolonial *and* feminist approaches within community psychology. This volume critically engages with and develops feminist and anticolonial voices from the global south *as* protest against hegemonic and Northern knowledge. The contributors to the book were encouraged to assist the editors in envisioning an emerging decolonial and feminist community psychology. The editors remark that ‘such a form of psychology already exists.’ This statement – that this work is already here and remains ongoing – is amply illustrated throughout the volume.

The introduction situates decolonial feminist community psychology, and provides summary of the breadth of topics covered, including pre-abortion counselling in

Zimbabwe; feminist participatory action research with Andean womxn in Peru; intimate partner violence in South Africa and attempts to humanise research participants; interrogation of photovoice research and its potential as a liberatory methodology through intergenerational feminist mentorship; Australian Muslim womxn's Borderland identities; youth-driven film-making ; a critical interrogation of notions of community and regulatory ethics in the context of work on queer subjectivities; interruptions of the binary of activism and scholarship: and finally, an examination *how* performative activism operates within decolonial feminist community psychology in South Africa.

This book demonstrates the wide scope of decolonial and feminist community psychological research. Due to its broad scope, it is relevant to a wide range of disciplines, across the humanities and social sciences. Each chapter is between ten and twenty pages long and has a list of references which generally appear to be comprehensive. The volume also provides a very detailed index to help locate specific issues within the contributions.

Most of the papers are written by authors with affiliations to South African institutions and relate to South African topics, with the exceptions being work on and from Zimbabwe, Australia (though on Muslim lived experience, thus – in this review's opinion – qualifying as a 'southern' context) and Peru. This situates all contributions as representations of life in the global south. This aspect of the book is its most powerful and unique, and is what infuses it with an ability to shift away from current white and Eurocentric hegemonic knowledge production. It is its intentional centring of black and Indigenous and disenfranchised voices that make this volume so relevant to global interested others – readers within the global south and, for very different reasons, readers within the global north.

My own background is that of a research psychologist whose areas of interest, in addition to processes of decolonisation, centre on 'the body', particularly queer and crip identity formation and theory. Therefore, I gave a closer reading to the chapters that relate to and engage performances of embodied and queer subjectivities.

Amongst these, the chapter by emerging scholar, Haile Matutu, particularly caught my eye. It is a well-written, sensitive, self-reflexive and persuasive chapter on the ethical complexities that arise when investigating non-normative sexual and gender identities, in this case non-gay identifying mxn who have sex with mxn, as they relate both to the participant *and* the researcher. Matutu takes great care to interrogate the sometimes exploitative and oppressive nature of research encounters – as ways of advancing individual aspirations of the researcher rather than conducting work that provides communal and social value – and invites us to centre reflexivity as an ethical framework in research on marginalised populations, as well as for marginalised researchers.

Generally, this is highly complex work, and where complexity increases, so do contradictions and tensions. As much as it is work that aspires to function in service of decolonisation, it is not immune to co-opting forces and inadvertent interaction with normalising and prescriptive norms and colonial-patriarchal structures. The chapter by Malherbe, Suffla and Everitt-Penhale brings this vulnerability to the forefront in a critical and thoughtful way.

The collective labour involved in this volume becomes a formal expression of its content: as a volume on decolonial feminist community psychology it is done pluralistically, as and by a community of decolonial feminists. That aspect – the volume’s ability to be *doing* what it is theorising on a formal level – is a welcome breath of fresh air in the context of epistemic work where the relationship between theory and praxis is often strongly dichotomised.

This is a volume of work that convincingly forges a connection between decolonial and feminist theory by 1) interrogating and decolonising how mainstream enactments of feminism have universalised understandings of gender and gendered marginalisation, largely ignoring the lived realities of gendered subjectivities in the global south, and 2) foregrounding how some of the social movements around decolonisation have marginalised feminist and other intersectional concerns and politics by centring gendered and sexualised forms of coloniality.

At times, it is the book’s stated purpose – ‘to provide a wide-angle approach to well-being and liberation’ – and its wide scope that becomes its challenge. One thing I would have welcomed, in spite of the commendable efforts of the volume, is a more direct engagement with the everyday. It is common that conversations around decolonisation to remain theoretical, and it would thus be valuable if a future publication engaged with a stronger contribution in the direction of everyday praxis. As a reader, I am left wondering what to do next and how to be in the world if I wish to engage these paradigms outside of academia. I would also welcome an interrogation of the link between feminist and decolonial justice and climate crisis, as well as a direct engagement with disability. Both our climate and the body are powerful sites of (de)coloniality, gendering and community.

Ultimately, this is a dynamic volume that I highly recommend and one I will be returning to many times over, for its relevance to our decolonial-feminist journeys, both in the academy, in our communities and within ourselves.

References

Hanlin, C.E., Bess, K., Conway, P., Evans, S.D., McCown, D., Prilleltensky, I., & Perkins D.D. (2008). **Community psychology**. In C. Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 524–540). London: SAGE.