

Feminist action research in mental health: A practical guide

Michele Jarldorn, Nicole Moulding and Kate Deuter (Eds.)
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Michele Jarldorn, Nicole Moulding, and Kate Deuter from the University of South Australia have thoughtfully assembled this edited volume to share their experiences of using feminist action research to co-create a peer support mental health website for women. The book invites readers behind the scenes of a research project that developed in response to a recognised gap in gender-specific mental health options in Australia. Alongside documenting the project itself, the authors offer a rich exploration of feminist research approaches, while simultaneously enacting feminism through their writing, based on an ethic of care, relationality, and accountability. The authors position themselves early in the book, openly sharing their backgrounds and experiences of understanding feminism, social work, mental health, and research. The book is both engaging and informative, providing clear guidance on the practicalities of feminist action research and offering a compelling justification for feminist approaches to mental health scholarship and research aimed at creating meaningful change.

In their introduction, the editors state that the book may be used by early career researchers and postgraduate researchers in social work. This is evident, as the book uses accessible language to share insights about the research experience. It is organised into two parts. The first half of the book covers feminist theoretical frameworks and includes three chapters of literature reviews on women's mental health, peer support, and the intersection of feminism and action-

oriented feminist research. Each of these first four chapters are authored by the editors. They provide an overview of feminism and a compelling argument about the structural violence that women experience that "often leads individuals to internalise blame for their circumstances" with impacts for mental health (p. 5). The literature review chapters provide rich accounts of a wide range of research and scholarship with a focus on intersectionality and social justice. Each chapter can be a stand-alone resource for mental health clinicians, researchers, social workers and academics to understand more about women's mental health, the history of the peer support movement, and action-oriented feminist research. However, when read together, the chapters tell an important story about how power is enacted through gendered violence and social isolation, which can be reproduced through 'gender-blind' biomedical orientations in mainstream mental health services, and resisted through recovery-oriented rights movements, peer support, and participatory research approaches to centre relational care. Reading this book as a mental health academic and a woman, I experienced many 'aha' moments in reading these chapters. I felt inspired and challenged to continue to question the assumptions that our mental health systems rest upon, and to recognise gendered violence and the specific needs of women.

The second half of the book turns to the practicalities of the research. Chapter five is presented in a similar way to a journal article with an overview of the research project aims, methods, findings and

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discussion. The authors present findings from the initial online survey with 52 young female participants, many of whom were on low incomes and identified as gender and sexually diverse. The authors use participant quotes to demonstrate that the women largely understood their mental health challenges in the context of gendered violence and social inequality, were critical of mainstream mental health services that they did not experience as understanding or caring, and there was participant interest and support for accessible, online, gender-responsive mental health resources. From the survey, eight young women joined two online focus groups to further discuss what they would want from a peer support website that recognises the daily challenges they face as young women. The chapter concludes with recommendations for gender-responsive approaches in mental health services, development of online mental health support, and for health professional training to include teaching on the impact of gendered violence on women's mental health.

Chapter six sees the introduction of new co-authors; Jane Andrew is the director of CoolBus Creative and Kirstie Wyatt is a graphic and web designer from Wyatt Creative. Intentionally chosen for the project due to their feminist perspectives, they join the editors to discuss the creative methods used to co-create the peer support website. This chapter begins with a critical review of existing online health resources from a feminist lens. This is a timely and relevant discussion of mental health technology and feminism. They discuss how the beneficiaries of 'Femtech' (software and services designed specifically for women's health) are biomedical corporations, not the women who use them. Their review of prominent mental health apps found a lack of critical analysis about diagnosis and mental health, and no apparent service user involvement in design. This is an interesting discussion, strengthened by the contribution of the creatives involved, and further

demonstrating the importance of a feminist approach throughout the whole research process. The second half of this chapter has reflections on the practical experience of developing the prototype website in partnership with five young women and the politics of co-design. This is a helpful discussion to understand co-design in action.

Chapter seven was my highlight of the book. Kizzy Yang, Rosie Dale, Abbey Hood and Jasmine Lloyd participated across every stage of the project and joined Deuter, Jarldorn and Moulding as co-authors for this final chapter, reflecting on the project. The chapter explains the process of co-authorship, using a train journey metaphor for points of reflection. The authors bring awareness to the politics of co-authorship, where scholarly writing is a core requirement of academic roles, and was both an exciting and daunting prospect for the young female participants. The researchers provided a template for points of reflection; the young women shared their reflections and were involved in editing the final chapter. It was a joy to read the reflections. The women shared how their involvement in the project was beneficial, not just in creating the website, but in understanding their own circumstances and reframing these in a structural way. The women experienced mutuality and solidarity within the group and spoke to the importance of remuneration and feeling valued for their expertise. This chapter is another enactment of feminist ethics, with the researchers honouring participants' voices through publication and authorship. The reflections add emotional depth to the justification for co-design research methods and equip readers to engage in such participatory research designs.

This book is a treasure for anyone wanting to understand the process of co-design research methods. All the authors have shared their experiences, what worked and why, so that other researchers can feel confident to enact participatory approaches at every stage of

research design and development. While the book is not designed specifically for social workers, and there is little explicit discussion of social work, it is clearly informed by social work theory and values. There is a strong critical lens on how power and privilege is expressed in mental health narratives, with analysis and demonstration of how to empower research participants and raise consciousness about structural impacts on wellbeing. I finished the book feeling

emboldened to draw on more feminist perspectives in mental health teaching and practice. Overall, the book offers both intellectual rigour and practical inspiration, making it a valuable resource for researchers, educators, and practitioners committed to ethical, inclusive, and reflexive research and practice in mental health. It is a reminder that co-design is not simply a method, but a political and relational stance closely aligned with the emancipatory aims of social work.

Reviewed by **Jo Appleby**, Senior Lecturer, Auckland University of Technology.