Book Review


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Building on their first collection, Researching Female Faith is the second output from the Faith Lives of Women and Girls Symposium, which meets at the Queen’s Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education in Birmingham. The collection comprises essays based on fieldwork examining the complexities and realities of feminist-centred qualitative research. Focusing on “how” research is conducted, sections include “developing feminist methodologies”, “gathering data”, “analysing data” and “practising reflecting”, each aiming to create a space for “critical and creative reflection” within the research process.

The book explores developing methodologies such as the roles of both researchers and participants in the research process and the research itself. It discusses different approaches to gathering and analysing data, for example, conducting interviews, video diaries, and the use of social media.

Parts 1 and 2 explore how methodologies are formed and negotiated, and the different pathways of creating and curating research. Janet Eccles, in her work on older women church affiliates and non-affiliates, demonstrates the issues involved in the engrained models in theology and religious studies without critical reflection, and how the male norms of rigidity do not often translate to the faith lives of women. Eccles challenges the reader to trust the process of data gathering, to trust our own analysis and interpretation. Each essay pushes the boundaries of existing approaches, and as the authors experiment in research, they come to trust their own instincts as well as trusting the representation of their participants’ voices. Sarah-Jane Page examines the pros and cons of using online methods of data collection. In her multifaith research on young adults and sexuality, she discusses her use of video diaries. Although this method allows participants to feel in control and “safe”, she reflects that those from less privileged backgrounds felt less confident.

The case studies in Part 3 show innovative ways of analysing data that stay true to the participants’ voices, and methods discussed include listening for the “I” in a group interview setting and reframing the silences in interviews from being perceived as awkward to being able to see the silence as a form of data. Finally, the authors turn to interrogating the researchers’ identity and role, seeing the researcher as part of the research. Although
formed in feminist practical theology, this is an interdisciplinary volume. There is an obvious care and empathy for their participants’ stories, as well as a deep immersion into the research process by providing detailed discussion of the methodological choices and conclusions. This collection is set apart from many monographs in social science, providing answers to methodological questions many researchers have. Part 4 examines the researchers’ position in feminist understandings of reflexivity. Jenny Morgans discusses how, even though research creates power imbalances that favour the researcher, it can leave them vulnerable, emotionally and personally challenged long after the exchange has occurred.

The volume mainly focuses on Christianity. However, the most recent Faith Lives conference, held at The Queen’s Foundation, Birmingham, included a range of spiritualities, religions, and non-religious practices, identities and beliefs. This possibly could be reflected in further work. In addition, the essays tend to examine the individual, and it would be useful to discuss groups of women, communities and institutions rather than the individual faith lives discussed primarily in this volume. The authors are committed to feminist methods and to highlighting participants’ stories and experiences, reflecting the voices of those often marginalized within faith communities. The editors state the volume demonstrates how research can be an agent of change through researching, being a participant, or engaging with the research. This volume will certainly aid future research into the faith lives of women and girls, and its breadth and depth create an excellent recourse for those engaging in similar work.