

Book Review

Feminism & Psychology
0(0) 1–2

© The Author(s) 2016

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0959353516644274

fap.sagepub.com



Vivian M May, *Pursuing intersectionality, unsettling dominant imaginaries*. Routledge: New York, 2015; 286 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-80840-8 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Charlotte Dann, *University of Northampton, UK*

The first thing that came to my mind before reading this book was my own sense making of intersectionality, and how I was acutely aware of its complexities, and the potential issues in effectively applying it within research. To me, the topic is vast and important to feminist scholarship – understanding it is necessary to *do* feminist research.

The book itself draws heavily on the work of Crenshaw (1989, 1991) heavily to illustrate the importance of considering the history of the term, what it means, and how it should be applied. The overarching issue that the book addresses involves how intersectionality has moved past what it was intended for and has become lost in respect to the ways it should be understood. The commentaries on the back cover allude to this, while noting how May is able to cover the histories comprehensively, and refer to this as a “go to” book on intersectionality.

The book itself is divided into six parts, addressing what intersectionality is, the utilisation of matrix application, answering critics of intersectionality, the failures in adequately applying intersectionality, the bias towards intersectionality, and finally, strategies for effectively practicing intersectionality. While these parts may seem linear, in the same sense that intersectionality should be considered through matrix application, the book works in a similar vein – referring back to key points, building on them, and demonstrating how they are all related. The sections are broken down into manageable chunks that allow the reader to take the time to comprehend before moving on to the next element in the matrix.

This book goes in depth and is complex – it seeks to address the political and intellectual histories of intersectionality first, providing the reader with a base understanding before moving on to consider the issues in more detail. At the end of each key section, the reader is provided with references to explore the subject in further detail, which I found useful as a personal resource to expand my knowledge of intersectionality and its applications.

The main issue centres around the notion that intersectionality, while being considered something of a current “buzzword” (Nash, 2008), is often presented superficially – there needs to be more of a focus on disrupting dominant logics and addressing social justice. A lot of focus is given to defining what intersectionality actually is and why we must understand its history to apply it effectively. It contests

what intersectionality is, demonstrates what it should actually be, and shows where research is short of reaching this mark. Throughout the book, examples are used effectively to explain how intersectionality can be applied correctly.

Through the inclusion of examples in research drawn upon throughout the book, more sense can be made as to the important elements that intersectionality focuses on. The stand-out example for me was the research that considered the Presidential elections (pp. 73–81), illustrating well the simultaneous oppressions of gender/race/class/sexuality, not just gender. This is summed up well through the quote “the aim is to identify the main forms of power at work, to show how they constellate, interrelate, and intermingle, and to then address how these intersections maintain subordination and inequality (and also uphold power and privilege)” (p. 79). Dominant research considerations of “either/or” are replaced for “both/and” in identifying and addressing privilege and oppression.

Rather than ignoring the issues that seem to arise with the application of intersectionality, this book seeks to address issues brought up through critique, debunking the presented myths, and explaining in detail justifications for its use.

To conclude, the book offers strategies for effective implementation of intersectionality, highlighting the key elements of antisubordination, the matrix approach, working outside of the dominant perspective, and consideration for research strategy. From my own perspective as a researcher using an intersectional framework, this book made me rethink my own methods and approach, and made me go back and ensure that I had addressed intersectionality in the way that it is intended. The positive to draw from this is that intersectionality is not static – the framework is active and evolving, with the aim of move towards a more just world.

References

- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *Legal Forum*, 8(1), 139–167.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Nash, J. C. (2008). Re-thinking intersectionality. *Feminist Review*, 89(1), 1–15.