

## Chapter 1

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# Introduction: Reconsidering Feminist Research in Educational Leadership

*Linda Skrla and Michelle D. Young*

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Research on women in U.S. educational leadership changed substantially during the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Numerous scholars have chronicled and categorized these changes and have described periods or phases through which research on female educational leaders has passed (e.g., Banks, 1995; Blount, 1998; Marshall, this volume; Shakeshaft, 1987, 1999). From its virtual nonexistence prior to the early 1960s, through a largely positivistic and functionalist period in the late 1960s and 1970s, to a span of increasingly sophisticated work in the 1980s and 1990s, the field has both expanded and evolved. Especially within the past two decades, feminist epistemology and advocacy have played important roles in shaping the changes in the field.

Through feminist research in educational leadership we have learned much about how gender inequalities were created and structured within our systems of school administration and how they are maintained and perpetuated (Bell, 1988; Estler, 1975). Feminist research on school leadership has documented, among other things, the persistent underrepresentation of women in high-paying and prestigious leadership positions (Blount, 1998; Glass, 1992). It has revealed the ceiling that keeps women out of upper management positions and has shown us that this ceiling is glass if one is White, but concrete if one is a woman of color (Alston, 1999; Banks, 1995; Jackson, 1999; Ortiz, 1999).

Researchers of gender and educational leadership also have centered women in their work and have explored the characteristics of women leaders and the institutional and professional cultures within which they work

(Lynch, 1990; Tallerico, Burstyn, & Poole, 1993). These researchers and others have examined traditional theories of leadership and have found them to be based on traditional male experiences and understandings (Brunner, 1997). Research on women in educational leadership has also explored how these traditional theories and understandings have been normalized, while women's experiences, understandings, and values have been ignored (Bell & Chase, 1993). In addition, feminist study of gender and educational leadership has concerned itself with gender socialization, with myths about gender and leadership, and with the operation of power and language in producing inequity (Chase, 1995; Grogan, 1996). Such feminist research has also theorized about how and why these phenomena persist and even thrive in U.S. educational administration despite sweeping social changes and women's progress in other societal spheres (Blackmore, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1987, 1999).

In spite of these impressive accomplishments, however, feminist research in educational leadership has not always followed a uniform or smooth path of steady advancement. There have been periods of rapid growth in interest in the field and periods of significant maturation of theory (Shakeshaft, 1999). There have also been stretches of time during which interest has stagnated or declined and during which progress in the field has seemed to slow as promising lines of inquiry become more fully excavated and new paradigmatic, philosophical, and epistemological boundaries are reached (Blackmore, 2000). In much the same way that Denzin and Lincoln (2000) characterized the field of qualitative research as being "at the edge of the seventh moment," when deep reflection and re-examination would be required to move forward, feminist research in educational leadership has reached an edge point. After an intense period of rising interest and increasing sophistication in the middle 1990s that saw, among other things, the introduction of feminist poststructural frameworks into research in educational leadership, the field in the early years of the twenty-first century needs reexamination to consider its past and to contemplate its future.

Additionally, there is mounting evidence of a backlash and retrenchment of dominant, androcentric discourses (Blackmore, 1999, 2000), as well-recognized individuals and powerful groups within the educational leadership community have begun to comment with increasing frequency that "too much has been made of the gender thing" and that "we already know everything there is to know about women in educational leadership." One of the key lessons that past feminist research in the field has taught us is that oppression is not monolithic or static. As gains are made by feminists on some fronts, the dominant discourses and structures of oppression shift and adapt to continue (Blackmore, 1999). Thus, this is a crit-

ical time for feminist researchers in educational leadership to reconsider our field of work and to carefully contemplate where our own shifts and adaptations may be occurring and where they may be needed. The collection of work in this book is intended to prompt, support, and contribute to such a reexamination in two important ways.

First, the book is a work of critical reflection on the field of feminist research in educational leadership as a whole. The writings collected here emerge from and build on critical feminist traditions. These chapters focus on and ask critical questions about the theories, methods, and epistemologies researchers use when conducting feminist research in educational leadership. They analyze the impact of feminist research on participants. They assess the ethical and political implications of researching across groups. They examine the types of strategies feminist researchers have developed to address the problems of the field. They propose alternative epistemologies that the authors hope will provide for more sensitive research methods and more complex research results. They probe for research possibilities that “might, perhaps, not be so cruel to so many people” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 1). And they offer examples of applications of these reconceptualized, alternate methodologies and epistemologies to research.

Second, this book serves as a sourcebook for feminist researchers in education leadership (and in other fields) who are engaged, perhaps unknowingly or unwillingly, in their own individual reexamination projects. Several of the chapters in this book were originally written as articles for a special issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (QSE). In planning the special journal issue, the guest editors, Michelle Young and Julie Laible, were looking to create a resource for educational researchers that explored some of the issues and questions with which the editors frequently found themselves preoccupied, troubling over, and discussing. They wanted to create a space in which such dilemmas could be confronted, examined, and discussed. Likewise, the current book is intended to fill a similar need in more depth than was possible in a single journal issue.

The book is organized into fourteen chapters, one introductory chapter followed by three main parts. In part I, “Troubling Feminist Research Methods in Educational Leadership,” the authors of the four chapters explore a number of feminist methodological dilemmas in educational leadership research such as power imbalances, ill-fitting theories, unanticipated impacts, and disputable representations. Although researchers who do not consider themselves feminists may also trouble over the dilemmas discussed in this part, these dilemmas are particularly problematic for feminists because they contradict and unsettle the foundational beliefs of

many feminist researchers. The contributors to part I draw on the research literature in educational administration and other, related fields, and on their own fieldwork experiences to explore and problematize how we do research, with whom we conduct research, why we do it, how we represent participants, and how we present our findings.

Part II, "Reconsidering Feminist Epistemologies in Educational Leadership" contains six chapters that explore alternate, expanded epistemologies for research in educational leadership. These chapters critique traditional ways of knowing in the educational leadership field that have been grounded almost exclusively in white, male, and heterosexist epistemologies and propose new epistemologies that are more responsive to complexity and diversity. Two of this part's chapters explore the epistemological intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and language. The remaining four chapters in this part comprise a dialog among several researchers about the concept of a "loving" epistemology.

Part III, "Reconceptualizing Applications of Feminist Research in Educational Leadership" offers three examples of reconsidered methods and epistemologies outlined in the first two parts of the book. The chapters in part III demonstrate the type of knowledge about school leadership that can be generated by researchers who are guided by reexamined feminist epistemologies and who use reconceptualized feminist methods. The chapter authors apply reconsidered epistemologies and methods to explore the topics of a native/indigenous model for educational leadership, the normalization of femininity in research styled as critical or poststructural, and the social construction of a leadership crisis.

The questions raised and tensions addressed by the contributors to all three parts of this book reflect to some degree concerns expressed by researchers in other areas of study. This is a propitious time for researchers in many areas, but particularly for feminist researchers in educational leadership. The issues raised in this book provide an opportunity for feminist and other educational researchers to review, critique, and rethink our research practices and theoretical understandings. The complexity of tensions such as these can paralyze. However, in analyzing and addressing these issues, the contributors to this volume use the tensions they have identified practically, responsibly, and creatively to reflect on ways to improve both thought and practice. Each author seeks to make clear that feminist research is entangled in problematic ethical and political dilemmas and also seeks to provide different ideas and insights about how one might proceed with feminist research within such problematics. By no means do these chapters cover the entire terrain of feminist research dilemmas in educational leadership. Rather, these texts represent a glimpse of both the questioning of formerly accepted practices and theoretical notions, and the generation of new ideas that emerge as the twenty-first century begins.