Feminist Theory, Methods, and Praxis in Family Studies: An Introduction to the Special Issue
Sally A. Lloyd, April L. Few and Katherine R. Allen

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Feminist Theory, Methods, and Praxis in Family Studies

An Introduction to the Special Issue

Sally A. Lloyd
Miami University, Oxford, Ohio
April L. Few
Katherine R. Allen
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg

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Over the past three decades, feminist/womanist theories, methodologies, and practices have had a significant impact on the field of family studies. Family studies has moved into an era where many scholars have replaced positivist assumptions with contextualized and gendered understandings of families defined in diverse and inclusive ways (Allen, 2000; De Reus, Few, & Blume, 2005; Fox & Murry, 2000; Thompson & Walker, 1995; Wills & Risman, 2006). Within this fundamental shift, feminist ideas and practices occupy both old and new spaces in family studies; they are increasingly subject to critique by feminists themselves. One of the consistently driving forces of feminism in family studies, however, is its association with passionate inquiry. Feminism is all about vision—having a vision for the individuals and families we study and the groups to which we belong, a vision that is centered on a desire for and advocacy of justice and social change.

We believe that the power of feminism as theory, method, and praxis is its versatile ability to occupy multiple locations—center and margin—all at once. As passionate feminist inquirers in family science, we are not complacent.
theorists, researchers, or practitioners. Feminism requires us to contemplate how the interactions of identities flow in and out and spill over categories. The utility and practice of feminist thinking and acting is not static, even within the individual who claims it as part of her or his identity. Feminism requires accountability by researchers; the articles we present in this collection demonstrate how family scholars are accountable to their scholarship and their informants.

Using feminist perspectives often raises more questions, which is one of its exciting features. Many scholars are challenged by how to accurately and sensitively portray intersectionality in their work. This collection features how feminist family scholars are mindful of this issue. In wrestling with how to define intersectionality, we need not think of pulling identity apart but rather figuring out how each subjectivity affects other subjectivities within the whole to influence behavior and life trajectories. This special issue showcases such feminist family scholarship, providing a forum for its interpretation and dissemination and revealing its dynamic influence and potential to change both the field of family studies and our fundamental understandings of family dynamics, gender constructions, and the intersectionalities of race, class, gender, age, sexuality, nation, and ability.

When we sent out the call for this special issue, we were particularly interested in bringing to the fore innovative scholarship that fully integrates feminist and/or womanist theory and methods, as well as work that highlights the rich interplay of ideas and the challenges or tensions inherent in such boundary-crossing work. We are delighted to present six articles in this collection that represent such cutting-edge work on feminist theory, methods, and praxis in family studies.

The collection begins with April Few’s article on Black consciousness and critical race feminism. In this article, Few challenges us to incorporate both Black and critical race feminist theories, with their emphases on intersectionality and the politics of location, into our examinations of the lives of Black women and families. Her article meticulously outlines the tenets of Black feminism as a standpoint of Black consciousness, as well as the intersections of Black feminism with critical race perspectives. A particularly exciting part of the article is her emphasis on “doing critical theory”; herein, she offers important perspectives on integrating critical theory into family studies methodology and praxis. She ends her article with a cogent example of how she has integrated Black consciousness into her own scholarship and activism.

Lori McGraw and Alexis Walker use narratives from White nondisabled sisters to elucidate meanings of sisterhood and disability. Their innovative
approach integrates critical feminist and disability perspectives within a strategic social constructionist perspective, perhaps the first in the family field. McGraw and Walker’s qualitative analysis reveals themes of portraying siblings with disabilities as normal, emphasizing the opportunity for moral enhancement, minimizing personal consequences, and accepting the ideology of gendered family care. Their findings provide unique insight into how nondisabled sisters both accept and resist the sociocultural parameters within which both disability and gendered care are embedded, thereby revealing the essence of a feminist oppositional worldview.

Michele Adams presents a sociohistorical analysis of pro-family campaigns. Using a critical feminist lens, Adams analyzes texts from the writings of the late 19th-century National League for the Protection of the Family. She argues that these reformers, in reaction to White women’s rights campaigns, worked to engage women’s ambivalence about family and independence through their use of pro-family rhetoric. Such rhetoric included themes of the family as natural, the natural family as threatened, and the family as patriot. Adams notes the similarities of historical and current backlashes against feminist movements and makes visible the underlying antifeminist bias in pro-family rhetoric. By revealing the contradictory ways in which women’s interests were both denied and engaged simultaneously, Adams integrates feminist theory, method, and historical praxis across two centuries.

Elizabeth Sharp, Maria Bermudez, Wendy Watson, and Jacki Fitzpatrick offer “glimpses from the front lines” as they recount their experiences of feminist praxis in the classroom. They share both joys and challenges of using feminist pedagogy with a contextual developmental perspective to teach a family/women’s studies course on gender development. Their articles emphasize understanding student developmental levels, addressing internalized sexism, the tensions experienced by and with students who bring strong religious beliefs to the course, and the empowering practices and benefits associated with feminist pedagogy. Through vulnerable reflection and dialogic praxis, both internally and with the classes they teach over time, they expose the systems of oppression (e.g., internalized sexism; patriarchal structures) that impede learning.

Teresa McDowell and Shi-Ruei Sherry Fang present a compelling analysis of the fundamental assumptions of conducting research from a feminist-informed, critical, multicultural stance. They emphasize the social critique of inequity and class structures, as well as the feminist politics of location that situate lived experience within structural contexts. The implications for family studies research are fundamental and include bringing marginalized
voices to the fore, interrogating whose knowledge counts and why, understanding the culture and lived experiences of research participants, creating inclusive coresearcher-participant relationships, maintaining researcher self-awareness, and applying diverse research strategies. Their article ends with an example of participatory action research in family studies, as well as a discussion of both the challenges and the potential of critical multiculturalism to foster a “corrective” research agenda in family studies.

Margaret Manoogian, Alexis Walker, and Leslie Richards present a rich and deep qualitative study of the family legacies transmitted across the generations by older Armenian mothers, particularly those surrounding the sociohistorical experience of genocide. They frame the Armenian genocide as an overarching cultural narrative that became a critical component of ethnic/family identity, cohesiveness, and survival. The women they studied emphasized their personal responsibility as ethnic mothers to pass down legacies, rituals, and stories of resistance. Manoogian, Walker, and Richards clearly demonstrate how feminist standpoint theory and the life course perspective can be used to underscore the ways that gender and ethnic history influenced the intergenerational transmission of these family legacies.

In the best traditions of feminist theorizing, these six articles represent the “both/and,” for they are simultaneously unique and integrated. The collection of articles covers very diverse topics, from caring for a sibling with a disability to integrating Black consciousness to legacies of genocide in Armenian families. Yet these six articles share strong threads of similarity. They provide a venue to help us trace and reflect on the developmental path of interdisciplinary, feminist family scholarship over the course of time. With each article, we travel back and forth in chronology, social location, privilege, generation, geography, and feminist and race consciousness. The collection contains tangible evidence of scholars wrestling with the dynamic yet amorphous concepts of intersectionality at multiple levels of process, (re)presentation, and theorizations of identity, research, and praxis. Neither social location nor categories within are static or exclusive for feminist scholars and their informants in the research process, classroom, or community. We find, as Trinh Minh-Ha (1989) has observed, that “categories leak” despite our artificial indoctrinated efforts to separate and contain elements or aspects of identity. The notion of standpoint as essentialist is revisited to examine the diversity of contemporary experience and legacy.

Ultimately, we hope that this compilation provides a convincing argument for using feminist approaches in postmodern family studies. These authors enjoin us to not only think in new ways about core concepts but also provide a path for “doing” feminist family studies. Collectively, these articles
highlight the nuances and complexities that are inherent in research that challenges how family scholars investigate and understand family dynamics, gender, contexts, intersections, and the life course. Although we agree with Fox and Murry (2000) and Wills and Risman (2006) that there is a potential disjuncture between family studies and feminism, we believe that feminism has produced a productive dialectical tension within the field, for feminism within family studies both forms a distinct theoretical perspective that is steeped in analyses of social locations, power, and praxis and has been integrated in subtle ways into the very fabric of how we think about, study, and work with families. We are pleased to offer this collection of articles as part of the continuing conversation that feminism brings to family studies.

As a final word, we have many thanks to extend. First and foremost, we thank the authors of these six articles for their excellent works and their willingness to respond to the advice of the reviewers and guest editors. We so appreciate their willingness to share their scholarship in this collection, as well as their flexibility throughout the process of revision and editing. Second, we thank an incredible group of reviewers for their reviews of the many excellent submissions that we received (this group is listed at the end of the collection). And finally, we thank Connie Shehan for providing the opportunity and support to make this special collection on feminist theory, methods, and praxis possible. We are deeply indebted to Connie for this opportunity to highlight feminist family studies scholarship, and we hope that this collection stimulates dialogue, challenges, and revisioning for many years to come.

References