

Allan, E. J., Iverson, S.V., & Ropers-Huilman, R. (Eds.). (2010). *Reconstructing policy in higher education: Feminist poststructural perspectives*. New York, NY: Routledge. 250 pp.

## Review by Pam L. Gustafson

*R*econstructing Policy in Higher Education: Feminist Poststructural Perspectives thoughtfully illustrates the effect of various theoretical underpinnings on policy-making and policy analysis. Poststructural feminism, the authors argue, supports efforts to dismantle policy and look for embedded assumptions therein that might have unintended results. In rethinking the contexts through which policy takes place, the authors critically review the assumptions of policymakers and analysts and the impact of those perspectives on developing objectives and assessment of policy. Far from presenting a simple exposé of what policy as a whole lacks, the authors use a poststructural feminist theoretical frame to delve into the ways that the assumptions, language, and historical contexts of policymakers and analysts prescribe the trajectories of policy analysis. By using clear examples to illustrate the multiple meanings reflected in a policy, the authors offer a candid and easy-to-read review of policymaking and analysis.

As a whole, the text offers various higher education policy issue examples viewed within the same theoretical framework. This provides readers a review of both feminist poststructural theory and issues of higher education policy that are typically viewed through other theoretical lenses. The authors address a variety of topics: the language of higher education policy, inclusion and diversity policies (such as Title IX and affirmative action), student development and engagement methods, the marketing of higher education to consumers, and research-centered learning policies and foci of universities. Through this theoretical lens, readers are asked to view a varied set of policy issues, the nature of how policies came to be, and how policies are analyzed, as well as how they could be analyzed through a different lens. However, this is not a text about “women’s issues”; rather, this is a text about the ways perspectives inform policy and policy analysis across all issues.

In Chapters 1 and 2, the authors lay the framework for the book, focusing on the empirical studies that are explored in the rest of the text and the way that policy analysis, when viewed through a poststructural feminist perspective, provides insight into such policies. The authors note that the poststructural feminist perspective

does not dichotomize issues, but rather purposefully allows for complexities within policies, discourse, and individuals, thus enabling a review of their complicated relationship. This introduction clearly urges readers to alter their ways of thinking about “the way questions are understood” (p. 9) by questioning the narratives and assumptions built into policies. The remaining three parts of the book are devoted to production of power in policy, objects of policy, and discursive constructions of change within policy.

Part 1 focuses on the role of power and presence in policy-making—that is, the way that policy narrates the lives and needs of individuals as a larger group. The authors of these chapters look at suffrage, the history of higher education, the expressed meanings of higher education for individuals and society, and the roles of female leaders in higher education. They skillfully present examples from the popular discourse on their subject, then use poststructural feminist theory to reenvision the discourse. They also offer methods for questioning the discourse of texts when conducting research in the field to purposefully and thoroughly dismantle dominant narratives rather than simply breaking them apart. For example, a study that recognizes women as vulnerable might focus on enhancing lighting or safety on campus rather than addressing the source of unsafe environments by such means as “naming, challenging, and transforming violent masculinity” (p. 30). The authors make the case for poststructural feminist theory and the ability to put the larger discourse back together in a dynamic and comprehensive manner.

Part 2 of the text focuses on the way the discourse of policy alters the individual’s landscape in terms of positioning within society. The authors of these chapters focus on cases of student development policy, intercollegiate sports policies, and marketing practices in higher education. These authors use poststructural feminist theory to untangle the messages and complications expressed in these policies as they relate to individuals and groups of people. Student development, for instance, often groups like individuals for the purposes of inclusion in student activities. However, these groupings might have nothing to do with the students’ actual identities, but rather reflect established norms regarding “other.” Similarly, Title IX policies that dichotomize men and women oversimplify the issues and thereby offer no dynamic solutions. As an example, policies that posit an equal number of men’s teams and women’s teams conflate a variety of concerns into gender equality as a one-dimensional issue, when in fact larger issues like race, heterosexual norms, culture, and class are involved in access to

sports in school settings. In these chapters, the authors urge policymakers to critically consider the language used when framing the lives and experiences of those their policies are meant to assist. Poststructural feminist theory, as argued throughout the book, offers a varied and innovative approach to issues of equity that focuses on the complexities—rather than the simplifications—of policies and the individuals affected by them.

Part 3 focuses on the way change is constructed in higher education by including the identities and multiple experiences of individuals. The authors of these chapters assert that although individuals have always had their own identities (despite social norms), policy that does not engender and account for those various experiences fails to open up higher education to its potential. Policy that fails to focus on change puts higher education at risk of missing the mark for many individuals whose educational experience must be, on some measure, externally realized rather than inclusive and holistic. That is, their educational experience is lived as an “other” within a system too rigid to include their individual experiences, efforts, and abilities. In these chapters and throughout the book, the authors offer examples as well as possible pathways for changing the narratives of higher education policy. They argue that by missing the complexities in the structures and value system of higher education, stakeholders in the system are drastically underestimating the utility and possibilities of higher education for individuals. The authors focus on the dialogues that have, despite the best efforts to uncover “missing voices,” been overlooked, lumped together, and sectioned off from the norm. This topic is of great importance to those studying the field of higher education because it presents a perspective that is open to multiple experiences and meanings.

This text offers a rich and descriptive review of the interaction of policy and framework through the careful illustration of policy and its larger meanings to individuals and groups. The authors argue that poststructural feminist theory, when applied to higher education, has the ability to disrupt many long-perceived and accepted views of the mission, methods, and outcomes of higher education for the entire populace. Throughout the text, the authors illustrate the ways that issues might be viewed from a poststructural feminist perspective. This frame has the potential to offer innovative and insightful views of work in higher education that expand possible outcomes for students, faculty, administrators, and policymakers. Indeed, using a poststructural feminist perspective may remove many barriers educators face when working to engage

students as well as communities and ultimately, to extend the outreach of a university.

### **About the Reviewer**

**Pam L. Gustafson** is the assistant director of the Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program at LIU Post. Her research focuses on exploring the relationship between admissions processes and outcomes in higher education. She is a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. She holds an M.A. in history from LIU Post.