



A Feminist Approach to Sensitive Research

Designing the Clay
Embodiment Research
Method

TRICIA ONG



Book review

A feminist approach to sensitive research: Designing the Clay Embodiment Research Method, by Tricia Ong

Routledge, New York, 2023.

ISBN: 978-1-032-25724-2 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-1-032-40565-0 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-003-35365-2 (ebook)

Reviewed by Tania Blomfield

By integrating her knowledge of arts therapy materials and practices, and experience in working with the population that she was researching, Tricia Ong has merged multiple research methods to create an exciting and unique way of safely doing research about sensitive and often traumatising topics with vulnerable populations.

In this book, Australian-based Ong discusses the method she developed to authentically engage with sex-trafficked Nepalese women, who are low-literate, stigmatised, oppressed and marginalised women, to explore their reproductive health knowledge in biological, health and societal contexts. She uses the Clay Embodiment Research Method (CERM), an adaptation of body mapping, to provide a way for the women to give voice to their experiences, despite shame, humiliation, taboos, and cultural suppression.

Chapter 1 sets the scene, providing a background of the author's connection to Nepal, and entices you into the rest of the book with descriptions of the author's time there working with women's reproductive health with sex-trafficked Nepalese women. This background provided the way in for Ong's PhD research, exploring the reproductive health knowledge of this population to better develop education and support in the community. Ong goes on to provide a background of the sex industry in Nepal, and introduces us to the participants in her research. She also provides insight into the experience of the interpreter she used for the research, who, while also Nepalese, came from a very different background to the research participants.

This is followed by a brief familiarisation with Nepal, useful for me personally, as it is not a culture I know. As well as geographical information, Ong also covers Hinduism, patriarchy, and the critical role that caste plays in determining a person's destiny within Nepalese culture. She also goes into detail about the impact these factors have on sexual and reproductive health for Nepalese women.

Ong developed CERM, viewed through a critical ethnographical lens, and focusing on participatory action research and feminist theory, to conduct her research with the women who participated. While wanting to use body mapping as an exploratory tool, Ong was aware of the cultural inappropriateness of using traditional body mapping techniques within Nepal. Her knowledge of Nepalese culture and women's relationship with clay, however, provided her with the inspiration to use clay as a body mapping medium, complimented by photo-ethnography.

Ong details the process used in each of the seven CERM workshops, and the following photo-ethnography interviews, and provides verbal snapshots and photographs of the participants' processes and creations throughout each workshop. She also provides anecdotes about the difficulties encountered in working in Nepal, particularly in relation to the use of clay, difficulties in sourcing materials during that time period, and difficulties with transportation to and from the workshops.

The power of CERM is described by Ong as a time-responsive research method, and she spends time discussing both the highlights and potential pitfalls of the method. Ong also gives details about the challenges of obtaining ethics approval to work with a vulnerable population in a country far from her own.

Ong sums up her research as "fast, fun, and dangerous" (p.101). As with most arts therapeutic methods, CERM works quickly, bypassing the logical, left brain processes, and diving straight to the heart of the matter, and, as she noted several times throughout the book, this raises potential risks in terms of re-traumatisation, particularly with already vulnerable populations.

All up, this was an enjoyable and informative read. Ong's writing style is conversational, and the personal anecdotes throughout the book paint a clear picture of highlights and challenges she faced, and keep the reader engaged throughout the book.

Published: March 2023

Issue: Vol.18, No.1

Word count: 628

About the author:

Tania Blomfield

MAAT(Clin)(Hons), BA(Psych/Rehab), AThR

Tania is a doctoral student at the Health and Environmental Sciences at Auckland University of Technology. Her research interests include arts based research, shame, and trauma. Tania's clinical work currently consists of providing psychological assessments under contract to ACC, and her previous private practice work focused on sexual abuse trauma, eating disorders, chronic pain, and people identifying as gender diverse.



This work is published in *JoCAT* and is licensed under a CC BY-NC-ND-4.0 license.

Cite this review

Blomfield, T. (2023). Book review – A feminist approach to sensitive research: Designing the Clay Embodiment Research Method, by Tricia Ong. *JoCAT*, 18(1). <https://www.jocat-online.org/r-23-blomfield-ong>