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The Little Green Book

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Review

Lawson, Hal A., Caringi, J., Pyles, L., Jurkowski, J. & Bozlak C. (2015). *Participatory Action Research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 978-0190204389.

This fine volume lives up to its jacket billing as a ‘pocket guide to social work research methods.’ Numberless are the theoreticians who lecture fellow academics, and the world in general, on how to conduct their business; far fewer are the writers who support their theoretical analyses and prescriptive recommendations with thoroughgoing, committed field experience. Hal Lawson and his colleagues are in the latter, much more useful set. Instances in this guidebook of their passionate engagement are many; this review will table but a few.

Participatory action research (PAR) is an approach that has steadily gained traction in social work, both within the USA that is home for the five authors, and beyond it. And as Lawson explains in his two introductions – the first describing PAR in general terms, the second more case-specific – PAR has five main elements. Lawson calls them ‘priorities’, but as a sometime professor of writing I must table a quibble that a program can no more have five priorities, defining ‘priority’ as ‘an absolute and overarching demand’, than a hunter can simultaneously chase five rabbits. These constituent elements are: enlistment of local stakeholders who likely lack formal training in social work; an iterative approach of planning initial action - performing the action - studying its efficacies and failures - and repeating the process, while continuously maintaining close monitoring; tabling new knowledge emerging from the iterative process of Element Two, thus justifying the R-for-Research in PAR; ensuring the new knowledge corresponds to the genuine needs of stakeholders, especially the local participants outlined in Element One; and carefully avoiding what Lawson calls ‘policy homogenization’ – the tendency (dear to the hearts of so many academic social workers) to overgeneralize from a given case and infer global/universal laws that sound grand, but are practically useless.

The rest of the book deftly illustrates how these elements may work out in practice. Child welfare teams reduce adolescent obesity in lower-income US communities; aid workers detect and mitigate sociopolitical oppression in the global south; geographical areas hard-hit by natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes have their circumstances ameliorated at maximum speed; the vestiges of colonial oppression are teased out, spotlighted, and shamed into retreat.

While Lawson and colleagues are wisely suspicious of grand principles whose pursuit may compromise the real and immediate needs of a specific situation, however, they do not shrink from practical generalizations. These include: stakeholders must be treated as co-originators of new knowledge, not simply ‘subjects’ or even ‘participants’; groups rather than individuals must be engaged and empowered; effective solutions treat people as resources, not problems; both the strategy and tactics of social work must at all times be culturally sensitive; PAR is invariably preferable to “one and done” studies run by fly-in, fly-out professionals; university-based academics need local ‘cultural brokers’ to be effective; and initial conflict and resistance, if seen as potential assets rather than barriers, can open the door to the greatest social gains.

The handbook concludes with a comprehensive list of useful resources – texts, videos, academic personnel, and institutional points of entry. My own conclusion: Here is a publication that should be in the hip pocket of every social worker. The Little Green Book may catalyze miracles that change the world.

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