

Book Review: Community Research for Participation: From Theory to Method

by Blog Admin

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*This book aims to bridge a major gap in knowledge by considering theoretical and practical issues relating to community research methodologies. The authors have collated a comprehensive and timely volume into the nature of community research that highlights the benefits of working with and in communities, finds **Matthew Wargent**.*

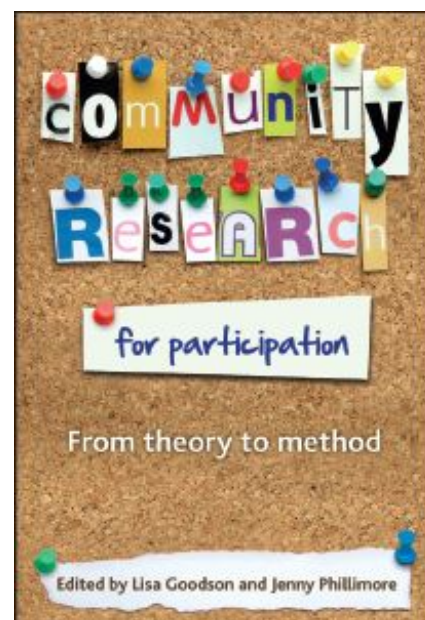


Community Research for Participation: From Theory to Method. Lisa Goodson and Jenny Phillimore (eds.). Policy Press. July 2012.

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At a time when social scientists have to demonstrate more than ever the value and applicability of their work, community research is an increasingly attractive alternative to traditional methodologies. Central to this burgeoning methodology is the recognition that the traditional objects of social research possess skills and expertise that can make invaluable contributions to projects, generating contextualised knowledge alongside, rather than about, local communities.

Community research provides an answer to persistent entreaties for academics to climb down from the Ivory Tower and get their hands dirty, such as [Clair Shaw's recent account of 'flipped academics'](#) in *The Guardian*. Similarly, the interest in Bent Flyvbjerg's *Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis* ([reviewed here by Flora Cornish](#)) is testament to the popularity of the turn to practice that community research embodies. Despite this, there is a paucity of texts dealing with the theoretical and practical issues involved with conducting research with communities. As such Lisa Goodson and Jenny Phillimore from the Institute for Applied Social Studies at the University of Birmingham have compiled a rich and timely methodological text by drawing on a number of disciplinary backgrounds and national contexts.



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This methodology owes much to Paulo Freire's seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) which remains influential in trying to overcome the object-subject approach that typifies many 'studying-down' methodologies. Community research is underpinned by Freire's increasingly utilised contention that no-one liberates themselves on their own, but neither is anyone liberated by others. The dialogical approach allows people a voice through which to name their world and therefore transform it, with an emphasis on the researcher and community co-discovering new situated knowledges. Community research recognises the ontological impossibility of what Donna Haraway called 'the God trick of seeing everything from nowhere' and therefore builds on Clifford Geertz's work on local knowledge and thick description, instrumental as they were in moving away from the grand theories of cause and effect towards an explanation social phenomena via situating thought in 'local frames of awareness'.

The book's twenty chapters are split into three sections addressing theoretical and methodological issue; ethics, power and emotion; and managing the research process. The strength of this text lies in its exploration of the complex power relations involved in conducting community research, an issue that Goodson and Phillimore claim is neglected in wider literature. The diversity of both the theoretical and practical chapters provides a rich picture of the benefits but also significantly the difficulties in managing

the research process.

Mannarini's study of participatory community profiling in a municipality in Southern Italy illustrates the delicate relationship between the parties involved. Unlike community-based participatory research where there is an equal relationship between community members and external researchers, community research can be characterised by a disparity of power between professional and community researchers. Managing the triumvirate of professional researchers, community researchers and community members can lead to the 'paradox of participation' where the professional researchers are caught between supporting bottom-up processes of self-determination whilst still fulfilling the need for a product and efficiency. The pursuit of funding institutions desired research products contradicts the Freireian methodology that emphasises the subjective experiences and learning processes of the community. This tension is one reason why some communities meet attempts at engagement with scepticism and hostility; and this is not the only barrier to progress. Even when communities do opt to engage, the pitfalls of 'false agreement' and polarisation amongst community members are ever present dangers. However when researchers are able to rescue participation from becoming the 'new grand narrative' and situate knowledge in the socio-political context, then community research can bring new perspectives to research questions and provide access to traditionally hard to reach areas of community life.

Kawulich and Ogletree's use of peer reviewers from within a Cherokee community highlights how close engagement with communities enables researchers to develop sensitivity to local needs; leading to the participants being given control of the flow of information to the wider public. Bell et al.'s exploration of how universities can promote empowerment by engaging the community in academic research demonstrates community research's ability to work as an antidote to the common tendency of researchers to 'feed-off' communities instead of forging longer term alliances (a predisposition that led residents of one English town to rename academics, as 'epidemics'). Proper engagement with communities not only prevents researchers from entering the field solely to answer research questions generated outside local context, but trust and cohesion can be generated through shared knowledges and goals. As the case studies in this volume show, successful community research can allow for a plurality of views from which to critically consider authoritative constructions.

Questions do remain as to whether the nature of this research can truly be incorporated into traditional funding structures, particularly in the university setting where deadlines rule. Perhaps more intriguing is whether researchers really want to relinquish control over the research process. This volume does suffer from the absence of a concluding summation that could serve to analyse the future direction and inevitable challenges of cementing community research as an established methodology.

Nonetheless, Goodson and Phillimore have collated a comprehensive and timely volume into the nature of community research that highlights the benefits of working with and in communities. The real strength here though is the portrayal of the messiness conducting community research; the text refuses to shy away from the 'circuitous and protracted' nature of this methodology and the inevitable power struggles over representation. As such *Community Research for Participation* will prove an invaluable resource to those wishing to learn more about this innovative methodology.

Matthew Wargent is a PhD student at the University of Sheffield where his ESRC funded research concerns the nature of democratic participation and political empowerment in the United Kingdom. You can follow him on twitter [@mattwargent](#). [Read more reviews by Matthew.](#)