
Research Methods for Community Change: A Project-Based Approach

Randy Stoecker, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2011, 280 pages

Paul Ashton

University of Technology, Sydney

*Gateways: International
Journal of Community
Research and Engagement*
Vol 5 (2012): 201–02
© UTSePress and the author

ISSN 1836-3393

Tertiary institutions have been under increasing pressure for some time to achieve competing goals. Universities in countries such as Australia, Britain and New Zealand which have undergone national research assessment processes – with grave consequences in the British case – are expected to publish ever larger quantities of original research in ‘high quality’ academic venues, primarily academic journals, and to demonstrate peer esteem. At the same time, they are required to demonstrate relevance and social benefit. Outside universities, state-based services continue to be eroded in difficult economic circumstances, while resources for community groups continue to shrink. Randy Stoecker’s *Research methods for community change* offers, among other things, a creative model which addresses some of these dilemmas.

As its title indicates, Stoecker’s highly readable book provides a manual for undertaking rigorous engaged research based on community projects that have quality impacts and outcomes for communities, students and academics. Stoecker is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who has worked with numerous community organisations and groups for over 25 years. I would also describe him as a public sociologist since, as is the case with public history, Stoecker’s immediate concerns are with authority (though he does not use this term) and audience.

For Stoecker, all participants in this model have skills and knowledge – even if they are not aware of them – which can feed into research, and can be shared, transferred or enhanced along the way. Authority in the research process is also shared. The process itself is cyclical, involving four stages – diagnose, prescribe, implement and evaluate – and it can begin anywhere.

In terms of audience, Stoecker does not privilege academic venues over others. Instead, he suggests a large number of vehicles through which research can be communicated and disseminated. Work concerning the preservation or building of community identities, for example, might best be presented through an exhibition or a community theatre production involving community members. This does not preclude its publication in refereed journals or at conferences. Indeed, a strength of the book

is its advocacy for the relevance of academic research and the need for genuine engagement. Academics are not portrayed as ivory tower intellectuals. Nor are community researchers held up as saviours. Community members are presented as partners in research rather than subjects of it.

Importantly, Stoecker indicates that the engagement process is anything but easy. A section entitled 'Loose gravel' appears at the end of every chapter identifying the pitfalls and problems that lie ahead for the newly engaged researcher. Stoecker also provides sound advice on these based on extensive experience.

This book should be recommended reading for academics who want to move into the area of engagement, for students who need a highly accessible and easy-to-understand guide to the relationship between academic work and community needs and desires, and for community members wanting to create significant and successful partnerships with universities.