
Public Sociology: Research, Action and Change

Phil Nyden, Leslie Hossfeld & Gwendolyn Nyden, Sage, London, 2012, 336 pages

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***Gateways: International
Journal of Community
Research and Engagement***
Vol 5 (2012): 195–97
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ISSN 1836-3393

Over the past decade, public sociology has emerged as a key site of debate, research and action in the exploration of innovative solutions to social problems. Public sociology seeks to reorient the broader field of sociology and make it more relevant and useful, whilst also drawing on the rich histories of disciplines such as collaborative and participatory action research, to emphasise ‘the active connections to publics and users of’ research, rather than ‘a passive research process’ (Nyden, Hossfeld & Nyden 2012, p. 8). This United States focused resource is edited by three leading academics in the area, and contains work on 33 case studies by 53 contributors who, as one would expect, come from a variety of backgrounds including not-for-profit and community-based organisations as well as academic research.

This is a timely publication which sets out the challenges and the imperatives for public sociology in an academic environment which privileges ‘original’ research by ‘experts’ within the academy over ‘translational’ research that organises existing research and disciplinary knowledge and communicates relevant findings to practitioners or activists trying to solve ongoing problems. Michael Burawoy, whose presidency of the American Sociological Association and subsequent work championing public sociology led to increased attention on the field, writes in one of the book’s three Forewords:

Sociological imagination may expose social structure as the source of our malaise, but it is not sufficient for political action. We also need a political imagination to turn personal troubles into public issues, which is precisely what suffuses this collection.

Nyden, Hossfeld and Nyden take up Burawoy’s distinction between traditional public sociology, which includes scholarship and professional activity that is driven by interests and priorities of the discipline (they identify the writing of op-ed columns, submissions to government hearings, speaking to community groups, consulting with organisations about their work, or reporting on research through web-based media), and organic public sociology (a more collaborative approach to research in

which boundaries between researcher and practitioner, scholar and activist, or university and community are more permeable). They refer to Burawoy's evocative description of the organic public sociologist as working in 'close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counterpublic', between whom there is a 'dialogue, a process of mutual education'. They describe this more collaborative approach as that which is played out in the case studies in this book: 'one that more explicitly recognizes the value of both university-based knowledge (e.g., outcomes from research done by academic sociologists responding to interests of the discipline) and community-based knowledge (e.g., awareness of community practices and histories)'.

I was struck by the authors' analysis of organic public sociologists necessarily working in complex, dynamic environments, of getting into the thick of 'heated community debates, conflicts between organizational managers and staff, disputes between elected officials and grassroots organizations' in seeking to bring about social change. It is refreshing and engaging to come across a text that squarely asserts the politicised nature of research without feeling compelled to defend in detail its objectivity and quality. As Nyden, Hossfeld and Nyden point out, ethical and research standards can and should be maintained whilst being actively engaged at a community level.

There are practical applied sections of the book such as 'Starting up and sustaining public sociology projects', which includes detail regarding 'Identifying projects and partners', 'Negotiating the research project', 'Building trust and credibility', 'Funding' and 'Making University–non-University connections more routine' and provides advice on various substantive and methodological issues that I found insightful and useful. The sections focused on the workings of the research centres with which the authors are involved are particularly detailed. The 'Career guide for public sociologists' is informative, though entirely within a United States context.

The 33 case studies detailed make for diverse and fascinating reading. They are grouped under the broad headings of 'Equitable community development', 'Environmental issues', 'Regional research and data collection to enhance public knowledge', 'Inequalities of race, class and gender', 'The media', 'Health', 'Crime, reducing violence, and promoting justice', and 'Community organizing'. Barry Checkoway and Katie Richards-Schuster's 'Youth participation in community research for racial justice', Keith N Hampton's 'The Internet as a leveler between advantaged and disadvantaged communities', Anne E Figert's 'Doing God's work and doing good work(s): Unique challenges to evaluation research in ministry settings', Leslie Hossfeld and Mac Legerton's 'Feast on the southeast: Creating a sustainable local food system in southeastern North Carolina', Donald W Light's 'Challenging discrimination against women, minorities, and the sick in health insurance' and Christine George's 'The role of relationship building in research partnerships' stood out for this reviewer.

Though the authors issue a rousing call for the promotion of such work in the name of public sociology, in my view there is a great deal of interdisciplinary relevance and potential in the case studies and analysis set out in this book. The authors acknowledge that they are in some senses repackaging current and past work in the field and indeed in other related fields (most notably participatory action research and evaluation, and public health), and the future of such projects may in fact be most valuably interdisciplinary. Including positive impact on the community with whom researchers are working as an important measure in evaluating research quality and outcomes seems broadly relevant, as does the involvement of collaborative partners to improve research through the contributions and ideas of those most affected. There is broad appeal and applicability for the authors' exposition of creative and flexible engaged research that is working towards positive social change.