
Book review:

Jason, L. A., Keys, C., Suarez-Balcazar, Y., Taylor, R. R., & Davis, M. I. (Eds.).
(2004). *Participatory community research; Theories and methods in action*.
Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

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Community capacity building is a term that has been flying around in public relations circles for a while now, not only in academic discussions but also in certain parts of the industry. People tend to use it to mean different things at different times, however, and to use it to justify entirely different approaches to community relations, depending whether they're inside the community or not. It's high time we anchored the terminology down with some solid theory, and this is a book, albeit from another discipline, that can provide one small starting step on the road to doing that. Ultimately public relations will need its own scholarly volume that comprehensively grounds community relations in a solid theoretical basis and thoroughly critiques community empowerment concepts, preferably from a global and comparative perspective. If there is one I haven't found it (and apologies if that is my own oversight), but in the meantime this book at least begins to fill what appears to be a glaring theory gap that to date contains even precious few journal articles.

This is a book principally by and about psychologists. The editors tend to have a primary research focus on health issues. Leonard Jason, Christopher Keys, and Renée Taylor are psychologists; Jason and Taylor have research interests in treating chronic fatigue syndrome and reducing youth smoking, and Keys in empowering marginalised groups through the use of participatory methods. Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar is an occupational therapist, and Margaret Davis is project director at DePaul University's Centre for Community Research. Their research interests

include using participatory methods to empower youths with disabilities.

Nonetheless, the methods they outline are directly applicable to the public relations processes of community consultation and stakeholder alliance building. While I wouldn't recommend the entire book for specialist PR applications, there are definitely several chapters here that would be excellent reading for students working with any kind of community, activist, NGO, or not-for-profit group in a hands-on PR project. There are also at least two chapters that I would suggest are essential reading for any organisational or corporate PR paying lip service to 'capacity building' whilst remaining unaware of the hierarchised understanding of knowledge that underpins their presumption of greater 'capacity' in the first place. Sensitivity to issues of gender, culture, power, accessibility, and a whole range of other social issues is crucial in both these roles, and this is a book that spells out why and how in plain English.

For academic researchers and students doing community projects, the chapter on university-community partnerships is a useful reference; it reviews the literature, isolates ten characteristics that provide a framework for successful partnerships, and provides a case study where the characteristics are tested and applied. There are also two excellent chapters that ask first communities themselves, then students, to set out their views on and experiences of the community research process, so that this isn't just academics preaching about 'what you should do'.

For organisational PRs the chapter on formal methods of empowerment evaluation will provide ways to quantify just how much capacity really has been built, again with a list of ten guiding principles and a case study to show the theory in action. The chapter on community views and concerns is also valuable reading to boost empathy for this audience.

The main problem with this book is that the contributor list is so skewed to America, and Chicago in particular. No less than 65 of the 90 contributors come from either University of Illinois at Chicago, DePaul University Chicago, or Chicago-based government and community organisations. There are only three non-USA contributors (an Alaskan, a Canadian, and a Venezuelan). This is not surprising given that the work arose from a conference held in Chicago in 2002, but it does mean that non-American readers will have to make a commitment to look through and around all the localisms to find the more widely applicable knowledge contained within. The 'ra ra' tone of successful American case study after successful American case study can become a little wearying; surely it can't always work this well?

Overall, however, this is an enormously valuable book for anyone doing or contemplating community-based research. Once people in my department heard that I had a copy, it went on high rotation, ultimately resulting in two departmental copies being ordered because there were so many researchers in the queue to use it. That has to be a ringing endorsement for any theory text.