Critical Social Work

School of Social Work
University of Windsor
401 Sunset Avenue
Windsor, Ont.
Canada N9B 3P4
Email: cswedit@uwindsor.ca

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information can be found at: <http://uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork>

Link to article:

http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/bookreview_researchforsocialjusticeacommunitybasedapproach

Critical Social Work, 2013 Vol. 14, No. 1

Book Review: Research for Social Justice: A Community-Based Approach

Critical Social Work 14(1)

Amy E. Fulton¹

¹ University of Calgary

Research for Social Justice: A Community-Based Approach

Author: Adje van de Sande & Karen Schwartz

Published: 2011

Published By: Fernwood Publishing, Nova Scotia, Canada

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-55266-441-4

Number of Pages: 190

In recognition of the limited amount of social work research literature that is congruent with social work's social justice values, van de Sande and Schwartz published *Research for Social Justice: A Community-Based Approach*. As professors at the Carleton University School of Social Work located in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, the authors built on their classroom teaching experiences in order to develop this engaging, illustrative, and practical text. The book provides a concise guide to the structural approach to community-based research aimed toward a target audience of social work students, social work practitioners, and other learners in the social sciences disciplines.

This text is intriguing for several key reasons. First, the content provides both theoretical and descriptive details. Explanations of key concepts and research processes are complemented by examples of student projects and reflexive journal entries. Elucidating critical concepts through these illustrations presents an instructive element that enhances the ability of the book to serve as an informative guide to understanding community-based research. Second, the book offers a unique perspective, which is grounded in the belief that the principle objective of social work research activities should be social justice and change creation. In particular, this publication marks an important contribution to the literature as it shines a spotlight on the arenas of critical and structural research, which are often marginalized or neglected in other "mainstream" research literatures. Perhaps the most impressive element of this book is the writing style, particularly the way in which the authors convey their passion and enthusiasm for a social justice-orientated research approach. The writing is well balanced in terms of presentation of theory, provision of case examples, and explanations of various research designs. In addition, tables, figures, and lists are utilized in order to summarize or illustrate important details. Thus, van de Sande and Schwartz have created a text that is certain to appeal to course instructors and students seeking a reader-friendly social justice-orientated research text.

While it is possible for the book to be critiqued for an overall lack of depth and detail, in my opinion this concern is outweighed by the accessibility of the relatively brief yet incredibly precise content. It should also be noted that the authors did not aim to provide a fully comprehensive text, but rather to present an introductory guide to community-based research rooted in structural social work. The noteworthy contribution made by this text should be underscored. Critical and structural social workers who previously found that the landscape of available social work research publications was inattentive or dismissive of anti-oppressive and participatory research strategies will surely find that this book offers an oasis that is reflective of their values and perspectives.

The book format consists of 12 chapters followed by five appendices, a bibliography, and an index. Each chapter corresponds to either a step in the research process or to a specific research method. Each chapter ends with a set of discussion questions that can be utilized to engage in reflexivity and exploration of the materials presented. The book begins with acknowledgements, a preface, and a poem. Chapter one is titled: *Research as Politics*. Beginning with politics as the starting point is appropriate given the authors' structural social work approach, which has a broad aim to "challenge oppression and work towards social change" (p. 8). Within this first chapter, van de Sande and Schwartz position structural social work historically and ideologically. They compare and contrast "mainstream" social work practice and research strategies with structural social work practice and research. The authors explain that structural social work research can be either qualitative or quantitative; however, they suggest that regardless of approach taken, the research needs to "expose the effects of an exploitive and alienating social order and create a picture of individual and group experiences of stigma and discrimination" (p. 3). The incorporation of anti-oppressive practice principles and participatory action research strategies (PAR) into the research process are emphasized. Further, the role of social work instructors to "help students see research as an effective tool to challenge oppression" (p. 7) is explained. Chapter two: *Research Paradigms* provides an overview of some dominant and alternative research paradigms. This chapter also introduces the concepts of "paradigm shifts" (p. 11) and "reflexivity" (pp. 18-20). In addition, social justice-orientated practice and research is positioned under the umbrella of "Marxism, Feminism, and Structuralism" (p. 18). Chapter three: *Research Ethics* defines ethics (p. 22) and provides a history of ethical considerations in research (pp. 22-23). The Canadian *Tri-Council Policy Statement* on research ethics and the composition, roles and functions of ethics review boards in the both the United States and Canada are discussed (pp. 24-30). Specific ethical considerations for PAR are also explored (pp. 30-34). Chapters four: *Developing Research Questions*, five: *Research Partners*, and six: *Participatory Action Research* are devoted to practical step-by-step descriptions of structural community-based participatory research processes. Chapter seven: *Research with Aboriginal People* presents a brief history of research with Aboriginal peoples (pp. 76-80), and an Indigenous research paradigm (pp. 80-82). Principles for engaging with Aboriginal communities in conducting research are also discussed in this chapter (pp. 82-85). Chapter eight: *Program Evaluations* is dedicated to explaining the popularity and importance of this evaluative form of research. Various program evaluation designs including formative (pp. 88-89) and summative evaluations (pp. 90-92) are explored. In chapter nine: *Needs Assessments* the authors explain how needs are identified and establish the rationale and importance of undertaking needs assessment studies. Methods of selecting from the different needs assessments designs including "the survey" (pp. 103-105), "focus groups" (pp. 105-107), and "environmental scans" (pp. 107-

108) are explained. Chapter ten: *Qualitative Methods* explores qualitative research interviews (pp. 114-120), data analysis (pp. 121-124), and trustworthiness (pp. 124-126), while chapter eleven: *Quantitative Methods*, highlights various quantitative data collection methods. Finally, chapter twelve: *Report Writing* emphasizes the importance of sharing research findings with research partners and participants. The writing process and format (pp. 143-151) for the academic audience, as well as steps for taking further action to create change (p. 151), are also described. With a length of 152 pages (plus appendices), this succinct text follows a smooth and logical flow while offering plenty of information and stimulating examples, many of which are based in the Canadian context.

Overall, this book is recommended as a resource for students and instructors interested in learning and teaching about structural and community-based approaches to research. It is an appealing and comprehensible text that speaks to social work and social sciences students who are engaged in the process of learning about how research can be employed as a tool with which to challenge oppression. Secondary audiences should include social work practitioners, as well as university professors in social work (and the social sciences) who are seeking examples of innovative and experiential ways to structure their research courses. Essentially, the authors provide an excellent guidebook for engaging in critical and structural social work research from start to finish. Readers are taken on a journey from positioning structural research politically and paradigmatically, right through to report writing and the dissemination of findings. With the publication of this text, van de Sande and Schwartz have contributed to filling a gap in the literature experienced by social workers with a strong commitment to enhancing communities and contributing to social justice aims through their research endeavours. This book would be suitable as required reading in graduate-level social work research methods courses or for supplementary reading for anyone seeking to enhance their knowledge of research strategies that aim to create social change.

Author Biography

Amy E. Fulton, MSW, RSW is currently a doctoral student in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary. She holds the position of Research Coordinator for the Murray Fraser Professor of Community Economic Development, and teaches an undergraduate loss and grief course at the University of Calgary. Prior to pursuing her PhD Amy was the Field Education Coordinator in the School of Social Work, Faculty of Health & Social Development at The University of British Columbia in Kelowna, BC. Her current interests encompass professional identity development; social work education; professionalization of social workers; migration and adaptation; and qualitative research methodologies.

References

- van de Sande, A., & Schwartz, K. (2011). *Research for social justice: A community-based approach*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.