

**Stoecker, R., & Falcón, A. (Eds.). (2022). Handbook on participatory action research and community development. Edward Elgar Publishing**

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## BOOK REVIEW

Stoecker, R., & Falcón, A. (Eds.). (2022). *Handbook on participatory action research and community development*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Reviewed by **Ashika Ashika**, PhD student, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University

This book is laid out in six different sections. Part one explores the infrastructures that can support the integration of participatory action research (PAR) and community development (CD) effectively for community problem-solving and improvement. Part two focuses on organising communities, emphasising the importance of the community in working together towards change, making sense of community issues, and creating avenues for a systemic change. Part three explores the challenges of building organisations and empowering community by maintaining equitable and collaborative relationships with community stakeholders. Part four highlights the potential in youth-directed community level initiatives. Part five focuses on how power dynamics influence the incorporation of community development and participatory development practices, and how systematic collaborations can help respond appropriately to overcome crises. And part six illuminates the importance of *covivencia*, a beautiful Spanish term that describes the culture and significance of living together in community, collaboration, and coexistence. Parts one, two, and three are particularly beneficial to participatory action researchers as these sections articulate how participatory action research could be carried out in connection with community development to bring about systemic societal changes. However, part four plays a critical role in implementing PAR and CD as it illustrates the subtle nuances of collaborating with government authorities and highlights the importance of receiving funds for the interventions.

Many common approaches to PAR and CD, including surveys, story-telling, interviews, case studies, exploring solutions, social mapping, and discussions, are explored throughout the book in connection with socially relevant themes such as housing conditions, neighbourhood health, community knowledge mobilisation, Cuban community development practices through arts, protecting the environment, supporting community organisers in urban planning, and epistemic justice. As a graduate student and doctoral researcher, I found these approaches highly effective as they allowed me to become familiar with their possible uses; this helped me envision how I might use these approaches within my own work. The editors also made it clear that PAR and CD can be used alongside traditional qualitative research methods. In all, the editors have curated this volume as an approachable guide for novice PAR researchers and community engagement. The editors also identify a variety of settings in which this research could take place.

Chapters that discuss and emphasise communities' power (chapters 6, 7) and capacity (chapters 9, 10, 11), including those that highlight youth perspectives and initiatives (chapters 13, 14 and 15) are accompanied by descriptions of research projects and analysis, giving a widespread applied understanding of the successful usage, impact, and effectiveness of PAR and CD in different settings. Chapter 16 describes the role of power dynamics and the various levels of involvement of the government in strong authoritarian states, and elaborates on the different ways in which community organisations can utilise the potential of participatory governance to help the community in distress.

Part two, "Organizing Communities," will be of particular interest to participatory action researchers and community development practitioners. For instance, in Chapter 6, Hidayat and Schwebach identify and compare different strategies in community engagement and PAR to bring about systemic changes in societies, and how PAR supported different initiatives in similar ways. The authors discuss two case studies that were a part of service learning courses in Wisconsin. The chapter provides clear insights into how effective strategies can be planned to encourage beneficial community collaborations and bring about the desired developments to help people thrive in better social settings. In Chapter 7, Lucie et al. explore the possibilities that a 'Community of Practice' can bring to PAR practitioners and provide a safe space to question and master scientific modes of knowledge production to explore sensitive issues in their communities. In Chapter 8, Breazeale et al. illuminate the potential of storytelling practices in enabling PAR and CD to work together efficiently and effectively. The authors discuss two case studies illustrating the impact of combining teaching, research, and community organising in CPAR and CD via narrative techniques to encourage critical consciousness.

Part three, "Building Organizations and Neighbourhood," explains how PAR can create space for participation among university faculty and students and community members amid social disturbances and conflict. This section of the book can be a powerful resource for PAR and CD practitioners to understand ways to facilitate university-community partnerships. For example, Droznin et al. in Chapter 9, depict how Stetson staff, faculty, and students empowered communities' voices and highlighted its assets, rather than reinforcing colonialist notions of "saving" the community in a low-income, marginalised area of DeLand, Florida for addressing public health needs. The authors acknowledged the centrality of continuous research and development in creating effective strategies for community collaborations. In Chapter 10, O'Toole et al. bring forth a case study of a partnership between a resident-led neighbourhood collaborative and a graduate leadership program at a local university in Newport and Rhode Island to address health disparities and build community leadership. Incorporating a mixed-methods approach, the project was aimed to find solutions using observations, interviews, documentation and discussions. Signifying the importance of academic research, strategic interventions, discussions and collaborations, this section is the epicentre of community development practices.

Part six, Chapter 21, revisits the critical tradition of PAR and acknowledges that PAR originated in the global south as a social movement to dismantle oppressive social structures. In the chapter, Peet and Hartwick (2015) beautifully state, "Community refers to groups based on family and neighbourhood bonds that engender feelings of togetherness" (p.397). The author's narrative and the experiences of the Amazonian

people beautifully portray the importance of togetherness in a community to bring about systemic changes. These narratives bring forth a critical aspect of CD and PAR practices that cannot be overlooked while planning research interventions.

The handbook on participatory action research and community development is an excellent comprehensive resource for PAR and community engagement/development researchers and practitioners who wish to learn more about how to integrate participatory action research in community settings effectively in a way that can highlight the transformative power of both PAR and CD, and enrich their work both in academic and applied settings. Providing the historical backgrounds and the contemporary models of PAR and CD, the book provides different situations and contexts across continents where these approaches have been applied and have transformed societies on different levels. The different chapters and projects described in the book also emphasise the importance of receiving grants timely, community trust and organisational challenges that are critical in PAR and CD. By continuing to reflect and explore how we as researchers can transcend text through community engagement and participatory action research, can make our work more accessible and discover a reality that exists beyond the text.

#### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:**

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**Ashika** is a PhD student and a teaching assistant at the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. Ashika's doctoral research focuses on the strengths of nurturing collaborations among people of different generations and its impact on their social relationships. Community development is an important component of Ashika's doctoral work and the volunteer work she carries out for two different non-profit organisations in Montreal, dedicated to helping isolated senior citizens feel a part of society.

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