

BOOK REVIEW:

'The Impact of Community Work: How to Gather Evidence' (2020)

by, Sue Briggs, Kirsty Forrester, Ed Garrett, Karen McArdle and Catherine McKay
ISBN 978-1447343943 £29.99

'The Impact of Community Work: How to Gather Evidence' is a book which I would highly recommend to anyone with an interest in community work. In one sense the book does what it says on the tin and successfully makes the case as to why gathering evidence and measuring impact matters in community work. The book also doubles up however, as an introduction to both community work and community based social research. In terms of impact and evidence, Concept readers will be aware that community work is an intensely governed activity in which community work practitioners must justify what they do to different audiences which includes management, government, inspectors, funders and of course communities themselves. "It's not enough to just do the work" as an inspector from Education Scotland once told me; "we also need evidence that the work makes an impact". Inspectors often refer to "impact" as the "so-what" question, namely, so what practical and measurable difference is your working making. *'The Impact of Community Work'* will enable readers to address that "so what" question and is written as a 'practical' and 'how to guide', which is neatly divided into two parts - 'Thinking about Impact' (Part One) and 'Methods of Gathering Evidence' (Part Two). The authors argue that:

'Being able to provide evidence of the value of what you do working in and with communities is clearly important for lots of good reasons that come quickly to mind. It can help secure funding and improve the long-term sustainability and profile of your work, as well as improving your own practice and keeping communities themselves informed of progress. It also can be used to meet the demands of funders, show value for money and improve effectiveness' (p. 1).

Each chapter offers in-depth accounts of different methods coupled with chapters devoted to topics such as presenting finds to different audiences, planning and evaluation, anecdote and observation, questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. The chapters also provide examples of how to gather evidence in terms of both quantitative data ('statistics') and qualitative data as well ('stories').

The authors are sensitive to what I would describe as an overall weariness within the community work sector towards demands, especially from government, inspectors and funders to continually justify its

existence. This weariness, which is not wholly unjustified, lends itself to two types of argument. The first, is that community workers spend too much time engaged in performance management activities as opposed to “getting on with the job”. In my experience, this is not informed by an elitist position that practitioners shouldn’t be accountable but is a response to the ways in which professional labour is increasingly controlled by performance management technologies in the shape of computerised data bases, management information systems, appraisals, work related objectives, quality assurance, and so on; technologies, which control us rather than the other way around. The second argument is a scepticism towards quantitative data, which stems from the view that community work is qualitative in nature and therefore is concerned with the things in life that are difficult to measure. The authors cite a study of youth workers who adopted this ‘anti-measurement’ position:

‘A majority of youth workers felt that youth work could not and should not be measured, and that organising youth work around concepts like outcomes, targets, curriculum and issues means there is a danger of losing the relationship as a defining feature of youth work practice’ (see Smith, 2003; Harland and Morgan, 2006; cited in Briggs, et al, 2020, p. 26).

The authors however, take issue with anti-measurement stances, which are self-defeating and in the words of the authors ‘short-sighted’:

‘We often hear community workers say they do not have time for this kind of paper-based review activity, because there are other demands on their time, namely from participants. We argue that this is a short-sighted view (p. 6).

In contrast, *‘The Impact of Community Work’* adopts a realist position which starts from the premise that we need to function in the world as it is whilst making a convincing case that evidence and impact matters, and that we need to take this stuff seriously. This realist perspective is strengthened by a decade of austerity, which is mentioned several times in the book, whereby a context has been created in which community workers perhaps now more than ever must demonstrate their contribution to public policy.

'*The Impact of Community Work*' is more than just a 'practical'/'how to guide' as the book is rich in theory and as noted, serves well both as an introduction to community work and community-based social research. In relation to the latter, the authors state that:

'If, as community workers, we are serious about tackling social injustice and inequality, we need to be operating within understandings of how such issues are produced and perpetuated. Also, to promote the value of our own work, we need to understand how it can be rooted in different research traditions and theories of knowledge – rooted in these domains more than in the dominant world view with which we must often engage' (p. 6).

The authors state that ultimately their book is about praxis, which, they define as 'the way we make meaning from experience and theory, which in turn informs our practice' (p. 9). The book succeeds in this endeavour, making '*The Impact of Community Work*' an excellent and timely contribution to understanding contemporary community work. It is highly recommended.

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References

Briggs, S, Forrester, K, Garrett, E, McArdle, K and McKay, C, (2020), '*The Impact of Community Work: How to Gather Evidence*, Policy Press, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK.