

Review of the Book

Glenn Laverack, *Health Activism: Foundations and Strategies*

London: Sage, 2013, 175 pages (Pbk), Price: £23.99,
ISBN 9781446249659.

This is a very interesting and valuable book in which Glenn Laverack draws from his long experience of activism in a variety of contexts. The author is senior research fellow at Flinders University, described as a “world leader in health promotion and empowerment” with experience around the world including WHO and who is now based in Australia.

He explains that: “Activism is action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine and is relative to the actions by others” (p.1). Throughout he gives a clear account of what is involved and why activism is important. At the end of the book he summarises:

What is clear is that if we do not challenge top down programming, individualism, corporations and complacent governments, we will continue to have limited success in improving people’s lives and health. The way forward for activists is not a revolutionary reorientation of the way they work but an acceptance of activism as a legitimate approach in the way we deliver health programming. Health activism offers an alternative way forward at a time when innovative ideas are lacking in practice. The extent to which this happens will depend on our willingness to engage with activists and to work with them to address the causes of social injustice and health inequalities in society (p.145).

The book is aimed at a wide audience but “it has particular relevance for postgraduate students and practitioners in public health and health promotion”. It is not a textbook but it has the feel of a primer or guide. There are 10 chapters beginning with foundations of health activism, and covering contexts and strategies (including international issues) before moving to the work of an individual activist in community and other settings and using particular approaches and skills such as those involving ‘new’ media and ending with some speculations about the future. Throughout all chapters there are clearly outlined frameworks that encompass activism as, for example, direct or indirect, relating to hard or soft power etc. He usefully suggests that context is important and that at times it may be necessary to determine that certain forms of activity are actually rather simple forms of routine engagement as opposed

to activism. “Activism” he argues “has a specific role to empower others” (p. 2). He builds a good case for a rational approach in which: “The strength of activist organisations lies less in numbers and more in assets such as strong leadership, evidence backed positions, good media relations a network of strategic alliances with other groups the ability to use multiple strategies organisational structures and sufficient independent financial resources” (p. 33).

This straightforward approach is very welcome. He argues that activists need to be clear about they are doing and he certainly achieves that in his well-organised writing. His explanations are enriched by many interesting case studies.

I would have welcomed (as might be imagined from this theme of this special issue of JSSE) slightly more explicit consideration of the different possibilities associated with activism. In particular what is the role for education in relation to activism? Do we find that the process of activism is itself educational and, if so, how does that occur? Does it matter who takes part and what are the patterns that show engagement by different groups for different goals? What about the unintended consequences of activism? Are there new forms of citizenship that might emerge from particular approaches to activism as well as useful ways to engage people in the achievement of worthwhile goals? If activism is contextually specific and may be classified in some cases as ‘simple’ engagement, then is it possible for some people to be marginalised and/or included as key decision makers through their activism?

The above questions and comments will not, I would imagine, present any difficulties for Laverack. I suspect that his experience and clear sightedness will enable him to deal confidently with such matters. This book is aimed at a particular audience and does a very good job in its own terms. He has already dealt with all the above issues at least implicitly. I hope to look forward to other publications that probe (in, potentially, a more confusing way) some of the highly complex issues around activism.

This is a good book that will be of value to many.

Ian Davies,
University of York, United Kingdom

