

Van de Ven, A. H. (2007). *Engaged scholarship: A guide for organizational and social research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 330 pp.

Review by James R. Cook

The author describes this book in the preface as “written primarily for doctoral students and faculty who wish to know how to engage others to obtain a deeper understanding of their research problem and question” and as a book that provides a guide “for involving stakeholders in each step of the research process.”

The author provides a model for engaged scholarship, with a significant focus on the development of research questions that are of importance to key stakeholders. He then proceeds to point out the importance of involving different people, with divergent perspectives, in multiple aspects of the research process, in order to create a richer process that can enable the complexity of important problems to be examined more fully. Clearly these are critical hallmarks of engaged scholarship and deserve discussion. An important point made is that, although researchers often think about multiple inputs as ways to gain convergence, the lack of agreement is equally or even more important for understanding the complexity of the issues under study. Finding the lack of agreement, or the discordant perspectives, can provide particular illumination when addressing complex processes.

The author is critical of research that does not engage practitioners or other researchers. He often blurs the two together, seeming to view engagement of other researchers versus engagement of practitioners or community members as functionally equivalent. This may warrant more separation in his discussions, since the types of benefits from involving the two types of stakeholders may be quite different. Furthermore, although involving researchers from different disciplines and backgrounds can be challenging, collaborative efforts with nonresearchers are often more difficult to undertake and relatively neglected by academic scholars.

The author provides an extensive discussion of the philosophy of science and the rationale behind engaged research. This is a very thoroughly developed discussion, providing background for why engaged research might be important and useful and how it fits in the broader context of science. This is interesting academic reading and may help those who are not convinced of the utility of engaged research to accept it as “legitimate science”; however, this part clearly did not contribute to the goal of understanding

“how to” engage others, nor provide a useful “guide” for involving stakeholders.

One of the strongest chapters (chapter 3, “Formulating the Research Problem”) addresses the ways that engaged researchers conceptualize the problem to be studied: the need to clearly understand the problem and narrow it down to a series of research questions. Some key techniques and strategies are identified for formulating the problem in a way that is clear, and for addressing issues of importance to both researchers and community practitioners. An emphasis is placed on attending to context, becoming very clear about the level of analysis of the problem of interest, and deciding on the scope of the problem. These are critical points, and Van de Ven addresses them well.

A second strong chapter (chapter 8, “Communicating and Using Research Knowledge”) points out the importance of communicating research in a manner that enables the intended audience to effectively understand and utilize the findings and their implications. Of course, without a clear, understandable, and important problem, there may not be an audience that cares much about the findings. But assuming that the research problem is important (as outlined in chapter 3) and the findings have potential utility, it is still necessary to develop effective communication strategies if the findings are to be used. Van de Ven points out the need for the communication to include logos, a clear and logical message; pathos, the power to emotionally touch the audience; and ethos, credibility of the messenger, in order to be sufficiently persuasive that the findings may be utilized. Unfortunately, much of the recent writing about the utilization of research findings is couched in “translation” language. The notion of translational research generally implies that the researchers are the authorities, and they must convert their knowledge to something that practitioners can understand. This approach may fit some types of science, but for many disciplines in the social sciences, a better conceptualization of knowledge utilization is through the development and implementation of collaborative research in which knowledge is co-created. If research is developed that recognizes and utilizes the knowledge of the researcher and the practitioner or community member, with each contributing to the development of research questions, methods, analysis, and interpretation, then the “translation” is not of the findings by the “researchers.” The translation occurs much earlier in the process. It is through better engagement of multiple stakeholders in the earlier stages of research that translation can and

should occur, which then facilitates the utilization of the research by multiple parties.

Perhaps my favorite chapter is the last one, in which the author provides tangible examples of how he developed relationships with stakeholders to conduct research. These examples are rich and useful. Here the book truly becomes a guide or “how to” book that graduate students or academic researchers can use to see how they can build relationships that lead to engaged scholarship. Van de Ven shows, in these examples, how others might engage with community practitioners. The book would be stronger and better accomplish its stated purposes if the author’s examples were liberally sprinkled throughout the book. Although the author is correct in stating that research methods textbooks omit discussion of the social aspects of research design, it is a shame that the social aspects are truly brought to life most clearly only in the last chapter.

In sum, if the reader wants to understand why engaged research can be useful, the book provides multiple chapters that speak to that. The author’s philosophical examination of science and scientific methodology provides some good perspective regarding the “why” of engaged research. Additional chapters on research design do not go much beyond other texts on quasi-experimental research or applied research design, although they do help provide an understanding of some of the difficulties in conducting applied research. However, if a graduate student or faculty member wants to find some helpful guidance regarding approaches to conducting engaged research, then they should attend to the chapter on problem formulation to help identify strategies for engaging community members in the formulation of meaningful research questions; the chapter on communication of findings (although with the caveat that translation should occur early in the process); and the final chapter, to see how social interactions are critical for the “engaged scholar.”

About the Author

James R. Cook is a professor and community psychology program coordinator in the Psychology Department, University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Dr. Cook’s area of research is community psychology, which focuses on changing systems and settings to better meet the needs of individuals and families. Most of his work focuses on using community-based participatory research to effect change in social systems and programs serving disenfranchised members of the community, including those served by mental health, public housing, and social service agencies. He earned a Ph.D. in psychology from Indiana University in 1980.

