St. John, E. P. (2013). *Research, actionable knowledge, and social change: Reclaiming responsibility through research partnerships.* Sterling, VA: Stylus. 276 pp.

Review by Timothy J. Shaffer

*I*n a world increasingly fraught with the acknowledgment that our social institutions and systems have not lived up to their purported goals, Edward P. St. John *(2013)* offers a thorough and thoughtful book on the ways that research might generate knowledge that informs efforts to "equalize opportunity for those underrepresented among college graduates and practitioners across professions" *(p. xv)*. Offering an alternative to public policy that has been shaped primarily, if not almost exclusively, by an economic development model, St. John attends to the need to bring social justice and fairness into our thinking about education and social systems. He squarely situates concerns about social good in our contemporary global context while acknowledging that the core assumption of progressivism and positivist research—a "general trajectory toward social uplift of low- and middle-income families" *(p. xvi)*—can no longer simply be assumed to be true. St. John offers frameworks for researchers and practitioners to use in partnership with educators in schools, activists in community-based organizations, and leaders in health care organizations.

The book consists of an introduction, eight chapters, and an appendix. The entire book is a great resource for scholars, but the appendix is particularly noteworthy for outlining how graduate students can conduct dissertation research that utilizes action research. Graduate students considering engaging in community-based research for theses or dissertations, as well as those who mentor them, will find this book an invaluable resource. I turned to Joseph Maxwell's *(2005) Qualitative Research Design* when writing my dissertation proposal, and I believe that St. John's book could be very useful in thinking about and framing what a dissertation using action research could be. Additionally, at the end of each chapter, St. John provides what he terms "guidance" in the form of recapitulations of key concepts, often written to practitioner and research audiences. Since the book seems to be most useful as a tool for researchers, including but not limited to university faculty and graduate students, it is helpful to have these brief statements at the conclusion of robust chapters engaging diverse literatures to reinforce key concepts.

To illustrate his concepts, St. John uses examples related to three general challenges: (a) improvement in inequality in academic and social preparation for college, (b) outreach by colleges to support preparation and ease the college transition for underrepresented students, and (c) expansion of opportunities for underrepresented students in higher education. He uses these issues to show how researchers can work with practitioners to address locally situated challenges. The book offers a foundation for dialogue between researchers who focus on education and researchers engaged in addressing challenges related to access to social support services and health care. We live in what St. John refers to as a world driven by a "government-corporate-nonprofit complex [that] has transformed education by using research to rationalize systemic reform initiatives" *(p. 1)*. Calls for evidence-based reform across sectors ask for a critical perspective about the role researchers can and should play in response to complex public problems, and St. John offers a useful text to squarely ground researchers as actors and contributors to social justice issues, not simply as passive observers.

Chapter 1 focuses on the importance of reframing social and educational research in a way that puts researchers in relationship with community-based organizations so that they are "sharing responsibility [for] solving critical social problems in local contexts" *(p. 25)*. One of the great challenges is to move from a standard, centralized approach to a more polycentric approach to change. However, emergent issues of inequality "cannot be solved merely by replacing central control with polycentrism," because we must also recognize how the globalization process affects this dynamic. St. John refers to our current period as the Global Transition *(p. 26)* and helpfully offers a historical look at globalization and social justice. This examination highlights the significant shift that took place in the 1980s through the embrace of neoliberalism in government and educational sectors and the impact of this political philosophy through its promotion of individual rights and choice over approaches attempting to balance social good and economic development. With a rise in privatization of education and other social services, social scientists and researchers concerned about social justice issues must offer new insights and approaches to public problems since "most of the theories currently used to frame problems related to quality and access of service were developed during an earlier period of social and economic progress" *(p. 54)*.

Chapter 2 focuses on the critical-empirical approach, "a meta-methodology that can be used in literature reviews, qualitative research, and quantitative research to discern and address critical

challenges in policy and practice" *(p. 59)*. A great challenge, St. John notes, is that theories in problem solving have largely been based on universal theories in order to provide universal patterns of problems and solutions. Our universities have prepared us well to think in this way. In contrast, to solve problems in practice, scholars and practitioners need situated theories "that provide testable explanations about how a recurrent problem might be solved in context" *(p. 60)*. St. John argues that we in fact need both types of theories working in tandem, and we must help develop theory through community-based research and partnerships. As Peter Levine *(2016)* has recently noted, "we will be unable to address profound social problems until we strengthen our theoretical understanding of society, and that will come from books, data, and seminar rooms as well as from action in communities" *(p. 249)*. St. John offers a framework for thinking about the importance of theory, both for specific partnerships we are part of and for the scholarly community.

This leads to the focus of Chapter 3, the action inquiry model (AIM). The process of addressing public problems in educational and social support organizations is not simply a matter of implementing best practices, standards, and prescribed interventions. Instead, professionals ideally use their knowledge and skills to respond to problems that emerge when they are confronted by new requirements and standards. AIM is the heart of this book and consists of three core processes: assessing critical challenges, organizing to address these challenges, and using action inquiry in working groups (or communities of practice) to address challenges *(p. 84)*. Action inquiry focuses on integrating learning-oriented strategies into organizational change processes explicitly focused on reducing inequality. This is contextualized in a number of settings in which social scientists and researchers are in partnership with others. Chapters 4 through 7 offer deeper exploration of topics such as professional development, organizational change, public policy, and leadership and public responsibility. The challenge is that within our global context, we have shifted from earlier models and concepts that placed social responsibility on public institutions rather than hybrid or explicitly private institutions. Neoliberalism and the dominance of market-based approaches only intensify the need to attend to social justice and inequities in various domains.

The volume's conclusion offers a framing that is, in my opinion, often absent or marginalized in our discourse about university–community partnerships or engaged scholarship. Using the Global Transition as a lens, St. John challenges his readers to consider the

neoliberal worldview that dominates our lives and institutions in such a that we *almost* forget that there are alternative ways to view the world around us. The Global Transition is shaped by a political philosophy that embraces privatization to the detriment of those concerned about human rights and the capacities of all people to engage in meaningful work that can improve their lives. He emphatically puts it this way: "We must confront the challenge of promoting social justice in the world as it exists rather than arguing only for the unattainable alternative of returning to fully publicly subsidized and operated education and social services" *(p. 210)*. His central argument is that reclaiming social responsibility with an integrative emphasis on equality and human rights is a responsibility researchers share with professionals in multiple domains—public, nonprofit, and private sectors—along with citizens in communities. We must do this work together, in relationship. But this isn't a simple thing to do.

This leads to my critiques of the book. First, I was dissatisfied with St. John's use of the conceptually limiting language of "partnership." Institutions and communities are framed in a dichotomous manner that parallels his treatment of researchers and citizens. Most of us write in such ways, but I was hoping that St. John would note this problematic language or suggest something better. Am I, a university professor, not a citizen? Are nonprofit employees not members of neighborhoods, sometimes those they seek to improve? The language of partnership between institutions and communities sets up a perplexing issue if we are serious about addressing social justice problems. St. John is speaking to professional audiences, but I believe we need to think more deeply about the assumptions we make when we approach our work in such ways. Drawing on the scholarship of Harry Boyte and others to frame research partnerships as opportunities for coproduction of knowledge, rather than efforts by well-intentioned researchers, would be one helpful addition to this very useful book. This suggestion, however, is not so much a departure from what St. John recommends as a departure from how he writes about it.

My second critique of the book is that I felt St. John was trying to speak to a wide audience and lost some of his clarity in the process. Although the later chapters fleshed out his theories, they gave the impression of walking through a field of tall grass with only a sense of one's destination. Many examples included corresponding tables that offered greater depth, but I found the presentation somewhat confusing. To develop his concept of AIM, St. John draws on his many experiences. The sheer extent of information leads me

to wonder if a more streamlined presentation would have been appropriate for such a volume. I fear some readers might not have the perseverance to see the conclusion of the book in the distance, beyond the field.

My third critique builds on this point: The author's frequent references to his substantial body of scholarship give the book an element of reading like a summation or culmination of that past research. At times, I felt that I needed to read those other publications in order to make sense of this book. This is unfortunate because St. John offers an important critique of our current intellectual climate, as well as valuable suggestions for a different approach to our research. In the face of an increasing focus on a market mentality in our educational institutions and social service organizations, engaged scholars can grasp opportunities to buffer that seemingly inevitable embrace of neoliberalism and to see the world differently. We can and should be social actors, not simply social observers. St. John helps us think about how to do so.

References

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