
Book Reviews

Agatha Herman and Joshua Inwood (eds) 2024: *Researching Justice: Engaging with Questions and Spaces of (In)Justice through Social Research*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.



Scholars intent on exposing injustice or devising norms for spatial justice inevitably confront the issue of whether they are exploiting their research subjects. When studying groups marked by structural disadvantage, researchers may receive rewards for their publications even while their efforts may do nothing for those who constitute the material for their investigations. In the edited volume *Researching Justice*, contributors, primarily drawn from the ranks of urban geographers, examine the ethical dilemmas they face and propose ways by which they can overcome such challenges to their conscience. They do so from a variety of perspectives—some by providing examples of ways that their work has enhanced justice or identified injustice; a few through more abstract

discussions of the questions raised by a commitment to justice as the underpinning of their research. The editors declare that their aim is to ‘understand how our concepts and practices of justice shape our engagements in the field’ (p. 2).

Joshua Inwood, in the editors’ introduction, comments that ‘decolonizing research’ is one of the book’s objectives. This goal, however, runs into contradictions. First, even while the editors reject Western individualism, they call on scholars to be self-reflective—a possibly self-indulgent and necessarily individualist exercise, as they themselves admit. Second, one might argue that Western scholars investigating non-Western locations are themselves colonialists and that the very term ‘justice’ arises out of the Western philosophical tradition. Still, despite—or because of—the inherent problems of using justice as the metric for designing and promulgating research, the book is consistently thought-provoking. Although a few chapters are weighed down by academic jargon, overall it is clearly written.

Kate Derickson’s chapter points to the ways in which university-based scholarship can provide resources for disadvantaged groups. Elizabeth Mavrouti, despite using a language (‘performative,’ ‘timespace’) that community members might find off-putting, recounts her experience in talking with members of the Palestinian diaspora. She refers to an instance where, instead of being able to speak with family members separately, both husband and wife were present, and the wife was silent. She indicates that the experience taught her to ‘accept difference and not

be judgemental' (p. 37). The anecdote raises a broad question for those studying cultures that differ sharply from their own—should they only criticize injustices inflicted by their own community, yet refrain from judging cultures that sanction practices they would normally repudiate? (This issue has risen especially in regard to clitoridectomy—see Martha Nussbaum's discussion of the appropriate stance for feminist scholars in *Sex and Social Justice*, 1999, pp. 118–130.)

Several authors examine the question of how to make scholarship useful to non-academic collaborators by making them participants in the research effort. Jen Dickinson and Natasha Uwimanzi recount an effort to ground research on post-genocide Rwandan reconstruction through the insights of diasporan youth. They describe an endeavor whereby young people of Rwandan descent were brought to Rwanda for ten days and shared their findings with academic researchers. The project leader, however, was intimidated by gatekeepers within Rwanda, who created obstacles to open, frank discussions with the visitors, resulting in a failure of the project to achieve its objectives. In contrast, Jennifer Balint, who likewise concerns herself with building collaborative relationships between Western academics and post-colonial publics, is more optimistic about the potential for exposing and rectifying injustice through involving indigenous inhabitants in her research.

Similarly aiming at the goal of using research to produce just outcomes, Deepti Chatti asserts that academic articles and technical reports are less useful in supporting climate justice than policy memoranda and journalistic accounts. The latter, though, are not the stuff that produces advancement within the academy.

The concluding section of the book provides a more abstract discussion of the issues raised. In the context of examining injustice within the Arctic, Corine Wood-Donnelly argues that simply identifying injustice is insufficient; instead, it is the responsibility of the scholar to point to what should be done. A contribution by the Vegan Geography Collective argues for multispecies justice, critiquing food-system and climate researchers for anthropocentrism: 'The lives of the animals being farmed, the chickens, ducks, turkeys, pigs, cattle, goats, minks, dogs, and many other species are insignificant, hovering outside the moral scope and concerns of environmentalism' (p. 142).

The essay by Don Mitchell calls attention to the structural bases of injustice. He contends that most theorizing about justice by geographers is idealistic and individualistic, even while 'our ability to *be* as individuals is fully determined by how myriad social forces combine and intersect so as to structure *group* differentiation' (p. 161, original emphasis). He comments that the demand for 'the right to the city,' while perhaps a useful rallying cry, is empty of content, failing to specify what these rights are. Thus, he argues against identifying injustice without stipulating the criteria of the justice against which reality must be measured.

The book ends with the editors summing up common themes that emerge from the preceding chapters. Most important is the contradiction between the neoliberal university, which evaluates faculty based on research impact as measured by citation indexes, and those who measure their achievements through their contribution to justice.

Researching Justice, although not typical of assigned readings in methods classes, forces researchers to examine the framework that underlies spatial investigations rather than simply the techniques of interviewing and data analysis. It also perhaps prods investigators to return to the old topics of community power structures and growth machines rather than simply focusing on the oppressed, thereby overcoming the danger of using subordinate groups to elevate the researcher's career. On the whole, the volume offers an important lens through which to scrutinize well-meaning attempts within the academy aimed at using research to create a more just world.

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