

Book Review

## Activism That Works

edited by Elizabeth Whitmore, Maureen G. Wilson, and Avery Calhoun.  
Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2011. \$19.95 CAN, paper.  
ISBN: 978-1-55266-411-7. Pages: 1-184.

*Reviewed by Christine Pich<sup>1</sup>*

*Activism that Works* provides an important empirical and collaborative contribution towards literature on action research and social justice activism. In raising the key question – “[h]ow do we know when we’re making a difference?” (p.7) – the editors, through part of a larger collaborative project with nine social justice-oriented organizations, challenge us to think about what it means to be successful in activist work that contributes, in a broad sense, towards social change oriented by “social or environmental justice” (p.8). In partnering with a range of diverse organizations throughout Canada – such as *Oxfam Canada*, the *Calgary Raging Grannies*, and the *Social Justice Committee* – an aim of this book was to provide activists from these organizations the opportunity to reflect upon their work in terms of what factors they believe constitute effectiveness and success, and how they know that they are making a difference. It is in this regard that terms such as ‘activism’ and ‘success’ take on broad and encompassing conceptual meanings. For example, ‘success’ is understood as that which is “described by activists themselves reflecting on their own work” (p.8). This relates to the central theme of the book, that is, in attempting to understand what constitutes ‘successful activism’ in complex contexts, there is no ‘right answer’ or ‘best practice’ when undertaking social justice oriented work. It is in this regard that the editors challenge how success is commonly perceived in terms of linear and tangible outcomes. In contrast, the editors encourage us to think about success on a different scale through the everyday work and successes experienced by a wide range of people (paid workers, volunteers, members of the community) involved within these organizations.

The book is organized with the majority of the contents constituting stories from the organizations themselves (in no particular identified order), and with the editors writing the introductory and concluding

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chapters. It is within the chapters written by the editors that the theoretical and methodological focus is discussed. Within the introductory chapters they highlight the difficulties posed by neoliberal capitalism towards activist work. In this regard, they point to the potential of “emancipatory social inquiry” (p.20) in terms of collaborative work between researchers and social movements, and the knowledge co-produced from such efforts. To frame this discussion, they briefly draw upon the work of Antonio Gramsci (structural and conjunctural analysis; ideological hegemony), Paulo Friere (conscientization; praxis; participatory action research), and George Smith (political activist ethnography). In the concluding chapters, the editors elaborate upon complexity theory, with particular reference to the work of Brenda Zimmerman (2000). This theory is understood as “a loose network of ideas, a set of mental models” (p.155) which challenges “linear, mechanistic ways of thinking” (p.155) that are outcome-oriented. The theoretical works drawn upon, especially the introduction of complexity theory, provide an intriguing framework towards understanding the complexities of ‘successful activism’. However, a tension in this regard was that they were only briefly drawn upon. It would have been interesting to delve into further discussion of, and identify any potential tensions between, the theoretical approaches.

Through the use of an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) lens emphasis is cast upon success and positive experiences, as well as the data sources generated, take a narrative form. This approach is well suited to frame the range of stories of what success means. For example, the *Disability Action Hall* considers successful features of their work to include building a “sense of community, sense of pride and culture” (p. 53), while the *Calgary Raging Grannies* highlight the ability to attain media coverage and energize themselves and others through humour and catchy songs.

The main contribution of this book is that it highlights how, even in a hostile neoliberal capitalist climate, successes of varying degrees are experienced within the *processes* of working on social justice issues and that important work is being done on a day-to-day basis in this regard. This is particularly important as it challenges the contemporary orientation of many funding sources in their measures of ‘success’ wherein focus tends to be on readily identifiable results and quantitative reporting mechanisms. In addition, through the involvement of various organizations, this book provides the space for activists to tell their own stories with through creative means, such as a comic book style format in the chapter by the *Youth Project*.

While providing important contributions, the main tension with the book stems from the framing of some key concepts – such as activists, social movements, and social justice – which could have benefited from a more elaborated conceptual analysis as they were quite broad and encompassing. While the intent may have been to provide generous conceptual framings, more discussion towards the potential benefits and limitations of this approach would have been useful. In addition, while the focus of the book is on ‘success,’ and the AI approach is suitable toward achieving this aim, the editors note the assumption “that something works in every organization” (p.24). It would have been useful to provide some discussion of what would be considered as falling outside of notions of success and positive work. Furthermore, while the editors introduce the organizations they have worked with within this project, what remained to be more clearly addressed is the methodological rationale for identifying and working with these particular organizations and not others.

Overall, Whitmore et. al.’s edited book provides an important collaborative space for multiple voices to creatively share and reflect upon what they understand as effectiveness and success and the importance of recognizing everyday successes that do not neatly fit into concrete outcomes. With its creative and accessible style and structure, this book will be of particular interest for researchers who work in researcher-community collaborative projects with the aim to co-produce knowledge, as well as a more general public and activist audience.