



Book Review:

Measures for Community and Neighborhood Research

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Book Review:
***Measures for Community and
Neighborhood Research***

Measures for Community and Neighborhood Research, by Mary L. Ohmer, Claudia Coulton,
Darcy A. Freedman, Joanne L. Sobeck, and Jamie Booth. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. August 2018.
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Increasingly, the field of service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) research is examining community partnerships and their impacts in an effort to better demonstrate the reciprocity at the core of SLCE practice. Recent impassioned calls for more and better research highlight this gap: “The field itself will be strong if we can contribute to both analysis and guidance that advances the voices, needs, knowledge, and priorities that emerge in what are, at best, poorly understood partnership dynamics” (Bloomgarden, 2017, p. 23). I would argue that a great resource for the SLCE field to answer such calls is *Measures for Community and Neighborhood Research* by Mary L. Ohmer, Claudia Coulton, Darcy A. Freedman, Joanne L. Sobeck, and Jamie Booth. While this book is not written with the SLCE audience in mind, its relevance to the field is palpable.

The first chapter of *Measures for Community and Neighborhood Research* succinctly lays out the purpose of the volume and introduces the process the authors undertook to select the measures included in the book. The authors were motivated by their own experiences conducting engaged research in the fields of public health and social work coupled with their personal histories as community organizers outside of academia. In the book, the authors “promote the use of valid and reliable measures that can be used in community and neighborhood research, program evaluation, community-based and community-level intervention research, research on neighborhood effects, and community-based participatory research” (p. 6). Guided by a well-reasoned ecological/conceptual framework, they achieve this end by organizing 10 chapters around a variety of measures addressing different aspects of community change, development, and structure.

In Chapters 2 and 3, the authors frame the later chapters by discussing conceptual and methodological approaches to conducting community research. Their conceptual framework draws heavily on Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems approach to examining multiple levels of analysis: individual, collective, community, and societal. The authors present a table of conceptual domains germane to community research and outline where a reader may find an appropriate measure included in the book to address that construct. Chapter 3 details many methodological issues related to community-level research and offers a brief summary of the various challenges of conducting community research, which many from the SLCE field will find valuable as they conceptualize studies of partnerships and impacts. The discussion of how to operationalize communities—and neighborhoods in research, in particular—is essential reading for SLCE researchers.

Chapters 4 through 13 present instruments that can be used to study communities. SLCE researchers can leverage the tools in this book to:

- understand community readiness for partnerships;

- guide strategic collective action and measure changes resulting from action;
- understand how partnerships promote social connections;
- examine whether partnerships promote empowerment and engagement within communities;
- measure resident satisfaction with partnerships;
- assess changes in the built environment resulting from engagement;
- understand processes like residential mobility in communities served by universities;
- study community disorder, crime, and violence;
- evaluate place-based social equity resulting from university engagement; and,
- examine community wellbeing and quality of life.

Each chapter presents an overview of the related constructs for these conceptual areas, framing the extant research on those topics. The remainder of each chapter provides detailed descriptions of measures from fields including social work, sociology, criminal justice, public health, public administration, and community psychology. These descriptions include information about the context of each measure's development, how the measure is scored or data are collected using the tool, information about its reliability, and a related reference and contact information for the developer of the instrument.

For the SLCE audience, this book is akin to Bringle, Phillips, and Hudson's (2004) *The Measure of Service-Learning: Research Scales to Assess Student Experiences*. Like Bringle et al., the authors of *Measures for Community and Neighborhood Research* are intentional in examining multiple facets of measurement. The comprehensive collection of measures from multiple disciplines is a unique strength of this volume, in contrast to Bringle et al., who collected psychometric instruments primarily from social psychology. Furthermore, the volume contains measures that can be administered directly to community members, used to observe community programs, or employed to measure community characteristics at even higher levels of aggregation. By approaching community research from multiple levels of analysis, the authors present several ways of knowing whereby community programs and engagements are having intended impacts and that may be applied in collaboration with communities or partners.

The primary weakness of this volume is the authors' seeming unawareness of the SLCE field and its contributions to community and neighborhood research. While the field has not contributed many measures toward understanding community impact, instruments like the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale (Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010), the Community Impact Scale (Srinivas, Meenan, Drogin, & DePrince, 2015), and the community measures developed by Gelmon, Holland, and Spring (2018) are not included in the volume. This oversight may also reflect a weakness of the SLCE field in not entering, more broadly, conversations about community impacts through high-quality, replicable, and published research.

The SLCE reader may also take issue with the book's exclusive focus on measurement. The authors offer an excellent discussion of approaches to working with community research partners in selecting measures and identify threats to maintaining the reliability and validity of the measure posed by changing or adapting measures to fit specific contexts. However, the interpretive paradigm receives little attention in this volume, and the contribution of ethnographic and qualitative inquiry to participatory research approaches is largely ignored. The authors clearly set out to develop a compendium of measurement tools, but acknowledging alternative approaches to community and neighborhood research would have been welcome. While measurement is at focus in the volume, the examples in Chapter 2 would have been enriched by discussion of opportunities for combining research paradigms. Furthermore, Chapter 3 could have been improved by referring readers to existing resources for defining neighborhoods from an ethnographic perspective to support the reader in overcoming challenges presented in the chapter (see Frasso, Keddem, & Golinkoff, 2018).

Both seasoned researchers and graduate students will benefit from the breadth of topics reviewed by the authors of *Measures for Community and Neighborhood Research*. The measurement tools collected offer SLCE researchers valid and reliable methods for assessing changes attributable to their partnerships and impacts. If SLCE researchers are truly to get “out of the armchair” and into the field to assess partnerships and impacts (Bloomgarden, 2017), this volume will surely be an indispensable resource.

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