

Book Review

South, J., White, J., & Gamsu, M. (2013). *People-centred public health*. Evidence for public health practice series. Great Britain, Policy Press.

Reviewed by J. Porter Lillis, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, University of North Carolina at Pembroke

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In *People-Centred Public Health* (2013), the authors present a comprehensive overview of the importance of volunteers, or “lay health workers,” and peer-based interventions for public health in the 21st century. The book uses current research and findings drawn largely from the United Kingdom where each author works in facets of public health related to citizenship and engagement. The themes and issues can be generalized to other countries, social welfare or not. It is also a short critical analysis of current policy.

In the first chapter, the authors give a brief introduction to the issues associated with volunteering in public health. These include terminology, scope of practices, challenges to participation, and issues associated with different types of volunteering. They lay the groundwork for the importance of having lay persons working as volunteers in community health projects, both for the recipients and the professionals involved, as well as for the volunteers themselves. They briefly introduce the current policies and the burgeoning data on how vital volunteer and peer-based approaches are for a multidisciplinary public health workforce.

Chapter 2 is devoted to policy context and how the shifts between conservative and liberal political perspectives impact public health policies and funding. It examines the current state of volunteering in England and the significance that volunteering has for the individual, as well as the

community. With retrenchment, shifting political values, and an aging population, volunteering is becoming increasingly important. However, this is occurring at a time when the government evaluates success by a medical model of health rather than a social model of health. The policy conflicts that these produce are explored.

Chapter 3 examines the history and current state of lay health workers in the global south, North America, and the U.K. Traditional top-down models, as well as a few bottom-up programs, are considered. Different levels and types of lay health workers are examined.

Chapter 4 provides the authors’ “main justifications” for ordinary citizens to participate in public health programs as volunteers. They present six reasons for engaging members of the public in program delivery and discuss them as they relate to theory, research, and practice. After discussing the benefits and value of lay health workers, they briefly consider some of the drawbacks. Issues surrounding evidence-based practice, as well as moral and ethical arguments, are explored.

Chapter 5 is about the volunteers themselves. It explores why people choose to volunteer and the barriers and rewards for volunteering. The authors provide compelling arguments for the skills and qualities a member of the community can bring, as opposed to an outside professional. The positive outcomes for volunteers are thoroughly reviewed.

Chapter 6, 7, 8, and 9 are case studies of interviews with lay health workers and service users in four different public health projects. The authors use these to supplement and provide examples for the arguments they have presented. The interviews and anecdotes provide a “real world” feel for the experiences of those on the ground and the challenges volunteers and volunteer groups face.

Chapter 10 examines how a health improvement program should be commissioned, implemented, and delivered utilizing volunteers and members of the public in health improvement programs. The authors advocate that the proper use of community members is necessary to have a holistic or “whole-system” approach. With sufficient funding and proper management, which the authors argue are often forgotten in programs utilizing volunteers, lay health worker programs will not only be successful, but thrive, even in economically disadvantaged areas.

Chapter 11 addresses the most common myths and arguments against lay health workers and the importance of active citizenship in health. The four basic categories of arguments are answered one by one: (1) Lay workers are a diversion from the real issues; structural inequalities should be addressed first, (2) Lay workers are not as safe or competent as professionals, (3) Lay workers should be paid if they are working, but volunteers are taking paying jobs from real workers, and (4) It sounds good, but where is the evidence? The ideological perspectives on volunteering from both sides of the political divide are examined.

Chapter 12 is a summary of the major ideas of the book. The authors then provide their own “manifesto” for a “citizen-centred public health system.”

The authors set out to “challenge traditional ideas on lay engagement and present fresh perspectives on why and how public health can successfully

harness people power” (p.179). The authors point out repeatedly that health is an outcome of social position. Through well-funded and managed lay health workers, and an engaged community and engaged local leadership, health issues can be addressed at the individual level for the recipient, meaning that the volunteers themselves will benefit from their engagement. If these are occurring whilst structural issues are being addressed by politics, the community will do better overall. The book does what the authors set out to do; the arguments are specific and precise, the examination of the current literature and findings are based on social welfare and public health programs in the UK and elsewhere, and it is well-presented and accessible to lay persons and academics alike.

The book is organized to provide the thesis, arguments with supporting data, and conclusions in an orderly format. Four of the chapters to support the authors’ thesis are case studies. That, in addition to the provided glossary, informative tables and figures within chapters, and key points at end of each chapter, make this a fantastic short or supplemental textbook for students in social work, social policy and the like. The book does analyze the political milieu and utilize case studies primarily from the UK, but the overall thesis is generalizable. The book would be a great tool for those wishing to have a greater understanding on the issues on volunteering, lay health workers and citizenship and engagement as they pertain to public health.