

Health promotion in action: from local to global empowerment

By Ronald Labonte and Glenn Laverack. Published by Palgrave Macmillan, UK. Hardback, 203pp plus index. ISBN 9780230007222, RRP A\$178.85

Reviewed by James Smith, Health Promotion Strategy Unit, NT Department of Health & Families

Health promotion in action by Ron Labonte and Glenn Laverack will not disappoint the astute health promoter. Or should I say health promotion activist? This book automatically makes the reader engage in a process of critical self-reflection like no other. Perhaps it is the topic of 'empowerment' that makes this an interesting read, or perhaps it is just the harsh reality that society is really struggling to grapple with ways to enhance the relationship between local and global health contexts. Irrespective of the motivation for reading this book, prepare to learn and to be challenged along the way.

The first four chapters provide a solid, but somewhat familiar account of the principles that underpin local empowerment. Labonte and Laverack introduce empowerment as a continuum, and go on to explain the key components such as personal action, small groups, community organisations, partnerships and social and political action. They also explain that empowerment strategies remain ethically neutral until they are explicitly linked to goals of justice and health equity (p67) – the essence of what health promotion is really about (p67). The text is well presented, with case studies and dot-points used to emphasise key points. As such, this book would be valuable for a recent health promotion graduate, someone transitioning into a health promotion career or even as a refresher for a seasoned health promotion practitioner.

There is, however, a noticeable change in pace and tone in chapters five and six. These chapters are somewhat detached from the first half of the book, yet they make an equally interesting read. The reader is taken on a journey from local empowerment to global empowerment. This is a journey that everyone in the health promotion community should consider taking. Labonte and Laverack attempt to explain the links between local and global empowerment by delving deeply into the politics of, and political systems that shape, the global context in which we live. As such, it provides a much more hard-hitting account when compared with other health promotion books. While it may be somewhat confronting for the average health promotion professional (particularly someone working at the local level), the examples, stories and general critique provide a harsh reality that, put simply, cannot be ignored. As they state, 'global health is the new challenge for a 20-year mature health promotion, and a just

globalisation is its new prerequisite' (p155). This seems even more pertinent given the current worldwide economic crisis (occurring at the time of reviewing this book).

The authors describe the intersection between globalisation and health (equity) extremely well, using a strong and robust evidence base to support their claims. They are extremely critical of the dominant neo-liberal ideology that has favoured economic growth, in contrast to human security, health development, global public good and human rights. They are equally sceptical of the bureaucrats and politicians that have failed, on many levels, to ensure that the global health discourse is just and equitable. For those people that have seen or read *The Constant Gardner* you will know what they are taking about. While a frank approach has been used to deliver key messages throughout this book, its tone is not all 'doom and gloom'. The final chapter briefly focuses on what health promoters can do to positively 'glocalise' their work – although I would argue that the actions the authors describe could be adopted by nearly any professional, in any sector. Given the authors previous (and well regarded) health promotion scholarship, there is little surprise that citizen participation and civil society action is high on their agenda. Indeed, there are many examples of civil society successes that are woven throughout the book.

There are only two minor criticisms of the book. The first is the academic style of writing, which ultimately limits the audience. The second is the excessive cost of the book, where I am sure that any profit made will be used to redistribute this resource equitably across the world (the authors would surely support this concept). To conclude, this book is well worth a read, particularly if you are up to the challenge of being a true health promotion activist.