



Book Review: *Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change* edited by Andrew J. Jolivette



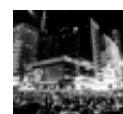
*In the collection **Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change**, edited by **Andrew J. Jolivette** in collaboration with the US non-profit organisation *DataCenter: Research for Justice*, a number of authors consider how researchers can contribute to the struggle for social justice through their research methodologies. While **Helen Kara** would have welcomed more reflection on the possible limitations of methodologies designed to reduce inequalities, she nonetheless positions this book as an important and engaging contribution to the field.*

Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change.
Andrew J. Jolivette (ed.). Policy Press. 2015.

Research can be unjust, even abusive. Many people know about historical abuses such as the **Tuskegee study of the mid-twentieth century** in which Black American men with syphilis were studied instead of being treated. There is much less awareness that injustice and abuse are also caused by contemporary research, which is often conducted and reported in ways that perpetuate inequalities. The aim of *Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change* is to show that there are alternative ways of doing research which are just, inclusive and



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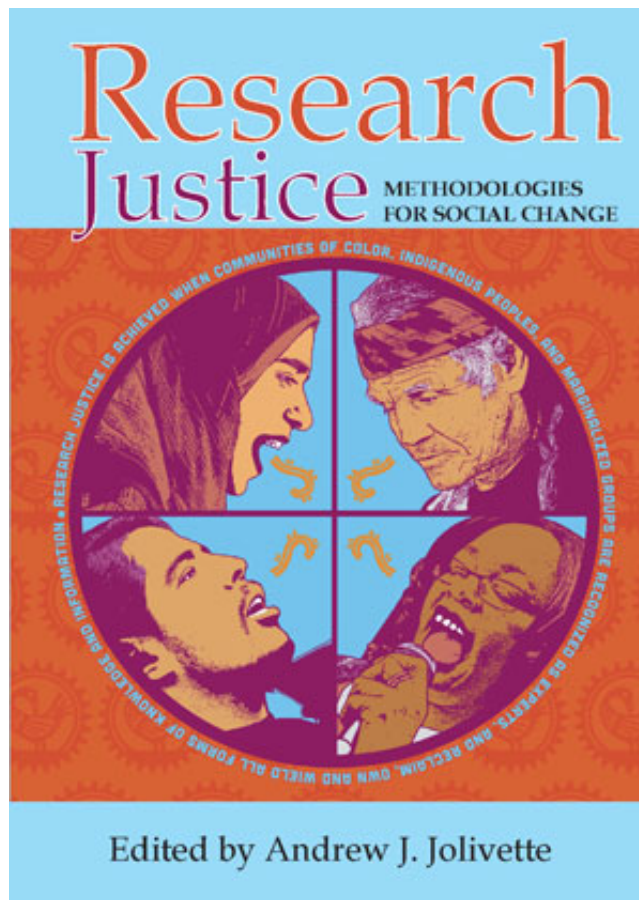
work towards positive social change.

The editor, Andrew Jolivet, is a US professor whose work focuses on culture and race. Jolivet edited the book in collaboration with DataCenter: Research For Justice, a US non-profit organisation that has been using research to support

progressive social change for almost 40 years. In 2010, DataCenter made Research Justice their explicit mission, and this book is designed to complement [the openly accessible guides to research on DataCenter's website](#).

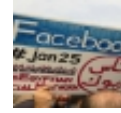
Each contributor to the book was asked to consider whether researchers are 'being "responsible in fulfilling our individual roles and obligations to the other participants in the struggle for social justice" (Jolivet 2012)' (9). Perhaps as a result of this, some narrative strands run throughout the book. One is the need to regard participants as experts and their knowledge as equal to researchers' knowledge. Another is everyone's right to self-determination, and a third is the encouragement of a close and explicit relationship between research and activism.

Most of the chapters are by scholars living and working in the USA and focus on US topics. Yet the work covered in the book is highly varied, including subjects such as disaster research, the criminal justice system, health and social care, archival research and indigenous/decolonising research. There are a few useful contributions from beyond the US, specifically from Canada, New Zealand and Italy, and one of the US-based contributors, Haruki



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Research is often described as though it exists in a bubble, separate from the rest of the world. In fact, research in the social sciences is intimately linked with other parts of researchers' and participants' lives. The traditional approach is to try to eradicate these links from the research process in favour of 'objectivity' or, at least, to present research as though the links did not exist. *Research Justice* takes the opposite approach, revealing the messiness and emotions, triumphs and challenges that are the lifeblood of research. In so doing, the book shows that almost any attribute or skill can be used in the service of research, and that embedding research within the lives of individuals and communities leads to richer, fuller findings.



Image Credit: [Sarah Joy](#)

The writing is thoughtful and interesting, and much of the book is very well-written. I was fascinated by Liam Martin's account of his ethnographic work in a US halfway house for ex-offenders, Julia Chinyere Oparah et al's tales of Black women's struggles for humane treatment during labour and childbirth and Eda's story of how natural disasters can exacerbate structural inequalities in society. In their introduction, Oparah et al highlight an aspect of abuse from Tuskegee which is rarely reported: the sufferings of the Black women and children who contracted syphilis as a result of the study.

All of this might mislead you into thinking that the only ethical standpoint represented is the ethics of justice, but the ethics of

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care are every bit as present, with descriptions of the healing potential of transformative research in several chapters. I agree with the main thrust of the arguments put forward. However, *Research Justice* has one major feature in common with other books I have read recently on transformative research frameworks, such as the second edition of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Books, 2012) and *Participatory Action Research: Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry* by Jacques M. Chevalier and Daniel J. Buckles (Routledge, 2013). These are significant and worthwhile books, but it concerns me that they contain very little critique of the methodologies they describe. It can seem hard to critique something so self-evidently good as a methodology designed to reduce inequalities and increase justice. Yet, however well-intentioned, righteous or valuable, no methodology is free of limitations.


Amrah Salomón J.'s chapter on narrative research is the one exception in this volume. She recognises that 'in its best forms, Research Justice is a practice of questioning that centers the confrontation of injustices created by colonialism, oppression, and systems of violence, domination, and marginalization' (189). But she also recognises that 'research justice' can take forms that are less than ideal. For example, she says, 'sometimes [...] work that is labeled Research Justice can be limited to the master's tools and reproduce the very dynamics we turn toward research to resist in the first place' (190). She also critiques the omission of research refusal as a method, and interrogates both the pros and cons of refusing to take part in research as a strategy for retaining power. Salomón J.'s critiquing is exemplary, and I would have liked to have seen more of this kind of analytic work in the text.

I was looking forward to the final two chapters, by giants of the field Michelle Fine and Linda Tuhiwai Smith. But I was disappointed to discover that, instead of the considered conclusions I was expecting, these are transcribed keynote speeches from a conference held by DataCenter in 2014. They were interesting to read, but I would have valued a conclusion

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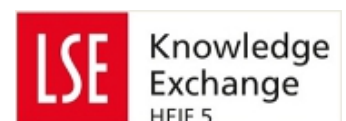
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which spoke to the book as a whole, whether instead of, or as well as, these contributions.

Overall, though, I think that *Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change* is a really important book. I learnt something from every single chapter, and no chapter bored me; this is not always the case. I would recommend it to anyone studying research methods or ethics.

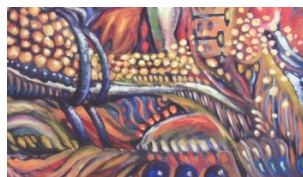
Dr Helen Kara has been an independent researcher since 1999, focusing on social care and health, partnership working and the third sector. She teaches and writes on research methods. Her most recent full-length book is *Creative Research Methods in the Social Sciences: A Practical Guide* (Policy, 2015), [reviewed on LSE Review of Books](#), and she is also the author of the [PhD Knowledge series of short e-books for doctoral students](#). Helen is a Visiting Fellow at the National Centre for Research Methods, and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences.



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