

Jason, L. A. (2013). *Principles of social change*. New York: Oxford University Press. 186 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-984185-1.

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It is a great pity that psychological paradoxes are not mentioned in the title. This book offers many insights but it is quite paradoxical in its nature. It is about principles of social change, but it is also a story of Lenny Jason's discovery of those principles. The orientation is contextual and yet it is also individualistic and abstracted. It involves simple, and often heartfelt examples from the author's life and work (and that of others), yet it deals with complex issues of attempting to change the circumstances of those less advantaged in society. Readers may well find this book puzzling in that at many levels it appears a relatively simple narrative, with intellectual abstractions tacked on at the end of each chapter or episode. Puzzlement will come when the reader tries to frame this in broad terms. It is based in a contextualist paradigm yet its aim is to identify a limited set of decontextualised principles. How this is achieved is both informative and confronting.

*Principles of social change* involves six chapters. These chapters are used to discuss a number of pressing social issues in United States' society. Events in the life of the author and also some broader social issues are described. From these episodes, Jason draws out a set of lessons that will form the basis of five principles of social change.

In Chapter 1, Jason begins the description of his involvement in testifying in Washington about the harmful effects of tobacco. This is used to contextualise some of the principles that he then discusses. First of these is the contrast of first-order change and second-order change. He then introduces

the reader to some understanding of the influences of environment. He makes the comment that "all too often, however, our tendency is to ignore or discount the importance of environments or the larger context within which we live, a term coined by researchers as 'context-minimisation error' (Shinn & Toohey, 2003)" (p. 8). Jason goes on to make the following comment:

It is important to look at both a person's traits and the environment, with the understanding that both factors change over time and affect each other. A downward spiral of negativity between individuals and the environment can lead to restricted opportunities and significant psychological and physical disabilities. (p. 9)

These are very important aspects of this book and its contribution. Jason is making the argument for community psychology and contextualised community research and action. The arguments that he makes are not only profound but reflect the importance of the potential of the contributions of a community-based psychology. I also have some concerns about these statements which I will discuss further on.

Further on in Chapter 1, Jason reflects on the work of John Snow in combating cholera. He characterises Snow's recognition that cholera was a waterborne disease that was spread by an unsanitary water supply as an example of a second-order intervention. The principle here was that treating the illness did not reduce the incidence of cholera. Rather, tackling the root cause of the spread of the disease was fundamental. This concept of addressing second order change and the identification of the root causes of problems is reflected in the remainder of the book.

Chapter 1 ends with a section entitled "lessons learned". Here, he identifies five principles of social change. These are:

1. Focus on second order change.
2. Identify and weaken the powerholders.
3. Involve courageous citizens and organisations to create a collective powerbase.
4. Social change requires time and one needs to be in for the long haul.
5. Constantly evaluate and refined strategies and tactics to find the most effective means for bringing about change.

Chapter 2 is entitled “Challenging the status quo”. Again Jason draws on his experience to provide us with some insights into how society resists change and what is required to attempt to foster socially just change. He describes his diagnosis with mononucleosis and how this led him to understand some of the issues faced by people diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). The issue of CFS is used to examine the way in which power is used and abused in our societies. CFS was trivialised in American culture and medicine. Jason uses his own narrative and the narratives of others to indicate some of the dynamics of oppression. What is reflected here is not that CFS makes its victims invisible, but rather mainstream society invokes a number of defence mechanisms to trivialise and distance the disadvantaged. This has particular message for not only in the United States also Australia and the United Kingdom – societies which maintain large inequalities between the powerful and the powerless.

The following chapter deals with some more traditional topics for psychology. In discussing mental illness, Jason discusses the impacts of community-based programs such as those based on the work of Fairweather, GROW and Oxford House. Using these initiatives as springboards, the theme of community action is addressed and developed. This well-crafted section provides an intuitive and important understanding of the importance of community based support and action for the disadvantaged and victims

of the excesses of greedy dominant cultures. The case for a humanising society through community action is well made.

In chapter 6, Jason introduces us to his father, a comedian of some note, and formalises some of the principles that he discussed in the previous chapters. He also does this in a personal manner. The apparent paradox of individual change and social change is not addressed directly, but it is resolved in the structure of the book. At some levels this is the autobiography of a change agent and his work with communities and agencies to collectively create change. Although the treatment of contextualism is somewhat paradoxical, the structure of the book provides us with recognition that while contextualist action and research involves much ambiguity and uncertainty, it is possible to identify some underlying processes (creating universals in a relative ontology). In recognising the importance of the five principles that Jason espouses, the reflective and reflexive aspect of the fifth principle is a theme that comes through the book as a whole. Reflecting on what you do and learning from this seems to be the most important of the principles. Certainly the power of the other enunciated principles requires this reflective approach.

There are a number of issues that arise from this book. Jason rightly points to the context minimisation error, the term coined by Shinn and Toohey (2003) to describe one of the fundamental flaws in modern societal and psychological thinking. This issue of underplaying the importance of environments has been a hallmark of community psychology, but it is also a source of some fundamental misunderstandings. The age of Enlightenment and modernistic thinking has brought considerable change to the way in which we see the world. No longer is the world a place where evil and malevolent spirits determine the lives of people, but rather we live in a clockwork world in which cause-and-effect predominates. Scientific

understandings have been so inculcated into general thinking that we immediately look for physical and social causes for physical and social events. This has given rise, or has been concordant with, individualism. The dominance of individualism, especially in North America, United Kingdom, and Australia, has led to a distorted perspective of the nature of the world. Jason's call for greater understanding of the impact of the environment reflects both a reaction to the highly individualistic world in which we live as well as a fallacy about the nature of society. This fallacy is based on the notion that individuals and environments are separate from each other and one can influence the other. If we are to take a contextualist perspective, the separation of people from the environment is nonsensical (Altman & Rogoff, 1987). People are part of the environment. To conceptualise the environment and the context as being separate from people creates an artificial understanding of human society. The mechanistic notion of a clockwork world does not fit to contextualism, and by extension, community psychology. Community psychology needs to heed the warnings of Seymour Sarason and to develop a deeper understanding of contextualism.

In another example, Jason rightly cites John Snow in terms of getting to the heart of second order change. One aspect that comes through the book as a whole is the way in which Jason's career has involved challenging societal orthodoxy. Snow's contribution was not simply that he sought alternative ways to address disease but in his recognition that the cause of cholera was not as was popularly believed due to miasma, but due to another form of transmission. This wasn't simply challenging the mechanism by which cholera was spread but involved challenging the dominant social thinking, and the thinking processes into which Snow had been socialised. Implicit in this book is this notion that we must not just simply address

the root of a problem; we need to be able to see the root. Snow challenged the dominant notions in medicine and in the broader society to identify the sources of the transmission of cholera. In similar ways, Jason reflects on his own (and others) challenging of dominant understanding of social and health issues. The issue of why particular people take up the challenge of contradicting and fighting dominant orthodoxy is alluded to but not really elaborated upon. What set Jason on his course of action and his understandings of oppression and disadvantage is not clear. What gave the medico cited on page 28 the "insight" that many victims of physical and mental health were "too weak-willed to recover" (p. 28)? These issues seem to me to be at the basis of a broader issue and that is how we get our students to understand issues of oppression and discrimination in ways that are meaningful and conducive to action. Possibly one way to begin this process for students is to have them read this book.

#### References

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