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# Neoliberalism with a Community Face? A Critical Analysis of Asset-Based Community Development in Scotland

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## Abstract

In this article we trace the ideological and social policy roots of asset based community development in the United States and the United Kingdom and explore how this approach has been legitimised in Scotland. We argue that ABCD is a capitulation to neoliberal values of individualisation and privatisation. Drawing on findings from our empirical work, we discuss how ABCD generates dilemmas for community development. While some practitioners are able to adapt ABCD to focus on renewing Scottish democracy, several practitioners are using ABCD to privatise public issues such as inequality and justify dramatic cuts to the Scottish welfare state.

## Introduction

As a result of the 2008 financial crisis, the United Kingdom is mired in a cycle of low economic growth and declining living standards.  In response to the severity of the economic downturn, the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government is undertaking a radical experiment in austerity. The central programme of the Coalition Government is to spur economic growth and job creation through the rather contradictory process of drastically reducing state spending especially with regards to social welfare (Yeates et al 2010; Clarke and Newman 2012). The Coalition Government argues that in order to placate financial markets and restore consumer and investor confidence, a systematic project of deficit reduction combined with tax increases is the only way to put the country's fiscal house in order. As a result of this programme of austerity, the UK is experiencing the most significant transformation of its welfare state since its founding after the Second World War (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker 2010; Taylor-Gooby 2011). Key social welfare services are now being eliminated, means-tested, dramatically curtailed or privatized in order to save money (Sommerland and Sanderson 2013; Sosenko et al 2013). From early childhood education, to legal aid, to

benefits for the long-term unemployed, to support for older people and people with disabilities—no aspect of the welfare state has been spared the cold bath of austerity. Indeed, through the Coalition Government's much maligned Big Society initiative, the rolling back of the welfare state is at least partly justified through a discourse of community empowerment and control (Cameron 2012; Crowther and Shaw 2011). As the state withdraws from different aspects of public life, the government argues that individuals, families and community groups will be able to fill this vacuum through their local knowledge, assets and energy to rebuild local services on their own terms and in ways that meet their interests and needs.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that in this uncertain context of social welfare and the rebalancing of the roles of the state, the market and civil society, asset-based community development (ABCD) appears to have captured the imagination of some policy-makers and community-based practitioners in the UK. ABCD seems to offer a way to navigate this new economic and social reality of drastic cuts to state spending and declines in living standards by removing the state as a primary actor in social welfare and instead focusing efforts to build capacity to put communities at the centre of welfare provision. In this article we explore how ABCD has been defined, legitimised and implemented in a Scottish context. By 'asset-based community development', we mean the movement within the field of community development that seeks to reorient theory and practice from community needs, deficits and problems to a focus on community skills, strengths and power (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Mathie and Cunningham 2003). For us, a key concern is trying to understand how ABCD, with its roots in a particular form of 'American neo-Tocquevillism' and a 'reflexive hostility to the state' (Emejulu 2013), is justified and put into practice in a tradition and context of Scottish social democracy that champions a strong role of the state in lives of ordinary Scots. We will begin our discussion with an analysis of ABCD in the United States and argue that ABCD is a response and a capitulation to the rise of neoliberalism and its values of individualisation, marketisation and privatisation of public life. By 'neoliberalism' we mean the:

> theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights,

free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (Harvey 2006: 2).

We will then move on to discuss how ABCD has been interpreted in the UK in general and Scotland in particular. Drawing on the findings of our empirical work, we will then turn to discuss how ABCD has been named, claimed and put in to practice in the Scottish context of community health and development. We will conclude with a discussion about the dilemmas of using an ABCD approach in Scotland. On the one hand, in our research we found that some policy makers and practitioners are able to adapt ABCD to focus efforts on renewing Scottish democracy through a collective struggle for social justice. On the other hand, however, we also found that several policy makers and practitioners are using and promoting ABCD without due regard to how it may be turning Mills' (1959) sociological imagination on its head by privatising public issues such as inequality, poverty and discrimination.

Before analysing ABCD, we will briefly outline the methodology and methods of this research.

**Methodology and Methods**

The primary research question for this project is: what are the implications of asset based approaches for the theory, policy and practice of community-led health interventions in Scotland? This article focuses on one aspect of this wider research project. Our study is rooted in a feminist interpretivist methodology. Specifically, we use critical inquiry and reflection to explore the dynamics between particular social relations and social phenomena in order to examine social injustice and social inequalities. (Harding 1987; Hammersley 2000; Harding 2004; Ackerly and True 2010) We operationalise this approach to better understand the politics embedded within debates about asset-based community development and the welfare state in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Many of the issues that the assets agenda raises, such as the role of the state and social welfare, the nature of civil society, and the sources of and solutions to poverty and inequality, are all explicitly feminist concerns. Given the dominance of the assets discourse in Scotland, as feminist researchers we are interested in critically examining its implications for the least powerful in society and whose interests might be served—and whose silenced—by this focus on 'strengths'.

It is important to note that our approach in this project does not sit within what Bechhofer and Paterson (2000: 81) describe as 'the classic model' of qualitative research, where the researcher 'is expected to be a recorder of neutrally elicited information'. Instead, by taking a feminist interpretivist perspective, we are concerned with how a researcher's disengagement reflects 'a masculine paradigm of research' (May 2001) and argue that the research process is 'inextricably and unavoidably historically, politically and contextually bound' (Fontana and Fey 2008: 118). Therefore, although we are interested in exploring the subjective ways in which our participants understand and experience asset based approaches, we also aware that such meanings are actively negotiated between the researcher and participants in the research process (Holstein and Gubrium 2004). We reject the notion that objectivity in social research is desirable, or even achievable, but rather consider the importance of reflexivity and self-disclosure.

In seeking to understand the meaning of ABCD within a contemporary Scottish context, our empirical research involved a series of semi-structured interviews with: grassroots-based practitioners working in local community development organisations across the west of Scotland; directors and policy officers of national intermediary organisations which provide a link between community-based groups and policymakers; and civil servants who have briefs on anti-poverty and health inequalities from one local authority in the west of Scotland. Ten practitioners, five of whom worked at the grassroots-level and five who occupied a strategic policy position, were interviewed. We chose to interview participants with these particular characteristics as we were keen to learn what commonalities and/or differences in perspectives on the topic there might be from those occupying different professional roles within the area of community-led health and development. Our sample is drawn from the Greater Glasgow area and we identified participants who share common characteristics of working with poor and working-class communities in the field of community-led health and development.

We chose to locate the study in this particular geographical area because of its rich history of trade union and community activism twinned with its poor health outcomes. Indeed, Glasgow's persistent and entrenched health inequalities since its deindustrialisation from the 1970s onwards have become such a puzzle for social

scientists, epidemiologists and public health officials that this phenomenon has come to be known as 'the Glasgow effect' (Hanlon, Walsh and Whyte 2006: 11). Therefore our participants are likely to share similar experiences of working in Scotland's most health deprived city and will have been involved in similar policy initiatives aimed at tackling the 'Glasgow effect'. These commonalities enabled us, through our analysis, to begin to build up a picture of how asset based approaches to health inequalities are being understood in this context.

Our interview participants were recruited and selected using a snowball sampling strategy from June 2012 to April 2013. Having made initial contact with key individuals identified in the literature and through our own networks in the field, we were then put in contact with others whose knowledge and experience were likely to be relevant to our topic. An advantage of using this method is that it revealed a network of contacts, minimised issues regarding accessing key informants and ensured that those most likely to offer significant insight into our research topic were included in the study. We are aware that this approach places significant limitations on the claims which can be made regarding representativeness and therefore on the generalisability of our data. However, as with much qualitative research, it is not our intention to be able to generalise to a wider population, but to generate illuminating data through the selection of a sample with direct reference to our research question.

In terms of data analysis, we established our key themes through an iterative process in which we organised, coded and analysed our data in relation to the patterns emerging from the interview transcripts until we reached saturation point. By 'patterns' we mean 'stable regularities' in the transcripts in which particular ideas, debates and practice examples about ABCD and the welfare state were raised by participants in similar ways, differences in opinion among participants occurred in 'predictably different ways' and these similarities and differences occurred with a high level of frequency both within and across the individual interviews (Saldaña 2011: 5). A feminist research ethic has particularly informed our data analysis process as we have sought to examine the perspectives of our participants in their own words and attempted to understand the meaning of their views in relation to the socio-cultural context in Scotland—in particular, the changing nature of the welfare state, the rise of neoliberalism and the

decline of social democracy. Even though we were not specifically analysing gender relations under asset-based community development in Scotland, our feminist approach has supported our critical inquiries into and reflections on the emancipatory claims and potential of ABCD in both the United States and the United Kingdom (Ackerly and True 2010). In reporting our findings we have chosen to use lengthy quotations and sought to contextualise our data by describing our participants and themes in detail. Providing this contextual detail we believe strengthens the credibility of our research and also enables the reader to make decisions about the applicability of our findings to other settings or similar contexts (Cresswell and Miller 2000).

While we recognise the inherent restrictions of a small scale qualitative study of this nature, we suggest that our research and chosen methods offers an exploration of the ideological and professional implications of an assets-based approach from the perspective of those at the forefront of practice and policy development on the topic. Given that recent studies in the UK appear to focus on evidencing 'what works' (Scottish Community Development Centre 2011; Foot 2012), our research aims to enhance current knowledge around asset-based approaches in Scotland, while seeking to take a critical stance.

We will now turn to explore the developments of ABCD in the United States.

**Problematising Asset Based Community Development in the United States**
In order to understand asset based community development and the implications of the current interest in this concept in Scotland, it is necessary to consider the ideological underpinnings that have shaped these ideas and the policy contexts from which they emerged. We argue that the roots of this particular model of American community development can be traced to two persistent and intertwined undercurrents of American political thought: a deep mistrust of the state and a championing of populist politics (Boyte 1980; Kazin 1998; Emejulu 2011). Rather than seeing ABCD as a radical departure from 'politics as usual' we argue that ABCD is an iteration of an on-going American project to advance a politics that is anti-elitist, anti-institutional and consequently, highly individualised and hyper-local. Authenticity is crucial in populist politics and this can only be secured through a practice of 'us vs. them'—in the case of

ABCD, the 'us' are communities and the 'them' are elite state actors (Kazin 1998; Canovan 1999)

The most prominent proponents of the ABCD model are John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993; 1997) who brought discussions of assets to the fore of mainstream community development in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. They describe their approach as born out of a 'post-Alinsky agenda for urban communities' (Kretzmann n.d.). The growth of the ABCD approach reflects a widespread assumption in some community development circles that Saul Alinsky's (1946; 1968) conflict based approach to community organising was no longer relevant or effective (for example see: Pierce and Steinbach 1987). The changing nature of the American post-industrial economy, labour market and neighbourhoods, Kretzmann (n.d.) argued, meant that neighbourhoods were now deeply disorganised due to declines in community participation, the collapse of 'vital' local institutions, and the 'disappearance' of a locally identifiable and accountable 'enemy'. To effect change, he suggested, there was a need for 'reorientation from organising confrontation over service distribution issues to confrontation over production and resources necessary to produce'. In other words, the Alinskyist model was outdated, the fight was no longer about social welfare service access and delivery but about the role, purpose and function of the services themselves and local people's relationship to these services. Interest in Kreztmann and McKnight's new model for community building was such that the ABCD Institute at Northwestern University was established to further develop and facilitate practitioner training in ABCD.

It is important to consider, however, the broader political and policy context in which this move away from Alinskyist and other conflict-oriented methods was taking place. While it is indeed the case that de-industrialisation and suburbanisation were transforming urban communities, broader forces were at play that were shrinking and delegitimising the available spaces for articulating alternative models for community development—particularly radical forms of practice. ABCD is at least partly generated by the recession of the late 1970s and the ascent of the New Right as embodied in the Reagan Administration. The growing popularity of asset based community development, we argue, should be seen as a direct response to right-wing retrenchment

and the dismantling of many of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society social welfare programmes under President Reagan (Piven and Cloward 1979; Block et al 1986; Fisher 1994; Katz 2008; O'Connor 2008; Emejulu forthcoming 2015). In this context in which organisations that supported conflict models of social action were actively targeted for de-funding and marginalised by state actors, consensus-based partnership initiatives, which unite public, private and community-based actors and of which ABCD is but one example, grew in influence and importance (Fisher 1994; Smock 1997; Stoecker 2001; Emejulu 2011). In this ideological context, we argue that ABCD represents a capitulation and compliance with the prevailing neoliberal reforms of the American welfare state under the Reagan Administration. Rather than seeking to organise against the elimination, reduction and/or privatisation of public services, ABCD in theory and practice seeks accommodation with this dominant ideological position. Key New Right analyses of the welfare state—that it breeds a culture of dependency in poor communities and that the best remedy to poverty and inequality is the application of free market principles such as enterprise and entrepreneurship—are taken for granted and actively promoted in the ABCD model. Whilst Alinsky's conflict model is deeply problematic in a number of ways—particularly in its practice of ignoring the dynamics of race and gender at the neighbourhood level—ABCD, we argue, is far more challenging for community development's aims and goals because it, perhaps inadvertently, privatises public issues such as poverty, inequality and asymmetries in power.

For instance, central to the ABCD model is the assumption that 'systems' (by which we suggest authors mean 'the welfare state') which rely on the 'deficiency, inadequacy, brokenness or disease of people', disempowers individuals and casts them as 'clients' or 'customers' (McKnight 2010: 63). By contrast, communities are presented as nurturing environments, which empower citizens by 'ignoring the empty half of the glass...mobilising a person with a heart problem to use carpentry skills to build a community centre' (McKnight 2010: 72). It is asserted in the ABCD literature that a deficit model of development is a product of dependency on 'systems' which are wasteful and hindered by bureaucratic regulation. These arguments reveal deep scepticism and distrust of the state and its ability to function for the benefit of society. What is problematic about this position, however, is that it ignores other important

functions of the state and risks shifting the responsibility for social problems from the state onto individuals and communities. As Emejulu (2013: 159) argues:

> The [welfare] state can be a cumbersome, bureaucratic and self-serving institution that undermines individual liberty and innovation. But it can also be a key guarantor and protector of equality and rights which makes individual liberty possible and meaningful. For community development, the state is both these things simultaneously. The state can undermine or suppress deliberative dialogue about the common good through 'invited spaces' that direct and control both the process and the outcomes of citizen debate. The state, however, can also support the democratic participation of the most marginalised through a system of social welfare. Regardless of how the state in advanced capitalist countries is seen or experienced, it is important to bear in mind that it is not a monolith of either control or protection.

Supporters of ABCD do not seem to recognise that 'systems' can both harm and protect liberty and rights and it is a role of community development not to simply disavow the state but to pursue an agenda that makes the local and national state work better for the most marginalised. We suggest that transferring various state responsibilities to individuals and communities is not the best or even the most effective means for reforming the state.

Furthermore, ABCD's analysis of 'systems' embeds elements of free market ideology into discussions about the role and purpose of social welfare and its attendant services. For example, the remedy presented for the 'parallel growth of systems and social decay' (McKnight 2010: 71) is the provision of 'empowering choices' and 'cash income in lieu of prepaid human services', 'thus creating a competitive market that should improve services' (McKnight 1995: 112). The decline in urban communities that Kretzmann and McKnight identified in the 1980s was due to unfettered free market capitalism in which industries and employment moved from cities to suburbs to overseas to maximise profit for private corporations (Amin 1994; Harvey 2006). It is not clear how more capitalism or free market logic improves the situation on the ground in poor and working class urban communities. Indeed, the asymmetrical impact of the 2008 financial crisis on poor African-American and Latino neighbourhoods in the United States appears to demonstrate how free market capitalism is not working to improve the life chances of these groups. As McQuarrie (2013: 98) persuasively argues in his analysis of the foreclosure crisis in Cleveland, Ohio, the transformation of civil society into a neoliberal

'technology' to improve neighbourhood well-being through mortgage lending and house building actually had the contradictory effect of making poor communities *more* susceptible and vulnerable to downturns in the housing market. McQuarrie concludes, 'civil society organisations are increasingly shaped by political and economic institutional logics that organise competition among them and drive isomorphic and rationalizing processes in their populations'. In other words, the embedding of free market principles in community development organisations seep into the logic of local people which may be, in the long run, counter-productive to these groups' social and economic interests.

If state-delivered systems are the source of disempowerment then local voluntary organisations, or 'the associative community', are defined as the source of empowerment and where assets are nurtured into action (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). The ABCD model draws heavily on a communitarian reading of Alexis de Tocqueville and his celebration of voluntary associations as the vital building blocks of democracy in America. In McKnight's (2010: 62) interpretation, de Tocqueville's community of associations is what 'today we call civil society' and it is the association which 'makes citizenship possible' (McKnight and Block 2010: 120). In this context then, the idea of citizenship is explicitly separated from discussions of the state and the rights and responsibilities of citizens in relation to the state. Again, we argue, the ABCD discourse promotes the privatisation of public life by framing notions of civil society and citizenship as removed from any notion of state responsibility.

From this analysis of ABCD in the US we will now turn to explore how it has been interpreted in the UK and Scotland in particular.

**Asset Based Community Development in the UK**
In the UK, discussions of asset based community development have risen in prominence across a range of social policy areas, particularly in social welfare and public sector reform in light of the Coalition Government's austerity programme. A key figure in bringing the assets agenda to the attention of politicians and policy makers in the UK is Cormac Russell, a research fellow at the ABCD Institute, who was appointed to the Expert Reference Group on Community Organising and Communities First (ABCD

Institute, nd). In outlining his '12 Domains of People Powered Change', Russell (2011) argues for the 'economics' of asset based approaches, claiming that 'restoring bonds among people can be a cost effective and practical point of leverage for solving some of the most pressing social problems'. Russell calls for 'handmade and homemade solutions' and suggests that 'care is the freely given gift of the heart' which cannot be effectively delivered by the state (ibid: 2011).

The claims Russell makes about what can only be achieved by 'people power' appear to reflect a distrust of the state, which we have argued, is a hallmark of the ABCD model in the American context. Perhaps a key reason why the ABCD model has translated so well to a British context in which the welfare state plays a far more important role in the lives of citizens, is because it fits seamlessly into the prevailing political analysis of the causes and solutions to social problems during the current economic crisis. An emphasis on 'dependency' is a prominent theme in justifying cuts to social welfare spending by the current Government. In his 25th June 2012 speech on welfare reform, Prime Minister David Cameron made a commitment to end 'a culture of entitlement' and stated that 'there are few more entrenched problems than our out-of-control welfare state'. In his critique of the Coalition Government, Wiggan (2012: 18) argues that:

> the terms which dominate [the public discourse on poverty and welfare] –
> worklessness and dependency – construct the persistence of poverty and
> unemployment as originating in the poor choices and behaviour of individuals.
> An expensive, well-meaning system of state support is portrayed not only as
> ineffective, but as reinforcing social problems.

From this backdrop of hostility to both the state and state sponsored welfare, we can see how ABCD has gained a foothold in the UK.

Much interest and research into the asset based approach in the UK has come from the arena of public health. In the context of health inequalities the discourse of assets has evolved as a critique of current approaches which, by focusing on disease prevention, it is widely argued, have failed to make the anticipated impact (Foot and Hopkins 2010; Scottish Government 2010). Discourses of resilience, self-esteem and community cohesion in recent studies and government-funded reports reveal influences of ABCD and an interest in the psychosocial determinants of health (Foot and Hopkins 2010;

NHS North West 2011). In addition, the 'economics' of an asset approach are made explicit: 'with the ever-growing volume of "needs", the future sustainability of this [a needs based approach] is questionable' (NHS North West 2011: 27).

Interestingly, however, it also appears that the discussions of assets within this literature include a greater concern for social justice and material inequalities than is apparent in the American ABCD model. In the 2010 UK Government funded report, *A Glass Half-full: How an Asset Approach Can Improve Community Health and Wellbeing*, repeated reference is made to studies such as those of Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) which 'remind us of the interdependence of material needs and inequality' (Foot and Hopkins 2010: 9) and the influence of the Marmot Review which states explicitly that 'inequalities in health arise because of inequalities in society' (Marmot 2010:16). Concerns are also made as to the extent to which taking an asset approach can help tackle these deep-rooted inequalities: 'community assets can only have a mitigating effect on the structural and social determinants of ill-health and inequality - poor housing, low wages, lack of jobs' (Foot and Hopkins 2010:12). Such discussions suggest that the ABCD agenda may create both challenges and possibilities in relation to austerity and welfare reform in the UK. If the discussion of assets in the UK is to include a greater concern for structural and material inequalities, then it has interesting implications for how the concept is redefined and applied in practice.

We will now turn to focus on how this tension is being played out in Scotland, a context of a historically strong social democracy and a tradition which champions a primary role of the state in lives of its citizens.

**The assets agenda in Scotland**
In Scotland, discussions of assets and interest in asset based approaches are currently high on the public health agenda, in part due to significant support by the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Harry Burns. In his report, *Health in Scotland 2009: Time for Change,* Burns states, 'an assets approach to health and development embraces a positive notion of health creation and in doing so encourages the full participation of local communities in the health development process' (Scottish Government 2010: 7).  This emphasis on positive notions of health can also be seen to echo the widespread interest, as discussed

above, in the psychosocial determinants of health. In Scotland, the growth of the positive psychology movement has been popularised by Carol Craig's (2003) influential text, *The Scots' Crisis of Confidence,* which claims that the solution to Scotland's social and economic problems lies in an 'attitudinal change' and promoting a more positive outlook on life. Such discussions have placed psychological factors at the top of the health and wellbeing agenda, although some would argue this diverts attention from significant issues of structural and income inequalities (Ferguson 2010; Friedli 2011). Several public and third sector organisations including the Scottish Government and the Glasgow Centre for Population Health are currently researching the role of asset based approaches in tackling health inequalities, focusing on defining the key methodologies for identifying and developing assets and building an evidence base and a means of evaluating the effectiveness of taking an asset based approach. A range of methodologies have been identified as involving an asset based approach, including asset mapping, appreciative inquiry, participatory appraisal and co-production (McLean 2011; IACD 2011). However, McLean (2011: 5) argues that 'many examples of asset based work may not use the "asset" terminology' thus the concept of what precisely constitutes ABCD in Scotland remains open to interpretation. Community development workers and activists attending the recent 'Shaking our Assets' conference commented on the need to clarify the meaning of an asset based approach and expressed concern that it is 'all jargon' (IACD 2012: 6). At the same event, a practitioner representing an organisation showcased as a 'practical example of assets in action' expressed concern regarding the ambiguity of the concept, stating that assets are an example of the 'plethora of concepts' which government and decision makers use, 'with some degree of abandon without taking on the real and challenging demands which each of them involves if they are to be effective'. This concern echoes the literature which suggests that policy makers and commentators in Scotland recognise the opportunities, challenges and tensions that a discourse of assets creates and are aware that, as McLean asserts (2011: 16), 'a clear political position and direction to the debate remains absent'.

In the UK context, we can see competing analyses about the causes and solutions to social problems. The ABCD model, given its in-built distrust of the state and support for free market ideas, appears to fit rather seamlessly into these existing debates. Although

championed in Scotland, there appears to be scepticism about ABCD and how it might enhance or transform contemporary community development work.

We will now turn to discuss our empirical study which explores these tensions in Scotland in greater detail.

**Assets, Democracy and Social Justice in Greater Glasgow**
Our study examines how assets and asset-based approaches have been defined and applied in relation to community-led health and development work in Glasgow.  Our findings reveal some dilemmas that practitioners and policymakers may face when seeking to use an ABCD approach in their work. While on the one hand some of our participants identified the potential for ABCD to focus efforts on renewing Scottish democracy, others saw ABCD, especially given the new realities of austerity, as a way to tackle dependency that the welfare state engenders among some people experiencing poverty.

Please note all participants names have been changed.

*What's in a name? Problems defining asset-based community development*
One of our key objectives in gathering and analysing our data was to understand how grassroots practitioners, policy makers, and other strategic-level professionals interviewed define and interpret asset based approaches. The different ways in which our participants operationalise the term reveal something of the ambivalence and ambiguity which is arguably inherent in the concept. Interestingly, the potential convergence or divergence of an asset based approach with the principles of community development is a tension which emerges from the data, suggesting an uncertainty regarding the implications of assets for the theory, policy and practice of community-led health and development in Scotland.

Related to the difficulty of defining asset based approaches, were discussions of whether they offer anything new or different, or whether such approaches should simply be understood as what Karen, a director of a community-based organisation, called, 'just good community development'. All of the practitioners interviewed were keen to point out that recognising and valuing people and their skills and interests was

how they had always approached their work. Gill, a front-line community development worker, repeatedly highlighted that the only difference in the assets approach is the language that is used: 'It's something that we've always done but it's very flavour of the month now. The way we work is exactly the same, just different words'. Sarah, a public health researcher, also commented on the newness of the language of assets and suggested that this might be a source of frustration for practitioners. Sue, a community development worker, raised similar concerns: 'I think that sometimes there has to be new terminology because people want to see something new'. By contrast, those participants who occupy more strategic roles within the sector tended to be less certain about the similarities between asset based approaches and community development. Judi, a civil servant, acknowledged that ABCD is 'a contested area sometimes', while Andrea, a health policy officer in local government, commented: 'I think a lot of work in community development has been about responding to a problem…responding to poverty, responding to unemployment, responding to deprivation. But I don't see that as the same as an asset based approach. I see a difference between those two things'. This comment, we suggest, resonates with a common theme identified in the literature that the assets agenda may marginalise discussions of significant structural and economic inequalities. We will expand on this point further below.

The ambiguity regarding how assets and asset based approaches are to be defined underlines the on-going problematic nature of these concepts. What our findings appear to suggest is that for some, this lack of clarity provides an opportunity to claim the term as their own and incorporate an asset-based approach into existing models of work and relationships. Others, however, remain highly ambivalent about what ABCD might signify and also concerned about incorporating this ambiguous term into their professional practice. These tensions, we suggest, are closely related to the key themes of democracy, social justice and the role of the state, which we shall now discuss in more depth.

*ABCD: A new model for social democracy in Scotland?*
Several participants identified an asset based approach as offering a potential means of increasing democratisation, both in terms of how community projects are planned and delivered, and also for the design and delivery of public services. A range of recurring phrases was used by participants to describe the best aspects of an asset based

approach such as: 'co-production', 'community involvement', 'influence', 'shifting the power balance' and 'participation'. Many recognised an asset based approach as involving a more co-productive way of working, engaging people in defining both the problem and the solution, using what Judi called a 'we'll-do-it-with-you mode'.

From the practitioners interviewed, there was a sense that an asset based approach might offer an opportunity to raise the profile and increase the scope of work which has long been championed by those working in community health and development. As Laura, a community development worker, commented, 'community development has always been about: "Well, let's go and ask people, they are the best people to ask about how to improve things"'. A focus on assets might allow people to have a more direct involvement in setting the priorities for service planning and delivery and it was recognised that asset based approaches might offer the potential for changing attitudes of health and other public sector professionals in terms of listening to and valuing the interests, skills and knowledge of individuals and community groups. The more strategic-level professionals interviewed also recognised the potential that an asset based approach might offer in terms of 'changing the power relationships and that sense of ownership and control' over social welfare services, as Karen stated. She went on to add that asset-based approaches, 'allow people to engage round the table in a more equal basis'. However, those interviewed also raised concerns regarding the challenges of sharing power and changing established ways of working, suggesting that although the asset based approach may offer the *potential* of working with community groups as equal partners, achieving that shift in power is a far more complex, long-term process.

In considering the theme of democracy, two contrasting positions emerge from our study, which in turn reflect the contrasting approaches of consensus and conflict based models of community development. In describing an asset based approach, many participants spoke of building networks and connections within communities and across different sections of society, including the public, private and third sectors. For example, the definition of the asset based approach offered by Mary, a community development worker, reflects the consensus building model and is consistent with the views of Kretzmann and McKnight:

It's very much about recognising the skills that everybody has when we put them together both individually, both within partnerships or projects which we form, between a group of people working together, or much wider than that the public sector working with the private sector...It's very much that collective when everybody works together and its greater than the sum of the parts when you pull all of those resources together.

The issue this raises, we suggest, is that of power and relates to the challenges of taking a genuinely democratic approach, as described by our participants. In seeking to work collaboratively and build partnerships across different individuals and groups in different sectors, our concern is whose interests are ultimately served and whose voices are marginalised when the power held by different parties is unequal. Shifting the power balance, as several of our participants discussed, is highly complex and requires a long-term commitment to change. The extent to which the current interest in asset based approaches is motivated by a desire for this change in power, our research suggests, is open for debate.

Those expressing a more consensus-based approach to community development work also had an interest in using ABCD to increase individual and collective responsibility for social problems and social welfare. Some expressed views on the need to reduce dependency and increase individual responsibility, echoing both the scepticism and mistrust of the state which is a key theme of the ABCD literature (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; 1997) and David Cameron's (2012) current position on 'a culture of entitlement' among the poor. As Rachel, a community development worker, states: I think our systems and bureaucracy are stifling it [the asset based approach]. We are just so full of systems that are so hierarchical [that] kind of stop people from contributing in the way that they could'. For her, an asset based approach requires 'thinking more about what you can bring to it [service provision] rather than what you can get from it'. Sarah, a public health researcher, agreed with this view:

People come into the doctor or they go to the hospital to be fixed or to have an issue or a problem addressed and this is about trying to turn that model on its head and putting the responsibility back on the individual in a lot of cases and saying we're going to help you to address it but we're not going to fix it for you...It's about trying to take away that dependency on services.

These comments clearly echo themes highlighted in the literature in relation to the ways in which the ABCD model frames social welfare services as disempowering. Importantly, this discussion of dependency and responsibility suggests that the assets agenda in Scotland, placed within a wider debate regarding the role of the state in austere times, could potentially be used to justify a reduction in the state's role in tackling social problems such as Glasgow's persistent health inequalities.

In contrast to these views, several of our participants spoke of asset based work in terms of its potential and dilemmas in relation to oppositional community activism for social justice. By identifying and seeking to develop the strengths, skills and knowledge of individuals and community groups, it was suggested, people become more confident to critically analyse and dissent from the prevailing views and representations of themselves and the problems they experience. For example, Gill, a community development worker, identified an asset based approach as resonating very strongly with her own understanding of her professional role: 'What our job is, is to support these "live" assets [sic] to become aware of what their rights are as a community and as a group and what power they have…It's about us supporting them to become a voice, a big voice, one big voice out of the whole community'. Such discussion of community activism suggests that some practitioners may be able to use the assets agenda to provide a constructive contribution to on-going debates about the nature and purpose of democracy in Scotland. Alternatively, our participants' comments may in fact reflect the determination and resilience of some practitioners to stick to their political and professional values and identity regardless of the language, fashions and priorities of current public policy priorities.

In contrast this, Kate, a senior policy manager in the third sector, was particularly aware that issues of structural inequalities are absent in ABCD theory and practice:

> When I hear people talking about asset based development I don't hear them referring to, "of course poverty has dragged these people down for the last twenty years", or, "the real problem here is unemployment". I hear a completely different discourse from them.

Furthermore, for some participants, they were confronted with a real dilemma about using an ABCD approach because of the contradictions they experience when considering neighbourhood-level solidarity work. Oftentimes it is precisely because of the identification and articulation of a shared 'problem' or 'need' that helps to build solidarity in communities and motivate people to take action. As Judi states, 'we know that people are motivated by problems, that's what galvanises them and I think for a long time people from an asset based approach perspective would see that as a deficit approach, you'd then be stigmatising people with needs and problems'. This tension reflects concerns raised by Barbara Ehrenreich (2010), Lynne Friedli (2011) and Kevin Harris (2011) who suggest that the assets agenda, through a relentless focus on the 'positive', may in fact marginalise critical analyses of structural inequalities and undermine collective oppositional action to address these problems.

Finally, the sceptics of ABCD in our study expressed concern that an approach which emphasises the need to release a community's 'untapped' assets could actually increase inequalities. Asset based approaches could potentially advantage the already influential and cohesive communities, as Sue commented, 'you can end up making the gaps wider if the investment goes to the people who are able to ask with more clarity for what they want and need'. This point about the unintended consequences of ABCD was also emphasised by Sarah who stated:

> For an asset based approach to work the community you're working in must already be quite a strong community…That there are structures in place, that there's already cohesion within a community and people know what their issues are and what their priorities are and that they are engaging with that. But there is the negative side that lots of people don't want to engage and lots of people are facing particular challenges in their lives that going along to a community meeting is the last thing that they need to deal with. So there is the potential that some form of inequality could be increased. There needs to be a lot more work done to look at whether that is going to be the case.

The potential for the asset based approach to not only sideline the issue of inequalities, but to also increase them, is, we argue, the most significant issue raised by our study and one which is to some extent absent from the key literature in this area. Our findings suggest that more work needs to be done to avoid asset based approaches perpetuating

inequalities and ensuring that resources and support are available to those most in need.

**Conclusions**

In this article we have attempted to trace the ideological and social policy origins of asset based community development and examine some of the dilemmas that are created when this approach is applied in a Scottish context. We argued that ABCD is 'neoliberalism with a community face', meaning that a logic of free market relations and a hostility to state-sponsored social welfare is the central unacknowledged value embedded within this theory and practice. We suggest that ABCD approaches have gained footholds in the US and the UK because of the neoliberal consensus that has dominated economic, political and policy debates in these two countries since the 1980s.

Through our small-scale empirical project, we argue that the application of ABCD generates tensions within an existing Scottish social democratic framework for community development. For some practitioners, ABCD is a way to roll back the state, challenge what they see as welfare dependency and promote community empowerment in social welfare service planning and provision. For others, however, ABCD could perhaps be used as a vehicle to spark discussions about making the welfare state more open and democratic. However, ABCD approaches generated real dilemmas in the ability for some practitioners and community groups to articulate their views about structural problems and build solidarity at the grassroots.

For us, we think ABCD provides the wrong answer but asks some of the right questions. In some cases, the welfare state in the US and the UK can be hierarchical, bureaucratic and inimical to meaningful democratic participation of the most marginalised groups. However, we do not think the solution to this problem is to advance theories and practices that serve to further individualise and privatise social problems. Instead, we must find more creative ways to 'reclaim the state' drawing on philosophical and activist traditions that help us to think and learn collectively about the nature of social problems and which also give us the practical tools to take collective action for social justice.

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