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Using theory-based evaluation to understand what works in asset-based community development

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Abstract   Asset-based community development (ABCD) has become a popular approach to community work, with the claim that it can support high poverty communities to drive the process of community development. Yet there is little detailed evidence on the efficacy of the ABCD model, and how this relates to the political, economic, and social context in which the intervention is located. This article presents research from a community case study in Scotland to explore how Theory-Based Evaluation can clarify ABCD's hypothesis for change. Understanding ABCD's causal mechanisms allows a nuanced consideration of why it may have limited impact and highlights the importance of context when planning community interventions. The study demonstrates that ABCD can generate locally led activity and build social networks but is unlikely to achieve a 'tipping point' from activity generation into wider community association without pre-existing resources being in place. Community association relies on pathways of activism that support local action incrementally and require resources in support of this.

Introduction

Assets approaches to community engagement have become a popular policy tool in Scotland (Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services & Scotland, 2011; Scottish Government, 2015). ABCD proposes that high poverty communities can gain autonomy over activity, leading to 'wider

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community association' and a 'vision for change' (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). Despite its popularity, there remains little evidence on how ABCD functions to address poverty. Concerns that assets approaches ignore the material reality of people's lives (Brooks and Kendall, 2013; Friedli, 2013) suggest that they should be adopted alongside distributive justice policies (Bull et al., 2013). Interrogating the underlying political discourses in which ABCD operates is vital to understanding how the approach may contribute to addressing inequalities. This article sets out to do three things. First, it explores the main discourses underpinning community participation policy and practice. Second, it applies a realist evaluation approach to surface and assess the seven ABCD mechanisms for change, based on evidence from two comparative sites. Finally, it considers the contextual factors that enable or prevent the achievement of ABCD outcomes and links these to the underpinning ideological discourses.

Evaluating asset-based community development

To understand the emergence of ABCD in policy, it is useful to consider the political drivers behind community participation. Taking inspiration from a discourse analysis on social exclusion (Levitas, 1998), this article explores three discourses of community participation over time: corporatism and responsibilization; social capital; and activism and ownership.

Community participation policy and practice
The rise of neoliberalism was accompanied by a discourse of corporatism and responsibilization (Somerville, 2016:93). Cuts to community provision were made in favour of investment in business and early 'service user engagement' in planning; this gathered pace with business-style community institutions (Local Economic Development Companies in Scotland; Community Development Companies in England) alongside deep cuts to Local Authority Community Development budgets. Despite renewed interest in participative decision-making under New Labour, the corporate language remained, bolstered by a New Public Management focus on cost reduction, competition, and customer satisfaction (Heffernan, 2006). The language of 'assets' and 'deficits' also appeared, to describe the notion that communities in poverty possessed untapped skills, and that needs-led work pathologized poor communities. The communitarian ideals expounded in Cameron's 'Big Society' were accompanied by a focus on moral civic responsibility and savage Austerity agenda with 24 percent cuts to statutory budgets (Hastings et al., 2013:3). Government rhetoric pathologized welfare recipients, asserting that welfare creates poverty by offering an alternative to responsible civic behaviour (Wiggan, 2012). Good citizenship was characterized as a moral

obligation, with poor communities blamed for socioeconomic problems as the result of an overly generous welfare system.

From programmes to regenerate community social life following post-war clearances (Gilchrist and Taylor, 2016) to New Labour's spotlight on civic society and community (Taylor, 2011:159), the social capital discourse holds that the wellbeing of high poverty communities is protected by social networks. Although the social capital discourse recognizes that markets produce inequalities, it obscures issues of context and power (Powell and Geoghegan, 2004:13). Although social participation undoubtedly supports individual wellbeing, its disconnection from issues of democracy necessarily limits its scope to address issues of social justice.

The discourse of activism and ownership recognizes the causes of inequality as rooted in poverty, offering a critique that addresses economic but also social, political, and cultural inequalities. Exemplified by grassroots movements for civil rights and standard of living, this discourse features radical community work based on popular empowerment and social change. Connecting social issues to the causes of poverty highlights the importance of welfare benefits, the power offered by unionized workplaces and the value of unpaid grassroots work. Local ownership not only enables local decision-making but transfers powers such as financial control to high poverty communities, such as the commitment of 1 percent of public-sector expenditure allocated through participatory budgeting (Harkins and Escobar, 2015).

Despite a surge in democratic participation and renewal leading up the Independence Referendum in Scotland (Escobar et al., 2018) and efforts to offset Westminster austerity measures, the global background of pervasive neoliberalism has featured welfare retrenchment and community responsibilization. In 2011, Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services & Scotland highlighted the need for a transformation in public-sector delivery but acknowledged that shrinking state resources made assets approaches a necessity.

Asset-based community development
Developed in the United States following a study on community resilience to poverty (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993), ABCD is presented as an alternative to federal responses of disinvestment, pathologization and the professionalization of social problems. Assets are defined as 'the skills of residents, the power of local associations, the resources of public, private, and non-profit institutions, the physical resources and ecology of places, the economic resources of local places and the stories and heritage of local places' (ibid:3). Strong, organized neighbourhoods promote health

through 'invitation, participation, connection' (McKnight and Block, 2010:1), combating consumerism to build a 'handmade, homemade vision' (ibid).

ABCD proposes to take back power over local decision-making, developing locally led activities by deploying assets and building a network of community support through wider association (ibid: 21). Criticisms of ABCD include its lack of attention to the structural causes of poverty (Ennis and West, 2010) and little evidence as to how assets approaches work in practice (Freidli, 2013). Although ABCD draws on the emancipatory language of Alinsky (McKnight, 2018), critics express concern that its critique of state community provision bolsters the argument for further cuts to public services that offer vital services and continuity of relationships.

Scotland's policy commitment to community involvement in shaping public services (Scottish Government, Community Empowerment Act 2015; SCDC, 2016) has offered fertile ground for the goals of local decision-making and ownership expounded by ABCD. The advocacy for assets approaches proposed by Christie in the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services & Scotland (2011) means that these approaches are now widely integrated within health and social service structures and settings. Understanding how ABCD functions to address poverty requires an examination of context that links practice to discourse and explores the impact of wider service cuts on the efficacy of a time-bound, cost-saving intervention.

Theory-based evaluation

Theory-Based Evaluation (TBE) is family of evaluation approaches concerned with understanding how and why an intervention works (Weiss, 1995). TBE takes different forms, including logic models, Realistic Evaluation (RE) (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) and Theory of Change (ToC) (Coryn et al., 2011). Using a mechanistic approach to interpreting causation, TBE extracts, tests and refines the programme theory (Pawson, 2013: xiii) to find out whether and how a community programme contributes to observable results. To the programme change hypothesis, TBE traces the relationships between activity and outcome to build the evidence against this hypothesis. TBE focuses on the importance of context, on the expectation that interventions work differently according to group and circumstance.

Although this article focuses on the detailed ABCD change mechanisms identified through RE, the wider research study also used the ToC to understand the desired programme goals. Reference is made to these findings where a lack of strategic alignment may explain the cause of unsuccessful ABCD mechanisms. TOC and RE approaches combine well (Blamey and Mackenzie, 2007; Rolfe, 2016): whereas TOC builds understanding of how a complex programme is being implemented, RE gives insight into the relationship between activity and outcome (Blamey and Mackenzie, 2007:

452) by offering a detailed, micro-level analysis of causal links, described by Pawson and Tilley (1997) as 'context-mechanism-outcome' relationships. The evaluator identifies a succession of detailed theories that relate the programme context to the specific activities designed to bring about change (ibid: 444). Both qualitative and quantitative data can be used to build up a picture of how the programme is working in action.

The case study

The focus of fieldwork was EMPOWER[1], an ABCD pilot programme created as a multi-site partnership between a Health Board, two Local Authorities, a voluntary sector organization and a mentoring consultancy, in South–West Scotland from 2014 to 2018. The project's long-term aim was 'to improve the mental health and wellbeing of the local population by building the communities' social capital and connectedness'[2]. ABCD was chosen 'to facilitate a culture change in how services interact with individuals and communities, by embedding person-centredness and improving community engagement and mutuality' (2.1).

The programme operated across eight neighbourhoods characterized by high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage (SIMD, 2012). It aimed to build social networks by increasing the range and frequency of locally led activity, principally by employing a 'Community Builder' in each neighbourhood. Although the programme evaluation measured the number and frequency of activities created, it did not explore how or why specific activities were or were not effective, how this related to context or whether the ABCD method was achieved in practice.

The research study selected two comparative case study neighbourhoods that appeared similar by SIMD profile but offered different contexts due to the history of activism that pre-dated the EMPOWER programme. Case Study 1 scored within the top 5 percent most disadvantaged in Scotland, with some street in the top 1 percent. The estate was considered unsafe and described by residents and workers as a 'no go' area for Police. There were no community-run facilities beyond a community flat used exclusively by one group. The primary school functioned as a hub, offering a range of support for parents, including basic skills and support for vulnerable women. The Case Study 1 Community Builder was employed at Phase 1 and participated in initial training and ongoing mentoring on the ABCD method with the consultancy organization throughout.

Case Study 2 joined EMPOWER in Phase 2. As with Case Study 1, there were pockets of extreme disadvantage in the neighbourhood. Local

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1 All names have been changed to protect anonymity.
2 AHEAD Annual Report, https://www.nhsaaa.net/media/3120/aheadproject14-15.pdf   Accessed 010321.

activity provision took place in the Community Centre, owned by the Local Authority but managed by a group of local volunteers. This included family support, a parent and toddler group, welfare advice and family events, disability and elderly support, and a community café. The Case Study 2 Community Builder was employed at Phase 2 and participated in the initial ABCD training programme but mentoring with the consultancy organization was only offered for several weeks due to a lack of funds.

Methodology

The research question guiding the study was: '*What are the key ABCD Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations which enable or hinder people to achieve wellbeing?*' The research combined ToC and RE, first building a logic model to depict the proposed steps of activity based on ABCD practitioner guidance, then mapping the causal pathways proposed to bring about each stage of the ABCD process. Drawing on empirical evidence, the case studies explored how each mechanism worked in practice, the contexts in which mechanisms were triggered and what outcomes resulted for whom. By linking these mechanisms and contexts to the main discourses of community participation policy and practice, this article aims to explain the likelihood of success and the potential to extend social justice potential of ABCD.

The study analysed programme activities, targets and outcomes to build a set of hypothesized 'mini theories' of change (Blamey and Mackenzie, 2007: 446). Seven change mechanisms (A–G) were identified (Table 1) and tested to establish how it worked in practice. The sampling strategy for research participants was mirrored across the case study neighbourhoods, drawing on a 50/50 balance of EMPOWER programme participants and staff. Data were gathered via twenty-four in-depth interviews and one focus group of six participants.

During in-depth interviews, participants were invited to answer three questions: to outline their role within the programme; to explore what they understood as an ABCD approach, including barriers and enablers; and to consider what the 'end point' or future goal for the programme should be. Data were mapped and analysed across the seven ABCD mechanisms to explore how each was working in practice. Analysis examined the contextual factors at micro-, meso- and macro-levels which enabled or hindered the mechanism from taking place successfully.

Case study findings: testing the ABCD change hypothesis

Based on empirical findings, the seven mechanisms (A–G) tested fell into three categories: successful, requires adaptation, and not successful.

Table 1 Summary of ABCD mechanisms for change A–G

CONTEXT	MECHANISM	OUTCOME
Disempowered communities with low levels of trust in external interventions	**A: Recruit Community Connectors** Community Builders identify residents who demonstrate a good knowledge of the neighbourhood but are not already involved in any formal role.	Identify trusted residents as community connectors
Marginalized residents	**B: Conversations with residents** Community Connectors talk to residents to explore interests and skills	Identify 'assets'
Disconnected community	C: **Introduce people with shared interests** Community Connectors introduce people with shared interests Residents discuss and plan for shared activity	Mobilize 'assets'
Low levels of activity/provision	**D: Generate activity** Community Builders offer enabling support to activity (e.g. seed funding, venue) Activity leads to further activity	Increased social networks and skills
Disparate community groups	**E: Build association across activities** Activities build until community groups are formed—formally or informally	Connected community
Externally led decision-making	**F: Associations come together to plan vision for change** Neighbourhood groups assemble to develop neighbourhood plan prioritizing activity	Internally led decision-making
Community-owned vision	**G: Engage professionals** Community assigns resources to different stages of vision and invites in professionals	Community-led practice

Conversations with residents (B), introducing people with shared interests (C) and generating community (D) all demonstrated some success, but the number and quality of outcomes were dependent on contextual factors beyond the scope of the ABCD intervention itself. Recruiting community connectors (A) and engaging professionals (G) did not operate in practice as anticipated and required adaptation, building association across activities (E) and associations coming together to plan a local vision (F) did not demonstrate success, although Case Study 2 offered useful learning based on historical support for community activism.

ABCD change mechanisms that demonstrated success: conversations with residents (B), introducing people with shared interests (C) and generating community activity (D)
Across both case study sites, conversations (B), introductions (C) and generating community activity (D) operated with some success. In Case Study 1, outcomes were innovative but limited to one-off initiatives due to a lack of community venue or pre-existing programme. In Case Study 2, activity was

absorbed within the pre-existing community centre, thereby replacing some of the resources that had been cut. Although this resulted in longer term sustainable activity, the approach was more traditional and demonstrated less of the innovative, disruptive approach characterized by Case Study 1.

Case Study 1 took a collective, creative approach to initiating conversations, creating pop-up sites across three neighbourhoods to gain visibility and talk to passers-by (Community Builder, Participant 19). The aim was to 'relocate authority' (ABCD mentor, Participant 24), side-stepping public-sector planned participation approaches and advocating for autonomy. Although the neighbourhood did not have a community centre or communal venue, 'bumping spaces' were identified where informal conversation could take place with residents. Bus stops, the local library, primary school, and supermarket checkout were regular meeting points. The Community Builder also performed the role of 'town crier', wearing a costume and ringing a bell to share good news stories and local opportunities on the local high street: the physical focus of a main street with shops made this an effective approach, and the disruptive style of intervention funny and memorable. The Community Builder was perceived as bringing a new approach to work: 'He walks about randomly talking to people and they are amazed by it. It's really good in that he gets us access to people,' (Statutory staff member, Participant 22). Although initial contact was successful, the lack of venue or activity programmes made it difficult to convert initial conversations into introductions and activity generation. Although one-off events such as community barbecues and picnics were popular, these did not develop into sustained activity.

In Case Study 2, conversations took place in the community centre in which the Community Builder was based. This was a useful meeting space since it was run by local women and considered to be community-led, but a street work approach may have encouraged wider resident engagement. Discussion took place over whether to engage in door-knocking as a means of reaching more excluded members of the community. Staff in Case Study 2 were not comfortable with this, feeling that it encroached on residents' privacy and presented a risk to staff safety. Examples of successful activity generation included young people volunteering with a special needs support group at the weekend, older residents joining a gardening project, and a parent taking on provision of the parent and toddler group (Local Resident, Respondent 5).

A more nuanced relationship with the Local Authority was possible in Case Study 2, due to a long history of local activism and a strong yet critical relationship between local activists and elected officials. Community activists were in regular contact with councillors, meeting regularly for local walkabouts to discuss local issues. Activists had led campaigns

regularly to prevent cuts to statutory resources, finding creative ways to take on ownership of assets, such as the Community Association taking on management of the community playground when the Local Authority was no longer willing to assume a maintenance role. At the same time, activists were mindful of the negative impact of responsibilization, having seen the closure of a neighbouring local venue that was a community-owned asset. When offered the opportunity to take on their community centre as a locally owned asset they refused, preferring to continue with the management of activity. Despite managing to prevent some statutory cuts in provision, Case Study 2 had not been able to resist them all, including the withdrawal of youth services, adult education provision and welfare advice.

Across Mechanisms B, C, and D, respondents raised the issue of how to engage with the most excluded and vulnerable residents, citing frustration at the lack of support for the most disadvantaged (Local resident, Respondent 6). Although the experiences of Community Builders in both neighbourhoods suggested a strong personal commitment to outreach, they expressed frustration at not having the capacity to work intensively with people who were often dealing with crisis situations such as food poverty (Community Builder, Respondent 1 and Local Resident, Respondent 2), addiction (Community Builder, Respondent 19; Residents, Respondent 21 and 22), and domestic violence (Local Authority staff member, Respondent 22). Further, where public-sector support was available to the most vulnerable, it was not linked in with existing local networks.

ABCD change mechanisms that required adaptation: recruiting community connectors (A) and engaging professionals (G)
ABCD described 'community connectors' as residents not currently involved in formal volunteer activity but with a good knowledge of the community; mechanism A aims to recruit a group of residents who can themselves stimulate activity. None of the eight participating neighbourhoods met the recruitment target in Phase 1, with most unable to recruit any community connectors at all. Three issues emerged: the lack of availability of potential volunteers not already involved; the socioeconomic challenges preventing residents not already involved from considering a participation role; and the tension between EMPOWER AND pre-existing programmes over the principle to avoid working with established community engagement work. During Phase 2, EMPOWER'S Strategic Board took the decision to change to a pragmatic approach, where the role of community connector could be taken on by any resident or worker, regardless of previous involvement. Although the revised approach was more effective in supporting the generation of local activity, the required

adaption raises questions raises as to whether ABCD can expect to engage with the 'most excluded'. This was summed up by Statutory staff member, Participant 18:

People have got other issues. They're depressed because they haven't got any money, they're depressed because their house is damp ... We're realising we have to undo all these barriers. They need to do all the basic stuff first (Statutory staff member, Participant 18).

Engaging professionals (G) sought to restrict professional staff from becoming involved in EMPOWER activity until a 'locally-led vision for change' was in place. Empirical evidence suggested that this mechanism was not workable in the EMPOWER context. The programme had been commissioned by a statutory partner and was located within a statutory management structure, both of which demanded professional involvement from the outset. Statutory staff perceived that because the programme was a fixed-term intervention, it should be integrated within wider public-sector programming to ensure continuity for residents: 'I . . . (have) been through a really huge journey with some of the people there,' (Statutory staff member, Participant 26) and 'I've got to look at it quite cynically . . . in that this project could end in three years' time. And it's likely that a lot of these professionals will still be here' (Statutory staff member, Participant 2). Further, statutory respondents perceived that EMPOWER presented a useful new way of working to statutory staff members whose 'model is so stuck in the mire' (Statutory staff member, Participant 18). This view lay in tension with the EMPOWER ABCD Mentor, who advised adherence to the ABCD principles: 'There's actually some real structural, political - small P, big P - issues that are getting, that get in the way of citizen led change' (Mentor, Participant 24).

Programme structures were modified by the strategic board in Phase 2 of the programme, when the mentor role was significantly reduced (Field-work Diary, 30 November 2016). This change was considered by Community Builder staff and mentor as 'selling out' on ABCD's radical position, adopting an agenda more palatable to the public sector but one that may compromise local citizen-led change.

ABCD change mechanisms that did not demonstrate success: building association across activities (E) and associations come together to plan a local vision (F)
ABCD theory suggests a 'tipping point' where the focus of local activity shifts from small groups to a wider conception of community association (E). From this collective group, a locally led vision for change can emerge (F). The study did not find evidence of wider community association or planning a local vision attributable to the EMPOWER intervention in either case

study neighbourhood. In Case Study 2, strong community association was observable but this pre-dated EMPOWER and was therefore not attributable to Mechanism E. Nevertheless, evidence on the history and pathways that lead to community association in Case Study 2 provided useful learning on how Mechanism E might be articulated to achieve success. There was no evidence of forward planning of a local vision according to Mechanism F.

Case Study 2 had a formally constituted Community Association that had been established for over forty years. The Association comprised twelve local activists representing a variety of activity groups and committees including the Tenants and Residents Association, Community Council, Disability support group, and creative arts group (Residents, Focus Group 1). All activists had developed skills as community organizers over a long-term period, with several having been involved for over forty years and feeling the strain from this level of commitment as volunteers. The group was keen to encourage younger people to get involved but had difficulty in achieving this (Community Builder, Participant 1). The lack of youth members was attributed to historical cuts to Local Authority youth service provision (Residents, Focus Group 1). This had been the main route into activism taken by current volunteers.

The commitment from statutory staff involved in the EMPOWER Project to 'having the communities' voice shaping . . . services for the future' (Statutory staff member, Participant 2) and a vision 'that comes from inside the community' (Statutory staff member, Participant 26) was encouraging. More contentious was the best way to facilitate this process, with some EMPOWER staff articulating concern that local autonomy was perceived as a threat to public-sector structures (Community Builders, Participants 15 and 19). They considered a role of 'disruption' rather than inclusion in public-sector planning structures as an important part of a process of local empowerment. Voluntary sector staff were perceived by residents as more trusted facilitators and contributors, due to strong connections with residents forged through regular local presence and activity provision.

The lack of understanding of how Mechanisms E and F should operate in practice was evident amongst all staff respondents except one. One respondent raised concerns over the assumed shift that Mechanism E made, from involvement in activity to association:

How do you build that in the community to make that wider . . . or do you just end up with 50 different passionate groups? . . . I think we'll just end up with lots of wee groups that aren't cohesive. It's not a cohesive community then. It's just supported groups.

(NHS staff member, Participant 2)

The absence of activity associated with 'building a local vision' Mechanism F in both case study neighbourhoods warrants further research. In

Case Study 2, strong neighbourhood identity and awareness of local need had resulted in several successful local campaigns for resources, suggesting an implicit understanding of the Association's role in protecting wider community interests. The level of skill, responsibility and resources required to undertake long-term planning may have been beyond the role of the Community Builder, and activists were already under considerable pressure in their roles without adding further responsibility.

The lack of empirical evidence of Mechanisms E/F suggests that these mechanism pathways are underdefined and require a deeper understanding of what is required for volunteers to move from small group responsibility to a wider associational commitment and long-term planning. Further, a question remains over whose interests are served by long-term planning or 'visioning' (F). The language of this mechanism is evocative of the corporatism discourse, suggesting a demand for 'acceptable' citizenship activities. Alongside this is a wider issue, that the EMPOWER Theories of Change (ToC) held by different programme partners demonstrated dissonance: whereas Health Board partners wanted to build social networks and generate activity, Local Authorities wanted long-term community plans, and the ABCD mentor organization sought disruption of statutory-imposed requirements. The issue of theory dissonance is not explored in the ABCD literature and warrants further research to understand and articulate ABCD's hypothesized outcomes against the nuance of context.

Understanding context: how activist experience, community resources and poverty impact on the outcomes of an ABCD intervention

The research study findings underline the critical importance of understanding context when implementing ABCD as an intervention to address poverty and inequalities, and of making explicit the links between contextual factors and discourses of community participation (corporatism, social capital, and activism) outlined at the outset of this paper. Although the socioeconomic profiles of the two case study neighbourhoods appeared similar, there were significant differences in two main areas: the experience, commitment, and skills of local activists; and the availability and local management of community venues and provision of local activity. These factors played a crucial role in whether the ABCD mechanisms were successful. Further, staff in both neighbourhoods raised questions over how ABCD can engage with residents living in poverty who are dealing with the crises of food poverty, addictions, domestic violence, and poor health.

Before turning to consider the alignment of context to community participation discourse, it is important to mention that alongside local context

was the broader issue of how public and third sector professionals should engage with an ABCD approach, and whose interests were served by the EMPOWER programme. The location of the programme as a multi-partner intervention between public health, local authority and third sector organizations created a barrier to realizing the ABCD approach. Questions remain as to whether the compromise in ABCD approach was offset by the sustainability offered by involving professionals throughout. Public-sector staff perceived that EMPOWER presented an important step in shifting institutional culture towards a recognition of the value of local ownership and action for change, while Phase 1 Community Builders and ABCD Mentor regarded professional involvement as a betrayal of ABCD's radical principles.

The experience, skills, and commitment of local activists

In Case Study 2, a locally managed community venue was integrated into the building of the housing estate in the 1970s. This offered a vital hub for the development of activist pathways over time. Several activists in leadership roles had been involved over their lifetime, initially attending youth events as teenagers. They had gained diverse experience of establishing and running groups (parent and toddler, disability support, arts and crafts, lunch club for elderly residents), representing and campaigning for issues at a wider community level, and gaining a broad understanding of the community. This experience aligns with the third discourse of activism and ownership, which aims to realize the link between activism and social change on inequalities. With local activism came a strong commitment to resisting public-sector agendas for 'consensual' partnerships that served the requirements of institutional new management practices, and to defending local resources through opposition to statutory budget cuts.

Ironically, government-led structures for democratic engagement worked more effectively and were viewed with less suspicion in Case Study 2, reflecting a deeper, more authentic and equal relationship between local activists and Local Authority staff and elected members than in Case Study 1. This highlights the value of critique in relationships between activists and statutory sector. Despite this more positive landscape in Case Study 2, however, the erosion of public-sector community education and youth services delivery twenty years' prior was perceived as having caused the current disengagement by young people. These cuts, made during the growth of neoliberal policies to reduce state provision, raised serious concerns about long-term sustainability and succession in community activism.

The depth of activist experience in Case Study 2 ran in sharp contrast to Case Study 1, where there were no venues, no history or focus for activism,

and suspicion of and non-engagement with statutory-run representative committees such as tenants and residents' committees and locality planning group representation, considered as tokenistic engagement. The lack of local ownership or support to build a new generation of activists reflects the withdrawal of statutory funding associated with a neoliberal agenda, and the failure to generate authentic community participation through the new management institutional structures of Community Planning.

The availability and management of community venues and provision of local activity

Case Study 2's community venue highlighted the value not only of facilities in which to meet and offer local activity, but of local involvement in shaping provision. The community-run café encouraged regular footfall in the building and an informal meeting space where people could hear about what was going on in a friendly, trusted environment. Management by a Community Association gave activists oversight and input to decisions regarding the Local Authority budget allocation, although at times this was strained due to cuts in provision, such as welfare advice, that were ongoing at the time of the research study. The successful elements of community venue provision resonate with the third discourse of activism and ownership, set against the prevailing trends of State retrenchment of resources associated with corporatism and responsibilization. The EMPOWER programme was able to complement and plug activity gaps, although this could be perceived as simply replacing what had been lost due to historical cuts rather than presenting a new approach to participation. As a fixed-term intervention, the EMPOWER programme itself reflected an ideological shift from long-term state investment to fixed-term resource precarity, reliant on external grant funding.

A lack of community venues seriously inhibited ABCD activity in Case Study 1. The only venues available were a small meeting room within the housing association office, the primary school, and a room in a faith-based organization, all of which were subject to limited opening hours and restrictions on activity and were managed by third sector or statutory professionals. The lack of investment precluded the development of authentic local participation, with community participation opportunities limited to institutional Community Planning processes, which struggled to gain traction due to local suspicion and a lack of local volunteers.

The provision of a regular programme of local activity was a key determinant in the sustainability of activities generated by the ABCD approach. Dwindling State provision meant that most activity in Case Study 2 was offered by local volunteers, and since there was no established group of

volunteers or venue in case Study 1, provision was non-existent. Although the post of Community Builder was able to stimulate activity in innovative ways, these activities could not become embedded. By contrast, Case Study 2 had a daily activity programme that was bolstered by ABCD activity and was able to mitigate against statutory cuts. These improved relationships between young people and older activists, between whom relationships had become strained. As before, this activity was not new but supported existing activity, demonstrating the protective effect of restoring resources previously cut by the State.

Managing relationships: community activists, third and statutory sectors

The tensions that arose between the management of EMPOWER staff by the statutory sector and ABCD mentorship by an external consultant raise important questions over how best to support an ABCD intervention. Although statutory sector community engagement teams brought valuable experience and useful networks, the bureaucracy associated with Local Authority rules and regulations did not align with the positive disruption advocated by ABCD. Third sector organizations may provide more fertile ground for critical community development practice and can respond quickly and creatively to local priorities but are themselves subject to the precarity of funding cycles.

The engagement of professionals (mechanism G) requires realignment to reflect the more favourable Scottish policy environment, rather than its origins in US federal state responses to poverty. Despite this, ABCD's creative community engagement techniques may not fit within a new public management statutory work culture that stifles local autonomy by requiring adherence to predetermined modes and types of citizenship engagement. This said, statutory sector staff highlighted the welcome challenge that ABCD brought to Local Authority and NHS organizational cultures, demanding new ways of engaging and supporting community engagement. It may be that ABCD is more useful in its challenge to new managerialism rather than in supporting grassroots power.

Poverty and inequalities
The issue of poverty loomed large across the EMPOWER programme, reflecting not only the erosion of statutory budgets but also the real-terms reduction in benefits value and the rise of food poverty. Both case study neighbourhoods faced a complex web of problems, including domestic violence, addictions, poor housing, low income, and isolation. A staff member

from a welfare advice organization reported that users would frequently not speak to another person in the month between appointments, leaving the house only to buy essential items. The idea that an ABCD intervention led by a part-time worker can solve deeply ingrained socioeconomic inequalities is clearly unrealistic. Worse, overpromising the potential of an ABCD programme can further marginalize those in poverty by legitimizing the further withdrawal of state support while advocating for local responsibility.

In both communities, the effects of welfare and Local Authority budget cuts had worsened the effects of isolation and were a serious concern for all participants. Although both case studies neighbourhoods had a similar socioeconomic profile, contextual research again highlighted the protective effects of pre-existing community resources in the form of activists, venue, and activity programmes.

Conclusion

Using TBE to evaluate the ABCD approach allowed for a detailed examination of Kretzmann and McKnight's hypothetical change theory according to seven mechanisms for change. Empirical evidence analysed against these theories highlights whether and how they work in practice, for whom and in which contexts. The study demonstrates that programmes using ABCD are unlikely to reach a 'tipping point' from local activity generation into wider community association without additional resources in place. Findings suggest that these resources include community activist experience, locally managed community venues and a programme of local activity. Further research would be beneficial to understand the complex and long-term pathways that facilitate community activism, such as the experience demonstrated in Case Study 2. This study suggests that assessment of suitable host communities for ABCD should include consideration of whether these resources exist and if not, how they can be supported in advance of implementation of an ABCD intervention.

Broader contextual issues draw attention to the underlying ideological discourses of community participation policy and practice. Although Local Authority-led community engagement strategies offer stability, they are based on New Public Management techniques associated with planning and cost reduction, and are often viewed as tokenistic by the host community. Statutory service provision such as gardening and welfare advice was considered more favourably than Community Planning, suggesting that the stability offered by the statutory sector may be better focused on increased, regular activity provision rather than on strategies for community engagement. Grassroots, activist approaches are more likely to be innovative and to generate widespread community action but a neoliberal agenda of

responsibilization has put increasing pressure on volunteers, while eroding vital statutory provision.

Empirical evidence suggests that ABCD has potential to create space for the community resistance and disruption required to support genuine local autonomy. Although ABCD may not be unique as a practice, its links to seminal approaches such as Alinsky's community organizing and Freire's (1972) concept of praxis nevertheless offer potential to renew questions of power and resistance in high poverty communities. ABCD theory requires modification for the more favourable policy environment of Scotland but also requires detailed consideration of the contexts in which it is likely to succeed. The delineation of activist pathways would support ABCD goals of community association and planning. But if ABCD is to retain credibility as a community development intervention approach, it must clearly state the need to address issue of structural poverty alongside activity, with particular care to avoid the legitimization of retrenchment through its criticism of state provision.

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