



# **Neoliberalism with a Community Face?**

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# Overview

- Background to the research project: Co-author Mary Anne MacLeod, University of Glasgow
- Tracing the American ideological roots of ABCD
- Findings: ABCD appears to be privatising public issues of poverty and inequality

# Methodology and methods

- Primary question
  - What are the implications of asset based approaches for the theory, policy and practice of community-led health interventions in Scotland?
- 10 semi-structured interviews
  - grassroots-based practitioners; directors and policy officers of national intermediary organisations; policymakers and civil servants from one local authority in the west of Scotland
  - snowball sampling from June 2012 to April 2013
- Critical policy analysis of 20 key texts
  - community development, community-led health, austerity measures

# The ideology of asset-based community development

- ABCD = movement to reorient theory and practice from community needs, deficits and problems to community skills, strengths and power (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Mathie and Cunningham 2003)
  - Fits squarely in the tradition of American populist politics and anti-statism (Kazin 1998; MacLeod and Emejulu 2014; Emejulu 2015)

# The ideology of asset-based community development

- ABCD is a cipher for several transformative political developments in America in the 1970s/80s
  - Backlash against radical social movements and Saul Alinsky's conflict-based approach to community organising
  - Pragmatic response to welfare state retrenchment
  - Riposte to right-wing populism

# ABCD as neoliberalism

- New Right analyses of the welfare state are taken for granted and advanced within ABCD
  - ‘[The welfare state promotes] deficiency, inadequacy, brokenness or disease of people’, it disempowers individuals and casts them as ‘clients or ‘customers’ (McKnight 2010: 63)
- ABCD represents a *capitulation and compliance* with the prevailing neoliberal logic of rolling back the welfare state

# Findings: ABCD in Scotland

## **ABCD as ambiguity and ambivalence**

- ‘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’ (Gill, community worker)
- ‘I think that sometimes there has to be new terminology because people want to see something new’ (Sue, community worker)

# Findings: ABCD in Scotland

## **Privatising public issues**

- ‘People come into the doctor...to be fixed or to have an issue or a problem addressed and [ABCD] 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 (Sarah, public health researcher)



# Findings: ABCD in Scotland

- **Privatising public issues**
- ‘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’ (Karen, senior manager)

# Findings: ABCD in Scotland

## **Rethinking power?**

- ‘I don’t think that communities can take control without controlling assets and controlling services...or some business. I think you need to have some substance to become a player and I don’t think you can do that without having some sort of enterprising approach’ (Greg, senior manager)
- ‘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’ (Judi, senior manager)

# Conclusions

- ABCD is a manifestation of defeats of left-wing politics in the United States
- A logic of free market relations and a hostility to state-sponsored social welfare is the central unacknowledged value of ABCD
- ABCD in Scotland has a contradictory status between radical and reactionary claims