

Let's Get Explicit: Social Justice in Asset Based Community Development

Four Asset Based Community Development practices that support social justice frameworks when practitioners make them explicit and intentional.

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Over 25 years ago Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight coined the term Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) to describe the successful approach to community-level change they had observed all over the United States. The idea was simple: Local communities could do more together by choosing to focus on what they had—their gifts, talents, and community assets—instead of what they were missing. It was a way of both strengthening community social capital and organizing community change.

Because of its simplicity, its doability and its truth, the ABCD approach spread “without any effort or plan on our part” (McKnight). Others noted that ABCD spread because the approach recognized and honored the dignity of individuals and communities long described as needy and deficient.

The core of social justice is the combination of power and love. At the core of ABCD are the principles of inclusion, dignity, and democracy. Our experience is that the ABCD approach is more compatible with a social justice agenda than traditional community development and community organizing. Below are four ABCD practices that support social justice frameworks when practitioners make them explicit and intentional.

Recognize the Value of Every Person and Community

ABCD practitioners assume that each person has gifts, talents, and value that are worthy of contribution to their community. Practitioners create opportunities for residents to give their gifts and to build the relationships that form as a result of sharing. Everyone is necessary and leadership is not limited to charismatic or articulate public speakers.

Each community has value and assets, as well. ABCD practitioners often begin a community project with a community-created “map” of neighborhood assets. Whereas most community developers might designate poor neighborhoods as “ghettos,” or areas deficient of value or resources, ABCD would not. By recognizing each community’s assets first, ABCD practitioners are able to mobilize a wealth of untapped resources within communities that have been largely overlooked. In doing so, ABCD recognizes these communities as full of value and worthy of fairness.

Prioritize Inclusion

Because each person is valued, inclusion is paramount. ABCD practitioners consistently ask themselves, “who is here, who is not here and how can we act so that those not here are not only welcomed but have a clear place and value?” ABCD, like other community organizing approaches, invests heavily in building relationships among **those traditionally excluded from decision making** and power structures. Then, recognizing the value of each traditionally excluded person, inviting and welcoming them into decision-making roles.

Grow Power Locally

- What can we ourselves do, with our assets?
- What can we do with our assets and a little help from outside?
- What do we need others from outside to do?

Most communities that work through these three questions are often surprised to find that 70 to 80 percent of what they want for their community is something they can do themselves or with a little help from outside.

The process of mapping assets and then answering these questions reveals that the community has power. It may be valuable to reorganize and focus some of that power to change systems of oppression that weigh a community down, but ABCD starts with the community's own power and works out from there. Often, communities have been trained to wait for the city, the schools, the parks department, the police department, or a large local institution to first, decide to prioritize what the residents want, and then second, to provide it. This external-first approach often leads to dependency and vulnerability rather than autonomy and power.

See Institutions as Servants

In ABCD work, institutions (schools, hospitals, local government, nonprofit agencies, social service providers, police departments, etc.) are not viewed as the primary solutions to problems. They are important sources of community resources that can be shared and mobilized in support of resident-driven solutions. Looking through the lens of social justice and fairness, these resources belong to the community and should be deployed in a way that strengthens community power instead of deepening community dependency on external power. Often, the injustice in our systems lies entirely in institutions' exploitation of what had been the community's resources in the first place. In ABCD, a more socially just world is possible when institutions use the resources they have collected to **walk alongside, or even support from behind, community residents and their assets.**

Social justice frameworks and asset-based approaches to community development and community organizing overlap considerably. In fact, there is so much overlap that many longtime ABCD practitioners presumed that ABCD practice was a result of the civil rights movement and social justice work nationwide. Many thought "it goes without saying" that ABCD was rooted in social justice principle and anti-racism practices. But it doesn't go without saying. It must be said. We in the ABCD movement specifically, and the community development field in general, must be explicit if we are to avoid being complicit.

In addition to ABCD's core principles and practices there are ways that ABCD practitioners can and should engage in more intentional denouncement of racist policies and procedures and community development practices that lead to gentrification and displacement in poor communities of color.

So how can the ABCD movement and the community development field better align with social justice movements and advance a common mission for equity? Here are some starting points:

- Articulate an intentional commitment to advance equity and inclusion in living rooms, workshops, presentations, and organizational meetings. If we don't say it, it is hard for others to know we mean it.
- Identify and name the systems that create inequity, exclusion and, division and our role in them. Just as identifying assets reveals and releases the power of local communities, identifying where and how our systems are unfair is an essential step to dismantling unjust power.
- Give the microphone and spotlight to those who experience systemic inequities and encourage them to step into roles of leadership. Make room for their specific roles. Pay them. When they don't come the first time invite them again! Repeat.
- Analyze budgets, governance structures, and strategies in an effort to make them truly democratic, participatory and inclusive.
- Reflect, individually and collectively, to understand the role of racism and bias in our own relationships and work.

How have you seen ABCD used to counteract systems of racism and oppression where you live? Let's share our stories. Go to <https://shelterforce.org/2019/04/26/lets-get-explicit-social-justice-in-asset-based-community-development/> to add a comment.