Outcomes of community engagement in neighbourhood renewal: community confidence, participation and asset based community development

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Research Masters with Training
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

This research investigates contemporary practice in community engagement in neighbourhood renewal projects. Community engagement has emerged as an integral component in neighbourhood renewal projects (Curtis, 2006; Jarvis, Berkeley, & Broughton, 2012; McArthur, 1993). However, community engagement is not necessarily clear cut with the same meaning applicable for all contexts. In many instances community engagement is based on a needs approach, highlighting what is missing, the deficits in a community and its neighbourhood. This has been led by policy makers in the UK, where a response to the neo-liberal Thatcher era focus on physical renewal (Smith, 2008) heightened interest in community participation over the last twenty years (Lawson, 2010). In Australia, community participation has had growing currency over many years and at many levels of social policy, where the term is used to denote the engagement of local people in decision-making about the services and structures which affect their daily lives (Dinham, 2005).

Neighbourhood regeneration projects in Australia typically target suburbs or regions that have higher than average state housing and lower than average socio-economic conditions (Jarvis et al., 2012). Despite the socio-economic conditions being a driver for neighbourhood renewal, there have been projects that take a purely physical approach, where the built form is upgraded, with little or no consideration given to community development; this is one form of neighbourhood regeneration (Curtis, 2006, p. 5 highlights the different approaches to urban renewal from different professional angles). In this approach, state housing enclaves have been sold to bring in more private ownership, breaking up communities in the process (examples provided by Stubbs, 2005; Tesoreiro, 2003 in New South Wales and South Australia respectively).

In community development practice, engagement in the community increasingly emphasises an asset based approach. Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)
draws on community strengths and assets, assuming that every person has skills and passions that can be drawn on and that every community has positive attributes that can be harnessed and mobilised to achieve positive community outcomes (Kretzmann, 1993). ABCD therefore provides an alternative vision of community engagement. On the one hand there is an emphasis on ‘needs’ and building the capacity of a community, while on the other hand, strategies are developed with the community to enhance pre-existing community strengths. While there is evidence that the United Kingdom’s policy changed to a more bottom up, participatory approach, according to Smith (2008), this was not reflected in the practice.

An alternative view is provided by Jaladin et al. (2012), who argue that “urban renewal programs aim to target both the physical and social environments to improve the social capital, social connectedness, sense of community and economic conditions of residents of the neighbourhood” (see McArthur, 1993, p. 312 for example). When neighbourhood renewal includes a focus on socio-economic drivers such as training, employment, and community projects, community development methods become essential. In other words, effective community engagement must be equally attentive to the social context, as well as the redesign of the physical environment while underpinned by an emphasis on working with community members. As Curtis (2006, p.34) suggests, “sustainable community regeneration is place-based regeneration that has a focus on integrated triple-bottom-line approaches to declining suburbs, thus combining traditional urban renewal with community development”.

**Research context and aims**

This study builds on existing research in the field of community engagement in neighbourhood regeneration and as such, the thesis contributes to the body of work on neighbourhood regeneration projects with a community engagement focus in Australia. As a community development practitioner, I have worked for a number of local government authorities, in not-for-profit organisations and for a private residential developer. During the course of my practice, it became obvious that in many instances
staff and consultants did not always have in-depth knowledge of community development and, more importantly, community engagement. Practitioners often presented with a set of ideals that, despite the best of intentions, elicited community backlash against renewal processes. In other instances, the language of community engagement was employed to extract consent without little sensitivity to the community’s views. In this case, community engagement was used to describe what appeared to be stakeholder management.

This research is therefore built around a concern for the ways in which the concept of community participation is indeed enacted in local settings. More broadly, the thesis aims to explore some of the ways that community engagement underpins community renewal projects in Australia. For example, many community renewal projects utilise the principles of best practice guidelines, and moreover they draw on significant resources – both in time and funding – as well as attempting to improve relations between the community and government bodies. This ‘operationalising’ of community engagement therefore requires exploration in terms of the way in which interests are indeed acknowledged and embedded in the community. Further, the research also considers the role of community development (CD), both in theory and practice in relation to ongoing urban renewal projects. Particularly in that CD is a well-established area of scholarly endeavour and a practice-based profession. The research questions therefore the relationship between the language of community engagement, the principles of community development and the processes of urban renewal.

In order to undertake this research, the thesis is structured around one main research question and three subsequent questions. First, as the project explores the relationship between community engagement and community development, the primary research question is: what can asset-based community development contribute to community engagement in neighbourhood renewal projects? Second, what might be the barriers and constraints that impact this relationship? Third, in what ways might the concept of best practice be expanded upon, and fourth, what are the impacts, if any, of the current
models in the Australian context? These four questions provide the frame for this thesis. The questions will be explored through an analysis of contemporary literature on community engagement, community development and examples drawn from the field of neighbourhood renewal projects in Australia.

**Approach and methods**

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach, relying on scholarly material, government reports and field work interviews with a range of community practitioners. The qualitative approach refers to the intersection between the use of academic research, the reports and the key insights drawn from the interview participants. As the primary aim of the research is to explore the relationship between theory and practice, the interview data is viewed in relation to current literature on community engagement and community development.

The thesis first examines literature that covers key concepts central to the research. Primarily, literature that explores the concepts of community engagement and community renewal are addressed in order to frame the project. This is especially important in the context of community engagement due to confusion regarding terms such as community consultation, community partnerships and community involvement (Abbott 1995). Community engagement offers many definitions and encompasses multiple forms of practice therefore understanding how these different approaches underpin community renewal is important for this thesis. Second, as the thesis is also concerned with what, if anything, the principles of community development can contribute to community engagement, the thesis also examines literature that takes a community development approach. Community development offers both a theoretical basis and a set of principles that emphasise the knowledge and skills of localised communities (Ife 2013). Further elaboration and analysis of these key terms is provided in Chapter Two.

In-depth, semi structured interviews were undertaken in order to explore practitioners’
perceptions of community participation and neighbourhood renewal. The interviews were analysed using a thematic approach, then further contextualised with reference to concepts drawn from communitarianism and empowerment theory. Both theoretical approaches were chosen due to their emphasis on community, and more importantly, that the primary assumption within both frameworks is that building strong resilient communities emerges from within the community rather than from an externally driven model. The interview process and analysis are explained in more detail in Chapter Four.

In undertaking this analysis, the thesis argues that community renewal could be improved with the use of ABCD. The thesis therefore makes three subsequent claims: first, there is potential damage to community confidence through stigmatising neighbourhoods with labels and negative language; this could be avoided with a more appreciative approach. Second, a reliance on community reference groups in the development of partnerships may overstate the true input from community, and prevent marginalised groups from participating, and third, the ABCD approach can help with the initial process of entering a community without provoking community backlash. This research contributes an analysis of community engagement in neighbourhood renewal with a community development focus. The proposal, that ABCD can contribute to work in this area, provides an alternative approach to practice and necessarily builds community development processes into the community engagement process.

**Thesis outline**

In order to address the research questions, the thesis is structured over eight substantive chapters. The next chapter, Chapter Two expands upon approaches to community engagement. The primary aim of the chapter is to highlight different scholarly perspectives that analyse community engagement; one that emphasises a project management approach and the other, drawn from the principles of community development. Chapter Two also examines research that covers neighbourhood renewal projects.
Chapter Three specifically provides an outline of the conceptual framework used for this study. The theories used in this research are a guide for exploring the ideals of community development, and empowerment theory, which is useful in understanding practitioner roles in community development and community engagement.

Chapter Four outlines the approach and methods used for data collection. The chapter explains how interviewees were selected and contacted; and how the interviews were undertaken. The process of developing interview questions is also explained. Finally, the chapter provides an explanation of methods employed for data analysis.

Chapter Five provides a discussion of interview data. This covers community confidence and a range of practices that appear to impact confidence both negatively and in a more positive light. This chapter highlights the drivers of group identity and how the neighbourhood renewal process can further erode confidence by labelling and stigmatising communities.

The following chapter, Chapter Six, examines the current best practice model promoted by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2). Examples from this research show that there is scope to use this model to address government requirements for public participation, while giving very little power to the community.

Chapter Seven provides a discussion on the findings of the research. More specifically, this chapter focuses on the aspects of asset based community development that emerged from interview data and are applicable in a neighbourhood renewal context. These findings highlight the benefits of the ABCD approach. This research demonstrates that there is great potential for community building and sustainability of projects after practitioners have moved on, and that ABCD may be a vehicle to this end.
Chapter Two: Community development, community engagement and renewal

Introduction

As the key research focus for this thesis concerns the relationship between community engagement and community development, this chapter expands upon these key areas of scholarship. First, literature on community engagement, both from a community development perspective and from a project management perspective is considered. The former is based on community development principles (Dinham, 2005), the latter, on neo-liberal collaborative planning theory (Roy, 2015). The second part of the chapter examines community engagement in a neighbourhood renewal context. This literature is dominated by examples from the UK, which provide critiques of different models and approaches. Several Australian examples are also included in order to highlight some of the challenges and benefits of various models. This thesis sits within the body of literature that analyses and critiques community engagement in neighbourhood renewal, and applies a communitarian and empowerment theory conceptual framework to current practice. This conceptual framework is developed in Chapter Three.

Community engagement

Community engagement is a contested term with various interpretations from different philosophical and historical backgrounds (Dinham, 2005; Roy, 2015; Wright, 2013). On the one hand, the community development approach has a communitarianism foundation, being that communities are best placed to make decisions on matters that impact them directly and that participation and citizenship are fundamental (Dinham, 2005). On the other hand, from a project management perspective, the neoliberal concern with the market has created a community engagement model that aims to manage the debate and reduce dissent (Roy, 2015). Researchers critical of some forms of community engagement (Cornwall, 2008; Roy, 2015) have claimed that this can be tokenistic, and at times, blatant public manipulation.
Examining the assumptions of these approaches leads to an investigation of the tensions between the individual and the community. Neoliberalism assumes individual responsibility for one’s own wellbeing, and de-emphasises individuals’ responsibility to others (Roy, 2015). Communitarianism assumes a social responsibility to contribute to community and the betterment of society as a whole (Etzioni, 1993). Therein may lie the basis for the contested space in which community engagement operates. Neoliberal capitalism is built on protecting individual and market freedom from state control, however, the idea of consensus building, evident in community engagement models, is about defining the common good, rather than the interests of individuals (Roy, 2015).

Communitarian grounds for community engagement are based on the rights and responsibilities of individuals contributing to their community and to the common good (Etzioni, 1993). Adding complexity to the communitarian grounds for community engagement, Roy (2015) highlights the tension between the goal of the common good and consensus building, with the goal of addressing inequality that requires a nuanced approach to disadvantage. In some situations empowerment strategies are required on an individual level to try to create an even playing field.

As this thesis is concerned with understanding community engagement in relation to urban renewal, the manner in which collaborative planning takes place is important. As community renewal relies on public and private institutions and local communities collaborating in the decision process, how these groups come together is relevant to this thesis. One approach that aims to explain these dynamics is communicative planning theory (CPT), developed from the work of Habermas in the early 1980s. According to Roy (2015), while not a ‘tight discipline’, CPT emphasises the collective ideals of deliberation such that disparate groups develop an understanding of the common good (2015, p.61). In this form of community engagement, stakeholders are invited to discuss, or ‘deliberate’, in the decision making process, with the view to diverse arguments being stated, the better argument winning, with the goal of broad consensus (Sager, 2009). However, “those managing collaborative processes can claim equality
simply by bringing competing interests to the table while ignoring the likely domination by economic, political and cultural elites and hence avoiding truly political negotiations” (Roy, 2014, p. 61). Arguments for deliberative democracy assume that there is equal capacity for debate, and that the democratic space is even and inclusive.

Researchers claim that while CPT was developed on the basis of improving democracy, the ideals of CPT are often corrupted (Roy, 2015; Sager, 2009). Roy (2015, p. 59) argues that “collaborative planning principles provide a means for the market-driven, local, state and planning agencies to reinforce present neoliberal hegemony”. Roy’s argument is that while collaborative approaches have the potential to be empowering for communities, planning projects are more likely to co-opt the democratic principles of community engagement, creating the illusion of democracy, while maintaining existing power relations and protecting the market and state agenda. Similarly, Cornwall (2008) notes that the malleability of concepts such as collaboration and engagement allows for a great range of approaches including those that aim to manipulate.

As described above, community engagement has become part and parcel of policy making in Australia (Head 2011, p.104). While community engagement is often part of the legislative requirements for policy, some areas are more expert driven than community or stakeholder driven. According to Hendriks (2008), this has seen the commercialisation of public participation, as consultants compete for contracts with government and private bodies. In Australia, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has emerged as an industry body to which many of these consultants subscribe (see, www.iap2.org for a range of examples). This model dominates in community engagement for project management (Hendriks, 2008). This is not a problem in itself, however, the model can be an ill fit with projects requiring a community development focus. As described above, deliberative democracy assumes an even playing field, when there are inequalities in the community, more work is required to ensure fair representation, and community development approaches may be better placed to respond.
The IAP2 model will be discussed further in Chapter Six. Suffice to say at this point however, the IAP2 model has been developed to take into account situational and contextual approaches to shared forms of decision making in complex and collaborative environments (Head 2011). The IAP2 model emphasises five forms of participation – inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower underpinned by the idea that ‘true collaboration’ is neutral, devoid of rhetoric and transparent (Susskind and Carson 2008). In short, inform refers to providing information, consult relates to the provision of feedback to participants; involvement entails the inclusion of participants’ concerns and ideas in project design; collaboration emphasises the importance of partnerships, and empowerment refers to the participants stepping into advisory and clear decision making roles during and after the completion of the project (iap2.org.au).

According to Cornwall however, approaches such as those outlined above run the risk of tokenistic engagement, if due consideration is not given to the methods, process and overall intentions of citizens’ engagement (2008). Cornwall compares models of community engagement, such as the approach adopted by the World Bank’s Civil Society Team (www.siteresources.worldbank.org) with Arnstein’s ladder of participation. In Cornwall’s view, activities such as ‘inform’ and ‘consult’, which are integral components in the IAP2 model also, are more associated with ‘tokenism’ (Cornwall, 2008, p. 270) than attempting to generate community engagement in a particular community. Participation and engagement can lead to transformative changes that are sustainable and cost effective. Equally however, community engagement can also lead to further marginalisation of certain groups in society and perhaps more telling, may provide the means to legitimate the state’s commitment to economic fundamentalism (Mowbray 2005, p.255).

Community engagement and community development

Arguably, community engagement is part of the democratic traditions of Australian society. There are both normative and instrumental positions that emphasise differing rationales for ensuring citizens play a role in collective decision making. In terms of the
former, normative ideals view community engagement as inherent in citizens’ rights to participate in collective decision making (Head 2011). Further, such participation entrenches citizens in broader social networks that enhance society. A more instrumental, or in the context of this thesis, managerial approach, links effective and efficient outcomes of social policy programs with the view that localised groups and stakeholders are best placed to inform how such programs should function (Head 2011, p.104). As such, the ideals of community development fit well across both of these positions.

Community Development approaches to engagement and collaboration are based on empowerment, citizenship, inclusion and participation (Ife 2013). In community development terms, community engagement and participation seek to enable change from below (Ife 2002). Community engagement in this approach, takes as its starting point, the value of local knowledge, local ideas and skills and the resources and processes that exist with localised communities (Ife 2013, p. 156). In other words, community development challenges the more accepted top-down driven policy perspectives and initiatives with a view to enabling radical, structural and grassroots changes that are sustainable.

In that community development views engagement as a local or bottom up process, it encompasses a range of tensions when undertaking community work. Primarily, tensions exist in the concept of attempting to generate social change by formal institutions such as government departments and agencies, that for all intents and purposes are ‘experts’ and exist outside the community. While the rhetoric in many instances is strong in terms of “the community knows best”, implementing processes that systematically enable engagement that is participatory in diverse situations is complex. This process requires a shift in conceptualising projects that encourage bottom up social change, to reframing development and change in ways that bottom up changes are visible and comprehensible from the top down (Eversole 2010, p. 30). In other words, this requires a shift in the power dynamics that function in the relationship
between the community ‘being developed’ and the organisations ‘doing’ the development. As Cooke and Kothari (2001) argue, participation and engagement can be used to cover over power inequalities and ensure a business as usual approach is in place.

Further tensions also reside in the attempt to implement processes that empower citizens in society. Abbott argues that community development is a specific form of community participation (1995). According to Abbott, community development is an approach aimed at empowerment. However, the success of this depends on the openness of government to community involvement in the decision making process. Abbott argues that community development approaches to participation that are based on empowerment through social change are at odds with government interests in maintaining the status quo. Tensions exist in the intersection between community development as a discipline, one that questions the status quo, and the expectations of community development workers, empowering communities without encouraging dissent (Abbott 1995).

Neighbourhood renewal

Public housing renewal programs have been part of Australia’s social policy landscape since the 1990s (Judd and Randolph 2006). Many early programs looked specifically at physical renewal, that is managing physical assets such as housing, infrastructure such as street design and parks and the jettisoning of public housing stock to the private sector (Randolph and Wood 2004). More community based renewal programs however have also increased over the last two decades with a broader focus on community aspects such as low income and high unemployment, cultural divisions, a lack of infrastructure and limited opportunities for residents (Ingamells 2006). The underlying ideas and assumptions of these programs draws from work in the United Kingdom.

Accordingly, such work in the UK emphasises an integrated renewal approach exemplified in a large body of work that has focused on the UK’s 1990s National
Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR) (for example Diamond, 2004; Hoban, 2001; Jarvis et al., 2012). Under the Blair government, the NSNR focused on regenerating communities through a range of capacity building and empowerment initiatives designed to ensure that residents were equipped with the tools and confidence to engage fully in local renewal programs (Jarvis, Berkeley, & Broughton 2012, p. 234). Fallov notes that:

The overall strategies of the English National Strategy of Neighbourhood Renewal can be characterized as aiming at improving local, regional and central governance capacity, activating residents and communities to enhance their capacity for self-governance, and improving the capacity of selected neighbourhoods (2010, p. 792).

With its strong focus on community capacity building, the program represented a significant shift in government policy on neighbourhood regeneration.

The UK government shifted its focus to community involvement in decision making and in ongoing projects. McArthur (1993, p. 305) notes the lack of community involvement in regeneration projects preceding this time, with a top down approach being the dominant model, and experts charged with the task of making change. Previously, there was greater emphasis on physical improvements, with little focus placed on the social elements of reinvigorating disadvantaged areas such as social inclusion and the creation of learning, employment, and community participation opportunities (Hoban, 2001). UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, launched New Labour’s policy of neighbourhood renewal in the late 1990s, arguing that previous policies had not worked and that new approaches were needed. He resolved that renewal had previously been too concerned with physical regeneration of areas instead of creating opportunities for local people (Hoban, 2001, p. 312; Spruill, Kenney, & Kaplan, 2001). This marked a significant change of paradigm and the potential for great opportunities for communities.

According to Jarvis et al. (2012) renewal programs where social issues are prevalent
requires more than facility upgrades such as landscaping and improvements to public amenities. Neighbourhood renewal projects often include complex problems of disadvantage, exclusion and community safety. These problems are not solved with improved infrastructure. McArthur notes that “it has been the pattern with many area regeneration policies in the past that reducing social deprivation and poverty has proved far more difficult than regenerating the local physical environment” (1993, p. 312). It is now generally accepted that projects with the sole focus on physical improvements do not have lasting social benefits for existing residents. Curtis (2006) argues that this approach is effective at transforming places, but typically increases gentrification and the displacement of existing residents.

The main driver in these projects is the disposal of public housing stock; this is typically combined with physical upgrades to public open space (Curtis, 2006). Stubbs (2005) outlines the damaging consequences to residents and the community of Minto, New South Wales, in the early stages of the ‘Minto Renewal Project’. With large swaths of public housing sold off, families with long term connections in the community were moved on, and the remaining public housing tenants left with a sense of insecurity as to their future in the neighbourhood. In this case, the effects of physical renewal provided little in terms of improved social conditions for residents, and were damaging to the community, as there was distress and fear for people who faced the loss of their homes, friends, gardens, special places and memories (Stubbs, 2005, p. 92).

Criticism of top down approaches to neighbourhood regeneration highlight the importance of authentic community engagement in obtaining community buy-in to programs and in making any real impact (Hoban, 2001; Jarvis et al., 2012). Examples in the UK demonstrate a range of engagement levels, from informing and consulting through to goals of empowerment. Jarvis, Berkeley and Broughton (2012) highlight the effectiveness of community engagement in a case study of Canley. The community of Canley were engaged in consultation and implementation processes, and received support from staff members who were based within the community. This approach
fostered buy-in from the community:

This level of commitment on behalf of residents has been critical in making a difference to the implementation of the regeneration framework, compared to previous somewhat disconnected and top-down attempts to stimulate renewal in Canley, which left many residents feeling excluded. The commitment of residents has been underpinned by the determination of individual local authority officers to drive engagement and advocate residents’ views and concerns. This was made possible through neighbourhood management structures that embedded individual officers within the neighbourhood to provide a bridge between residents and policy makers... (Jarvis et al., 2012, p. 242).

In effect, as the above example emphasises, community staff are key in driving residents and advocating for residents’ views and concerns. Staff were connected to both the community and the authorities, becoming the conduit for advocacy and action.

While Jarvis et al.’s study highlights the positive outcomes that can be achieved, it does not specifically expand upon the ideals of empowerment. While Jarvis et al. emphasise a commitment to consultation with communities, McArthur (1993) goes one step further to look at partnerships where communities are involved in decision making. McArthur notes:

Whereas ideas about participation in the planning process have traditionally emphasised consultation with the public, contemporary urban regeneration initiatives stress the importance of partnership. Partnership is reflected by community representatives having a seat on the various organisational structures which manage and deliver regeneration initiatives (McArthur, 1993, p. 306-307).

In these cases, local research gained through consultation is viewed and discussed by participants, creating opportunities for partnerships between local communities,
government bodies and local organisations. McArthur (1993) and Jarvis et al. (2012) both claim that this gives local communities a degree of ownership over what is done, how the results are used, and what actions should follow.

Summary

The above outline of conceptualising community engagement in renewal programs raises several questions. For example, if the assumption is that community engagement is for the purpose of providing voice to community in terms of the renewal, are engagement methods designed to hand over decision making power to communities, or are they designed to manage communities? If people have a responsibility to contribute to their communities, as is outlined by Etzioni’s (1993), why is the inclusion of a broad range of people so challenging in engagement projects? And, if there is evidence that demonstrates that taking a strengths based approach brings positive outcomes for communities (Kretzmann, 1993; Perkins, 1995), why have the more asset based methods not become mainstream in community engagement in neighbourhood renewal? Each of these ideas are expanded upon in Chapters Six and Seven.
Chapter Three: Communitarianism and empowerment theory

Introduction

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework that underpins this project. As the thesis is concerned with exploring the relationship between community engagement and community development the purpose of this chapter is to expand upon these two key conceptual approaches. Further, as one of the aims of the thesis is to point to some of the benefits of a community development approach this chapter highlights significant insights that enable greater emphasis on generating long term community changes. The chapter explains the main ideas that comprise communitarianism and ideas drawn from empowerment theory. The chapter also outlines the rationale for linking these two conceptual approaches.

Community development theoretical context

Before moving on to discuss the main conceptual approaches used in this study, it is important to outline the parameters of the research. Since the 1990s, interactional theory has been applied to community development by a number of authors, particularly those working in rural communities (Bridger, 2011). Wilkinson (1991) provides a framework for interactional theory where community occurs in interactions in which people develop shared meaning, which in turn, further reinforces community identity. Bridger, Brennan and Luloff (2011) refer to the central role that local interaction and capacity play in the development of community, and argue that community emerges from the interactions and collective actions of its members, as a complex social, economic and psychological entity. This approach does not assume that community inherently already exists, rather, it is created by its members whose interaction creates group identity.

Interactional theory provides a framework for understanding communities and how people interact within them. However, this thesis is not a community research project,
as such, the research does not focus on the social conditions of a particular community, and how they function both collectively and with the structures around them. In Chapter Five there is an exploration of the impacts of stigma on community identity, however overall, this is a study concerned with those who work with community, and the methods employed by them. For this reason interactional theory will not be an appropriate framework for this research.

Communitarianism is a dominant theory in community development, and as a framework for consideration, communitarianism positions community involvement as a given and as a key factor in the success of neighbourhood regeneration. It is therefore a useful approach to take to this investigation. Tam (2014) suggests that a communitarian idea is to oppose both top-down declarations on how people should live, and any form of laissez faire thinking that suggests that individuals are best left to finding their own ways without any collective structure. What it offers instead is an inclusive approach to assessing human interactions so as to determine what improvements can be made by all the members of any given community. Tam also notes its focus on empowered community participation in problem-solving (2014). This is where communitarianism is a useful lens through which to view community participation in neighbourhood renewal, as empowerment is rarely the goal in current models of engagement. Empowerment theory, discussed later in this chapter, lends itself to being combined with communitarianism, with its focus on community and individual empowerment.

Communitarianism

Etzioni’s seminal communitarian book, The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda (1993), asserts that in response to increased individualism, there is space for self-interest while also having social responsibility and that a willingness to contribute to the betterment of the society as a whole is both needed and beneficial to individuals. Etzioni argues for a balance between the individual and community. Communitarians argue primarily for increased social responsibility as a core value to be upheld (Etzioni, 1993; Tam, 2014). Etzioni asserts that, “[p]eople are
better off when they combine their self-advancement with investment in their community” (1993, p. 124). This links with another community development concept, social capital, which is considered to be present in situations where community involvement and contribution is high. Social capital is expanded upon later in this chapter.

In communitarianism, civic space or community is the starting point of analysis (Arneil, 2006). Arneil notes that this position sits in between theories of the rights-bearing citizens of liberalism, and the equality-bearing state of socialism, and becomes a new theoretical paradigm that seeks to transcend the left/right divide through an emphasis on the space in between the individual and the state (Arneil, 2006, p. 1). This theory is useful for this thesis as neighbourhood regeneration often falls short of reaching maximum impact when government bodies carry out work for the community rather than with the community. In my experience, community involvement often ceases after the master planning stage, with a reliance on government bodies to implement and maintain changes. Accordingly, the suggestion is that when community is involved from the beginning and in an ongoing capacity, local ownership and local empowerment are invited.

Etzioni (1993) makes the assertion that individuals should have a key role in furnishing the needs of their neighbours and communities. Once they have met their personal needs, individuals have an obligation to promote the well-being of relatives, friends and others in the various communities to which they belong. These include all types of social groups, such as schools, organisations, families, neighbourhoods and interest groups. Etzioni argues for increased social responsibilities, and that “strong rights presume strong responsibilities” (1993, p. 1). This means that if individuals are to demand entitlement to services and rights, there is a requirement to also contribute to society through community and active citizenship. These priorities clearly underpin community development and community engagement work in practice, where officers aim to mobilise community to participate in activities and decision-making. “The best
social events do not merely develop social bonds, but also serve a communitarian purpose, from organising neighbourhood crime watches to running soup kitchens” (Etzioni, 1993, p. 125). To this end, neighbourhood regeneration would need to take into account the presence of opportunities for community contribution, and a key role for community development workers in these projects may be to support the development of these opportunities if they are not present.

Every social philosophy contains a theory of human nature (A. Etzioni, 1996). This is important in social science research, as theories provide some way to understand human motivation (Anfara, 2006). In the context of community work, theories of human nature can offer an explanation of triggers for behaviour, motivations for actions, and barriers to participation. This awareness can assist practitioners in developing community engagement and community development approaches. Communitarian theory views human beings as inherently social (Dixon, 2005). There is therefore an expectation that people will find situations in which they can be a part of their community. Community theorists acknowledge community as “an essential component within the formation of individual identity and as the means for citizens to achieve improved levels of personal well-being” (Dixon, 2005, p. 4). Viewing people as inherently social has implications for practitioners, as a role for practitioners may then be to facilitate opportunities for social capital to develop.

Dixon, Dogan and Sanderson (2005) are critical of communitarianism, arguing that communitarians must acknowledge citizens’ different epistemological understandings of their social world. The assumptions of communitarianism are not reflected in many modern urban settings and do not explain experiences of poor public participation in the outcomes of many neighbourhood renewal projects. As Putnam (2000) points out in his study of the involvement of Americans in community clubs and associations, there has been a steady decline in people participating in traditional community settings. Therein lies a shortcoming in the capacity for communitarianism to underpin this thesis entirely, as in reality, the actual numbers of participants who are involved in community
engagement represents a very small percentage of the population. Tension lies between the communitarian ideal and the reality of low participation, between the collective communitarian and the individual experience. The barriers to participation, and the role of the practitioner in reducing these barriers are not reflected in communitarian theory.

**Empowerment theory**

Empowerment theory offers some new ideas and alternative approaches to examine community participation. Empowerment theory is a community psychology framework that has applicability in community development and community engagement. Empowerment, as a goal, is referred to in community development as a process for marginalised people to gain control over their lives and participate in decision making processes (Christens, 2012). However there is scant literature that links empowerment theory, at a community psychology level, with community development. Christens (2012, pp. 543-544) notes the potential benefits in applying this theory to community work, as well as having protective effects on mental health, psychological empowerment has been found to be associated with higher levels of community participation, and greater sense of community.

Empowerment theory aligns with ABCD and is useful in this study as a framework that can underpin the ABCD approach. Zimmerman and Perkins (1995) explain that empowerment theory compels practitioners to think in terms of competence versus deficits, and strengths versus weaknesses. This aligns closely with the ABCD approach, which seeks assets as opposed to shortcomings. Empowerment research focuses on identifying capabilities instead of risk factors, and investigates environmental influences of social problems instead of blaming the victims of these problems. In the context of neighbourhood renewal, this approach has a great deal of potential, in that it asks communities what the community strengths are, and further, what the environmental barriers may be. As a lens for viewing the work of community engagement practitioners, and alongside communitarianism, this framework helps to understand the current approaches and where they may be improved. For this project, empowerment
theory picks up, where communitarianism finishes. Communitarianism provides a utopian view of community life, empowerment theory provides a possible explanation for why the assumptions of communitarianism do not always play out in neighbourhood renewal contexts. That is, some of the reasons for low rates of community participation may be associated with low levels of individual and community empowerment.

Empowerment theory views professionals as collaborators instead of authority experts (Perkins, 1995). This aligns with community development principles, where community is seen as the expert on matters relating to their community, and the practitioner a facilitator (Toomey, 2011). Neighbourhoods earmarked for renewal are usually chosen based on perceived socio-economic disadvantage (Wood, 2002) or, on the other hand, economic factors driving the sale of state housing (see Tesoreiro, 2003 for example). Decision making in neighbourhood renewal can be a top-down process. Adamson’s study of barriers to community empowerment in regeneration projects in the UK found that “… community involvement in area-based regeneration programmes is a disempowering experience for community participants, which incorporates them into a process determined by wider welfare ideologies” (2010, p. 115). For this to be turned around, communities would need to be given opportunities to make decisions, and have a role in influencing the overall regeneration agenda. In most instances this is not the case and renewal agendas are top down driven. In addition, welfare ideologies that Adamson refers to underpin a capacity building approach, which is discussed later in this chapter. The empowerment approach justifies the topic of community engagement as a valid and important area of study, especially as neighbourhoods earmarked for development are often considered disempowered, and deficient in some way, which is in itself a disempowering starting position.

Empowerment theory can be applied to both the individuals and community (Perkins, 1995, p. 571). For the purpose of investigating neighbourhood renewal, all three approaches to empowerment are interesting. Individual empowerment is necessary, in order for people to feel that they have the capacity to become involved. If an individual
does not have the confidence, and does not feel that their opinion is valued, it is unlikely that he or she will be involved in any way other than to become informed, to accept information. The individual contributes to the collective through their capacity. At the community level the theory has great potential in guiding practice. At this level, empowerment refers to collective action to improve the quality of life in a community. The role of the practitioner then becomes that of facilitator and mobiliser, rather than service agent.

Empowerment theory and communitarianism are aligned in many ways. Both call for increased involvement in community life, albeit to different ends. These differences present an opportunity to bring them together for a better understanding of community participation. Where communitarianism argues for involvement in community life as a right and a responsibility (Etzioni, 1993), empowerment theory argues for involvement in community life as an empowering process for individuals (Perkins, 1995, p. 570). Both need to be present for renewal projects to successfully engage communities. Empowerment theory and communitarianism together provides a lens through which to view community engagement practice, and to critique current models used in community engagement. Christens (2012) argues that individual empowerment leads to an increase in community participation. There may be a connection between low rates of community participation and low levels of individual empowerment.

Social Capital

As this research investigates the potential for different forms of community engagement, one of the key concepts in community development is social capital. While literature on social capital highlights the contested nature of the term, primarily the term emphasises the productive nature of social ties (Cox 1995). Brooks (2005) considers social capital as one of the essential components in the capacity of communities to regenerate in times of stress and changing circumstance. This suggests that building social capital ought to be a key goal in neighbourhood regeneration projects. However, Woods (2002) argues that a focus on social capital in neighbourhood
regeneration should be secondary to community development, as community development is what is needed to build participation and create opportunities for empowerment in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

For Putnam (2000), social capital features in social organisations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Cox (1995) refers to four major capitals: financial capital, physical capital, which refers to environment; human capital which refers to skills and knowledge, and social capital, which she claims receives the least attention of the four. Cox also defines social capital as “the processes between people which establish networks, norms, social trust and facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (1995, p. 8). Moreover, for Cox social capital can be measured and as such, provides a form of social audit that benchmarks the positive and negative effects of change in a community (Cox 2000, p.106). While these approaches to social capital are subtly different, understanding the importance of social capital is relevant for this project because many neighbourhood renewal projects take place in lower socio-economic areas (Wood 2002) and levels of trust and cooperation are often inconsistent.

Community development practitioners are often involved with building social capital. Kenny (2006) and Cox (1995) both argue that community organisations provide the egalitarian conditions for civic engagement that develop social capital. The voluntary nature of community organisations builds trust, reciprocity and open communication, in working with shared responsibility towards shared goals. Cox and Putnam both claim that social capital can be built through working together voluntarily in egalitarian organisations such as environmental groups, Parents and Citizens groups, playgroups etc. Working through group processes and spending time together connects us with others. Stark (2005) notes that getting to know other people is considered by participants as one of the best things about being involved in a community renewal project.
Summary

This chapter has outlined the conceptual framework that underpins this study. The chapter has explained the main ideas that comprise communitarianism and ideas drawn from empowerment theory. The chapter has also outlined the rationale for linking these two conceptual approaches. First, that together they provide some way to explore community engagement practices. Second, when combined, they emphasise the way in which community engagement has been often understood in urban renewal projects and finally, together they also enable an effective critique of current approaches to engage with communities.
Chapter Four: Methods

Introduction

This chapter provides an explanation of the methodological process used in this thesis. This includes the concepts and experiences that have guided selection of the research topic, research methods, and analysis. As previously stated, this study investigates how an asset based community development approach might improve outcomes for communities in neighbourhood renewal programs. To do this, models and techniques used by community engagement practitioners in the neighbourhood regeneration process are examined. While there is significant literature supporting ABCD in community development work (see for example Kretzmann, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Stuart, 2014), this knowledge is rarely applied in neighbourhood renewal projects. This chapter outlines the approach employed in the thesis, which includes a discussion on the linkages between the theoretical framework developed in the previous chapters and the choice of methods for data collection. The chapter also explains the process for selecting interviewees and the analytical methods used to draw out key insights from the data.

Approach

As explained in the previous chapter, communitarianism underpins Community Development as a discipline. While the conceptual framework for this thesis is explored in Chapter Two, the following summary provides an explanation of the thinking that guides work in the field, and thereby guides the research in this study. As a practitioner first and foremost, my overall aim is to explore a topic that has practical benefits for community development work. In my experiences, the process of exploring theory has led to a more robust practice, and a better ability to communicate the benefits and processes of community development. With a communitarian focus, I assume that community engagement in neighbourhood renewal is desirable because communities are best placed to make decisions that affect their lives, and that this process should
empower them to do so, as well as contribute to the building of social capital.

Communitarianism emphasises action research as a methodology, as a core principle of communitarianism is the empowerment of communities, including in the research process. However, the focus of this study is not on communities, but on the people who work with communities, and the drivers of their work. Communitarian theory guides community development work and the principles of communitarianism underpin this project. Tensions exist however because this thesis is a study of practice. Practice in community development work can usefully look to empowerment theory, as it provides a framework through which to view the role of the practitioner.

This is a qualitative study. Kumar (2005) describes qualitative approaches as being useful for the description of situations, a phenomenon, problems or events. This is the best approach for this study as the purpose is to describe community engagement in neighbourhood renewal, and explore the challenges and benefits associated with the process. Community development has its roots in social work, social science, and collective action, all topics of human interest. It is a broad field of practice that includes work in capacity building service delivery programs, assets based approaches that aim to highlight existing strengths, work that builds social capital through creating and augmenting networks and relationships, and a combination of any of the above. Many practitioners use a combination of techniques and the qualitative approach provides an opportunity for people to consider and share the way that they work in the fields of community development and community engagement. A qualitative study is also the best way to elicit the nuances of different community development approaches. Different methods of engagement and participation needed to be explored through dialogue, asking participants to explain their involvement on projects allowed for an interpretation through the lens of communitarianism and empowerment theory. The underlying principles, whether they were strengths based or needs based, became evident through the interview process.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for a range of reasons. First, while I wanted to
guide conversation around the questions above, I also wanted to provide an opportunity for interviewees to consider their practice generally. I was also interested in providing an opportunity for practitioners to give a personal and frank account of what they were trying to achieve, the successes and failures of their work, and some of the unintended impacts on the communities in which they worked. By employing the empowerment/communitarian conceptual framework, I asked questions that would reveal their interests, and success, in empowering the community, what community development approaches were used, and what project goals guided the decisions to use them.

Questions were designed to cover: how practitioners approached community engagement in neighbourhood renewal projects; whether they used a strengths approach or a needs analysis as a starting point; what successful community building looked like to them; how evaluation took place; and some of the benefits and challenges of their approach. To this end, I wanted to find out how the concepts have been reinterpreted by practitioners. Where practitioners were using capacity building as an approach, I wanted to know how they understood that, what kinds of capacities they were trying to build, and what processes informed these approaches. Where a strengths based approach was used, I wanted to find out how that impacted on outcomes, and what was different about the management of these projects.

Participants

I spoke to people who work in this field to find out how practitioners approach community engagement in neighbourhood renewal projects. The cohort chosen was comprised of practitioners who had worked on projects that had integrated renewal as part of the desired renewal outcome. That is, projects where social outcomes were part of the renewal agenda. Of interest, were whether practitioners used an assets based approach, a capacity building approach, or another approach; what form that took in practice, and what success looked like to them. I was interested to hear if other practitioners had experienced the same practical challenges that I had. I also wanted to
find out if there was a gap in the accepted knowledge base around community engagement in neighbourhood regeneration.

To begin the process of recruiting interviewees, a request for examples was posted on the ‘LinkedIn’ Community Development Officers Network and the IAP2 (International Association for Public Participation) ‘LinkedIn’ network. A number of practitioners came forward, and from these, there was some snowballing. Leading ABCD proponents were also targeted. This cohort made up the final ten interviews. While a small group with diverse approaches to community engagement in renewal projects, the intention was to draw insights from their experiences and the outcomes of their approaches, as well as to understand some of the guiding principles and accepted knowledge in this field. The interviewees came from New South Wales (4), South Australia (1) Queensland (1), Western Australia (3), Victoria (1).

**Process**

Interviewees were sent the information letter outlining the study’s aims, as well as the informed consent form. Both of these, along with the ethics application, were approved by Murdoch University’s Human Research Ethics Sub-committee in August 2014, (HREC project number 2014/140).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a research tool as this was considered the most effective method for gaining an in-depth understanding of practitioners’ perspectives on their work in the field. In-depth interviews are from the interpretive tradition (Kumar, 2005, p. 124), with interaction designed to elicit the participants’ perspective on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words. There were also practical considerations to consider in choosing a research tool. Time and space limits meant that participant observation of community engagement in neighbourhood renewal projects was not possible. Gathering participants for a focus group was also not practical, as the cohort was a group of practitioners from different parts of Australia. In-depth interviews were preferable to surveys, as the open ended
nature of the interviews allowed for practitioners to explore the complexities of the topic, consider their practice and reflect on the intended and unexpected outcomes of their work.

Interviews were conducted by phone, Skype and in person during 2014 – 2015. Interviews were recorded then transcribed. Transcripts were sent back to participants for comment and confirmation. Data from interviews was transferred into an Excel spreadsheet categorized under questions, and linked with respondents. With communitarianism and empowerment theory as underpinning frameworks, I was interested in finding data that related to these concepts of community. This guided the way data was analysed and the themes that were extracted. Data was broken down manually into individual ideas, which were then coded under the following headings:

- Models (that guide practice);
- Strengths versus needs (the use of a strengths or needs approach, or a combination of both, and what informs this approach);
- Social capital (practitioners’ concept of community building and social capital);
- Professional skills (and the presence of interdisciplinary teams);
- Integrated renewal (the extent to which the projects had gone beyond physical renewal and into community development domains);
- Evaluation (what factors guided the perception of success and what the measures of success were).

Emerging themes and key points from interviews were then summarised and transferred into another spreadsheet, so that data could be analysed under both questions, and under respondents. For example, I wanted to be able to see all of the themes emerging under a question about evaluation, which included all of the respondents. I also wanted to be able to see the patterns among practitioners working in an ABCD model against patterns among practitioners working in other models. While the number of participants is not sufficient to make broad claims about the benefits of one model versus another, themes did emerge that exposed the tensions of working in
a particular way, and the unexpected outcomes of community engagement in
neighbourhood renewal.

With communitarianism and empowerment theory as underpinning concepts, I was
interested in finding data that related to social capital and how it is built, and methods
and techniques that enable the empowerment of communities. What emerged were
various ways of interpreting the idea of participation, the barriers to participation, the
tensions between community empowerment and the requirements of funding
organisations and governments. Ideas that emerged from the interviews were then
considered under the following themes.

• Partnership models and the concept of representation;
• Community confidence (the extent to which individuals and groups feel
equipped to participate in the community renewal process and the ways in
which community engagement approaches can build or erode confidence);
• Community backlash (when renewal is not wanted by the community);
• Empowerment (approaches that enable empowerment, and the tensions and
conflict between government agendas and community interests).

Summary

This chapter has outlined the process, methods and analytical considerations for
conducting the empirical aspects of this project. As previously stated, this is a
qualitative study on the outcomes of community engagement in neighbourhood
regeneration projects around Australia. A follow up research project, applying the
findings of this research would be well placed to take an action research approach to
community engagement in a neighbourhood renewal project, however this was outside
the scope of this study. This chapter has explained the qualitative methods used to
record data, code the data, and analyse emerging themes. The next two chapters
discuss the key themes that emerged in the collection of data. Chapter Five covers the
importance of community confidence and place making. The importance of
partnerships and representation are explained in Chapter Six. These themes provide the basis for discussion of the features that an ABCD approach can bring to community renewal projects.
Chapter Five: Practitioner impact on community confidence

Introduction

This chapter addresses some of the main themes that come through the interview data. Primarily, the chapter considers practitioner roles in building or eroding community confidence, and how confidence is integral to successful neighbourhood renewal. The deficit model, which is generally used, has a negative impact on community confidence by adding to stigma, assuming low capacity, and assigning ownership and power to government departments and practitioners, rather than to community. In doing this, opportunities for building social capital and embedding sustainability into projects, are lost. On the other hand, an ABCD approach builds community confidence and assigns power and ownership with communities. The current approach to neighbourhood renewal involves labelling communities as deficit in some way, with the view to improve conditions with the help of external agencies and government departments. If the purpose of neighbourhood renewal is to “target both the physical and social environments to improve the social capital, social connectedness, sense of community and economic conditions of residents of the neighbourhood” (Jalaludin et al., 2012), then building community confidence, as a tool for building social capital and a positive shared identity, is an objective well worth considering.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight practices that are damaging to individual and community confidence, and propose alternative approaches based on ABCD. Practitioners interviewed for this project referred to community confidence in neighbourhood renewal in three different ways, and this chapter will investigate each of these themes: firstly, the blow to community confidence that comes from being labelled as a community in deficit; secondly, the level of community confidence required to participate in community engagement; and thirdly, the practices that can build or erode community confidence.

Practitioners need community members to participate in engagement activities.
However, for community members to participate in the opportunities that neighbourhood renewal projects can offer, they need to feel empowered to do so. Empowerment theory provides a lens through which to view community engagement techniques and approaches to neighbourhood renewal. As a guide to practice, empowerment theory may assist practitioners to build community confidence, and therefore, the capacity to participate in neighbourhood renewal. When there is a general sense of low self esteem, and when communities have been humiliated by poor local reputation and labelling, a great deal of work is required before useful engagement can occur. The chapter first discusses labelling and stigma, and the impact these have on community identity. In the next section, a discussion on confidence to participate, and the practices that can develop or hinder confident participation is provided. The final section of the chapter provides examples of place making, and discusses the possibilities for place making to be used as a technique to build community confidence.

**Labelling and stigma**

Negative labelling has a damaging effect on community confidence. Stigma is often present in localities selected for neighbourhood renewal, it is created and perpetuated by articulating social deficit as a reason for intervention. Using words such as ‘deprived’ or ‘disadvantaged’ can be harmful to the community as a whole (Hoban, 2001, p. 316). A review of current neighbourhood renewal projects in Australia uncovered examples of negative labelling and the articulation of deficit on project websites. While arguing for the needs of a community may be necessary to attract government funding, there are implications for community confidence.

A review of the Victorian State government’s community renewal website finds that ‘deficit’ is implied in eight communities chosen for renewal, and places the government as an external expert in turning these communities around:

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Community Renewal is a $20.4m six year initiative aimed at addressing disadvantage in eight urban communities: Frankston North, Laverton,
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Whittington, Bayswater North, Chelsea, Craigieburn, Hampton Park and Rosebud West. These communities receive targeted support to address issues including falling employment, poor access to transport and other services such as early years education (Victorian State Government, 2011).

While intervention may indeed be useful for these communities, the labelling that goes along with renewal can have an adverse effect. A Maroondah Times article on employment programs, developed as part of neighbourhood renewal in Bayswater North, gives Bayswater North the distinction of having the highest unemployment rate in the catchment area (Thwaites, 2012). With this focus on negative aspects of their community, it is not surprising that there was reluctance from the community to become involved in the engagement process. : “There were some issues that the community had about why they had been singled out for that kind of project... There were issues about them being singled out as a disadvantaged community because they didn’t see themselves as that” (participant interview, 17 September 2014). The comment above suggests the community is asking ‘why us?’ If the community did not see themselves as disadvantaged before neighbourhood renewal, they would certainly have the picture after the wheels of neighbourhood renewal began to turn.

An interview with a participant, illustrates how neighbourhood renewal can be interpreted, “I’m British and it used to drive me nuts when people would come in and tell us they are going to fix our community, and well, we were having a really good time” (participant interview, 31 October 2014). This comment illustrates a community having neighbourhood regeneration imposed upon them as a result of a perceived deficit, when the community did not see itself as deficient. Heald (2008) discusses the tendency in development projects for top down verdicts about communities and how well people live their lives. This approach has undertones of moral judgment, assumptions that those with less power should want to be helped by people in organisations who think they know better.

A collective identity that is based on disadvantage is a contributing factor in low
community confidence. This can be explained through an understanding of community. Community has been explained as encompassing solidarity and agency (see Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 12; Hustedde & Ganowicz, 2002, p. 3). These authors explain solidarity as a deeply shared identity, and a code for conduct. Community identity is examined by Puddifoot (1995, p. 367) and sorted into six main categories: locus, or place based identity; distinctiveness of the community; identification with the community; orientation, a resident's own attraction to the community; evaluation of the quality of community life; and evaluation of community functioning. If community development practice is in part the process of creating a deeply shared meaning, there are implications for a community when that shared meaning is about deficit and need. A deeply shared identity can be a positive or negative experience for community.

The existence of state housing is a significant factor in the labelling of a community as disadvantaged (see for example Wood, 2002; Ying, 2013). In a study of housing commission residents, Wood found that “[r]esidents in all the case study areas felt they were stigmatised simply because they lived in an area that had been denigrated for several years. Much of this related to the 'housing commission label’ that was attached to these neighbourhoods” (Wood, 2002, p. 5). Ying notes that “the place of residence may give residents a sense of social class distinction, which can influence community identity significantly” (2013, p. 714), and further links this stigma with a weakened community identity: “if you perceive living in indemnificatory housing communities as linked to some kind of "stigma" label such as low-income, this may significantly weaken the social identity of the community residents” (Ying, 2013, p. 717).

This negative identity can lead to residents’ disassociating from their community identity. In a community renewal process, successful community engagement is dependent on residents’ identification with their community. If residents do not identify with their community, there is little reason to participate in neighbourhood work. As Puddifoot (1995), explains, locus, or place based identity is one of the ways in which community identity is formed. There are implications for community when the place to
which they are attached is negatively labelled. Practitioners working on neighbourhood renewal can do a lot of harm when they add to a shared meaning of deficit. This situation can lead to two options: to accept the label and the victim mindset that goes with it, or rebel against the label and reject the proposal.

Neighbourhood renewal is typically a response to a perception of deficit (Wood, 2002). Communities are aware of this and respond in different ways. Practitioner interviews indicated that backlash can occur, and is more likely in communities that are more marginalised. It is possible that simply announcing that a community has been earmarked for neighbourhood renewal erodes community morale. The Leaving Minto report revealed that there was a tendency for residents to feel more dissatisfied with their neighbourhood after renewal had been announced, some of this is attributed to a lack of security in the foreseeable future, and a general reduction of community interest in the local neighbourhood (Stubbs, 2005). It is also possible that the very mention of ‘revitalisation’ makes people feel like their community is not ‘vital’. Practitioner comments include:

> You need to communicate it in a way that is not ‘rejuvenating’ or ‘revitalising’, don’t put a ‘re’ in front of it. More like – we are going to have a focus on your community and this is what we can do. If you call it a revitalisation program- hmmm aren’t we vital? So it’s all about perception and how you communicate, make it positive rather than negative (participant interview, 28 November 2014).

> ... yes, they were very proud of the community and were concerned about a stigma (participant interview, 5 September 2014).

In communities that are already struggling with negative labels, the announcement of neighbourhood renewal based on a perceived deficit reinforces that stigma. The impact on community confidence can, as is noted above, reduce interest in participation in renewal engagement and activities, and this impacts on practitioners’ ability to generate long term community engagement results.
Confidence to participate

Successful community engagement is dependent on the will of the community to participate. Low community confidence can be a barrier to participation in traditional methods of community engagement. Reference groups, or advisory groups, are a popular method of engagement, designed to represent people with different points of view, fields of interest, or who have a particular stake in the project (Creighton, 2005). These groups can be useful as an engagement tool, but only in as much as participants feel they have the capacity to contribute. Woods notes examples of community engagement that were intimidating for individuals:

> Numerous accounts were also provided about the anxieties created by the invitation to participate. Participation structures placed expectations upon residents and frequently led to feelings of inadequacy. This often related to ‘language barriers’. Residents expressed anxieties about their ability to express themselves clearly in formal meetings and some had problems with basic literacy (Wood, 2002, p. 8).

In the UK, programs of renewal have been criticized for inaccessible engagement techniques that alienated the community rather than welcomed them:

> Local residents perceived a lack of commitment to, or opportunities for, training and capacity building for genuine newcomers and many described feelings of inadequacy in formal contexts, especially board meetings. Of resident board members interviewed, all said they felt disempowered in board meetings and held back from speaking at meetings for fear of appearing foolish. In particular, each resident’s representative identified policy and strategy discussions as largely beyond their current understandings, and two added that they felt this was more to do with needless use of meta-language than with anything inherently complicated (Dinham, 2005, p. 307).

Adamson (2010, p. 117) notes that some capacity building may be necessary to build
perceived skills and the confidence to contribute. Lack of confidence impacts on whether or not people get involved, are willing to attend meetings, run projects and stand up for what the community wants. In some instances, confidence needs to be built up in people before they can participate. Public participation is explored more thoroughly in the following chapter; the focus of this chapter is practitioner roles in building or eroding community confidence, and community engagement techniques such as reference groups have the potential to both build and erode confidence.

**Confidence and empowerment**

Empowerment theorists advocate that practitioners identify the physical barriers to wellbeing, rather than blaming the victim (Perkins, 1995). In this context of participation, this may mean reconsidering traditional techniques such as formal meetings or workshops. One ABCD practitioner interviewed chose to take a very informal approach to community engagement, so that techniques were not intimidating. While this project was not neighbourhood renewal, but community renewal in a caravan park, the technique is transferrable to a neighbourhood renewal context:

A few things were important for us as a team in the caravan park project. One was about assertive outreach – going to where the people are at. Also that it was low key and non-threatening. The engagement tools that we would use were around kids’ playgroups, after school activities, we had community sharing lunches, BBQs, that sort of stuff. So it was about building trust and relationships (participant interview, 13 March 2015).

This approach, referred to by the practitioner as ‘assertive outreach’, takes the engagement to the community, as opposed to asking community members to come to the engagement, to activities such as community meetings and workshops. This approach enables practitioners to meet residents in situations where they are already comfortable, and allows more targeted engagement. It allows for engagement with
community members who would not typically go to a formal meeting. Confidence to participate can be built through an introduction to participation that is accessible.

Another method, explained by Adamson (2010), is supporting community members to build confidence in smaller groups. This creates a situation that is less intimidating initially, and residents may eventually develop the confidence to participate in the more formal structures. In Adamson’s example, community workers developed confidence in communities to participate in reference groups. They did this by creating secondary committees based on locality or interest, as opposed to a singular reference group. “This model built social capital, and community members often proceeded to the broader reference groups after they had built confidence” (Adamson, 2010, p. 117).

Adamson argues that community empowerment and citizen participation is dependent on the creation of well-connected communities. This example of a broad reference group is mentioned in most of the interviews. This raises questions around social justice; for example, is the opportunity to participate equally accessible, both physically and socially, across a broad demographic including people with disability, those with low literacy levels, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds? Those with lower confidence are less likely to participate in reference groups, which attract people who are comfortable in this environment. Sub-committees, held in accessible locations, are a way of reaching out to different demographic groups in the community.

A number of practitioners interviewed spoke about building confidence of community members through up-skilling programs that aimed to equip community members with the skills and confidence to take advantage of the opportunities that neighbourhood renewal would eventually offer. In these cases capacity building in the form of education and training were built in to projects, in order to leave ongoing benefits. For example:

So we’re putting together a pathways strategy which is where we’re bringing in employment agencies, trainers, Greening Australia and different agencies and saying, as the infrastructure projects roll out, can we put together pre-
employment training, as a precursor to working in trades with companies on site. Also the tenders, we only want to hear from employers who have got traineeships and employment programs as part of it... so that we’ve got that local community ready to take advantage of what is happening there, rather than displacement (participant interview, 31 October 2013).

In this example opportunities for the community are built into the project. In another practitioner example, an award winning employment program was built into the neighbourhood renewal project, “Residents are clamouring to get involved in the employment program. We’ve expanded the employment program model to other projects” (participant interview, 5 September 2014). Having consideration for these community development outcomes are examples where practitioners have gone beyond traditional neighbourhood renewal, and aimed to add social value to the project as well.

The level of engagement and the opportunities given can put limitations on community contribution. Dinham (2005) quotes a community respondent from a UK neighbourhood regeneration project: “it sometimes feels like local people are engaged for their ideas, not for their strategies and this leaves them with a ‘confidence gap’ about putting their ideas into practice. In this way, she felt that local people lose control of their own ideas rather than are helped to implement them strategically” (Dinham, 2005, p. 308). If community workers play the role of facilitator, the community has the opportunity to realise their goals themselves. Toomey (2011) provides examples of different roles community workers can play, for example, the ‘provider’ gives the gift of charity to less fortunate communities. This is typically done by organisations and people, whose lives will not be directly affected by the project. The ‘facilitator’ on the other hand, provides space for community to work together. “It is not about ‘working’ on people but rather ‘working with’ them” (Toomey, 2011, p. 190). With this approach community members are supported to create and implement their own projects in their own communities. This in itself builds community confidence.
Practitioners referred to the concept of community confidence in explaining the difficulty in getting people to realise that they have assets. For example, “Not many communities know their assets, they are good at recognising their needs” (participant interview, 13 February 2015), and further, “[t]he challenge is getting people to realise that they have assets” (participant interview, 28 November 2014). Practitioners in these examples understood that part of their role was uncovering the assets and facilitating a process where people could realise their community strengths. Once this process was started however, the transformation and boost in participation was significant. Confidence in a community is linked with sense of pride, but particularly about having belief in the capacity of the community. This is encapsulated in the following: “… you’ll see people’s sense of confidence, and pride in the community has skyrocketed, and the sense that they are doing it themselves” (participant interview, 13 February 2015).

**Place making and community confidence**

Place making has been included in this chapter for its potential to build community confidence and for its alignment with asset based community development. Place making is a relatively new phrase incorporating elements of planning, community development, cultural development, marketing and economic development. It is useful in this discussion because it is linked with asset based community development as it has the same focus on existing strengths and community knowledge, engaging communities in positive explorations of identity and culture. It can be an effective way of building community confidence for two reasons. First, it is a focus on place, the physical environment, rather than socio-economic circumstances, bringing attention to something that is not necessarily personal. Place can be separated from the personal, and so a critique of place does not necessarily have to have the same implications for community confidence, as a critique of socio-economic realities. Second, with this focus on place, community ownership and community mobilisation for achieving goals, there is great potential for place making to build on community confidence and create
empowering experiences. Used alongside asset based community development, place making can be a confidence building approach for community engagement practitioners in neighbourhood renewal projects.

Place making is explained by world leaders in the field, not for profit organisation, Project for Public Spaces (PPS):

Placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community. Strengthening the connection between people and the places they share. Placemaking refers to a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value. More than just promoting better urban design, Placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution (Project for Public Spaces; www.pps.org).

Place makers are guided by the community, rather than using a top-down approach. In place making, it is assumed that the community has the expertise to determine where the local assets are, and what will enliven or activate a place. This focus on community knowledge has the potential to build community confidence, aligning with asset based community development approaches and empowerment theory. Empowerment theorists argue for a focus on strengths versus weakness (Perkins, 1995), place makers look for the physical assets in communities and build on these in a way that is informed by community culture.

In place making, community culture is embedded into physical structures and landscaping through creative processes. “With community-based participation at its centre, an effective Placemaking process capitalises on a local community’s assets, inspiration, and potential, and it results in the creation of quality public spaces that contribute to people’s health, happiness, and well-being” (Project for Public Spaces; www.pps.org). Place making involves facilitating community members to work together
on physical projects. Communitarian theory explains that community building occurs when community members work alongside one another to serve the broader community benefit (Etzioni, 1993). One of the known outcomes of place making is increased community pride and identity. If place making can build community confidence, it may be a useful approach in neighbourhood renewal projects for the same reasons that ABCD may be a useful approach: building community confidence leads to communities that are more engaged in the process, more self-reliant, and more likely to sustain their involvement in the long term.

One practitioner interviewed for this project summarises a project below:

We held a place making workshop, and we got about 60, 70 people. It was just about looking at the suburb, and asking ‘what are your ideas’. A lot of ideas were around the park. So we realised that the park was a point of interest. So then we said “what would you like to see in the park”. And we started drilling down until we formed several interest groups – events, a playground, environment (participant interview, 6 March 2015).

The process above allowed for community members to become involved in aspects of renewal that were of interest to them, where they could contribute in a meaningful way, building individual and collective confidence. The practitioner above was able to harness community energy by exploring what was important to them, rather than taking a top down approach.

Semenza and March (2009) refer to an intervention in Portland, Oregon, where communities were engaged in the creation of public amenities such as an information kiosk, benches, trellises for hanging gardens, and art walls. Post project surveys showed that people had increased social interactions and neighbourhood participation. They conclude that “Community involvement in urban design can enrich social networks with direct benefits for social capital and well-being” (2009, p. 22). Through the process of working on construction and community art projects, community members interacted
and bonded with others locals. Sense of place was strengthened through urban beautification and project participation (2009, p. 22). Community confidence can be enhanced by physical beautification, and by community involvement in project delivery, all adding to improved community engagement outcomes.

**Summary**

Confidence, both individual confidence, and community confidence, emerged as a theme in this study for practitioners working on neighbourhood renewal projects. Confidence, as outlined above, was considered as something that is often missing or diminished in neighbourhoods that have been identified for development, and can be further eroded depending on the methods of entry into a community, and the ongoing community engagement approach. The method of entry into a community needs to be well considered, with special attention to engaging with local community leaders or community connectors. The language of neighbourhood renewal can be problematic in reinforcing negative stereotypes, and can be counterproductive in efforts to build social capital and engagement. Practitioners may find greater success from having a better understanding of who the community is, before entering with a set plan of engagement. Creative methods of engagement may be useful in developing trust and building relationships in order to maximise participation. The next chapter expands on the themes derived from this project in order to explore practitioners’ interpretations of the push to partner with community members.
Chapter Six: Participation, partnerships and representation

Introduction

Partnership models based on community participation are often used by practitioners in community engagement in neighbourhood renewal, and emerged as a preferred technique by practitioners interviewed for this thesis. This chapter explores how effective these models are in ensuring community representation in neighbourhood renewal decision-making, and how they compare when considered against principles of asset based community development, empowerment theory and communitarian theory. Community partnerships have emerged from community development practice. However, as described in Chapter Two, neoliberal agendas have impacted on community engagement and collaborative planning, using the language of deliberative democracy, while still maintaining hegemonic control (Roy, 2014). Competing versions of community participation, deriving from community development perspectives and neoliberal perspectives create a contested space for this practice. The purpose of this chapter is to explore current models of engagement as have been identified by interviewees in this study and compare them with community development values and best practice.

Participation

Community partnerships have become a crucial part of any neighbourhood renewal project. For many years in Australia, State and Federal governments have given it increasing prominence (Wood, 2002). Curtis explains that there has been “a merging of experience world-wide that has led to a conclusion that place-based regeneration projects with sustainability objectives need to adopt a partnership approach with active involvement of local communities to stand any change of success” (2006, p. 4). In addition, research shows that “where there is increased interplay between civil community and local government, there are higher levels of active democracy and social capital, which also coincides with the community of greater economic prosperity”
Practitioners interviewed for this thesis all agreed that community participation was an essential part of their work in neighbourhood renewal. For example:

People who live in the area really do know best about what it would take to enliven, activate, create a safer place (participant interview, 6 March 2015).

It’s about the community having the opportunity to have input. The community having that opportunity to contribute, genuinely, into how their community operates, runs and looks. For me, it’s about making sure it is about the broader community, not just those with the loudest voices, or those who can best articulate their views (participant interview, 17 September 2014).

With this evidence pointing to the benefits of partnerships between government and community, a discussion on the effective use of partnership models and their capacity to ensure representation, is useful.

The practical application of partnership models was described by five of the ten practitioners interviewed. In these cases, reference groups or steering groups were used in neighbourhood renewal projects. This participation was considered an opportunity for people to contribute to decisions affecting their lives, as community members sat alongside government and other service agencies in decision making processes. For example, in neighbourhood renewal in South Australia, a reference group was established:

From the early stages there, there’s been an active reference group with passionate local residents on it. The local council administers that reference group but community members chair and run the meetings. They play a very active part in all the engagement activities. That has been a really strong means of our being able to connect with the local community. It’s a partnership model (participant interview, 5 September 2014).
As previously explained, from a community development viewpoint, principles of community participation come from communitarianism. Communitarian theorists propose an expectation and a responsibility for community participation, the responsibility to participate goes hand in hand with community life (Etzioni, 1993). For communitarians there would be a willingness from community to contribute, and on the other hand, an understanding from governments that community knows best how to find solutions to its own challenges, as communitarianism positions the local community as the expert. Insider knowledge and expertise is essential in order to make appropriate and sustainable interventions, and in terms of the fundamental values of empowerment, partnership and involvement which underpin community development (Dinham, 2005). While these ideas are consistent with neo-liberal views on individual responsibility, the principles of empowerment, reducing barriers and acknowledging and addressing social justice issues, are absent from a purely neoliberal approach. In contrast, rather than breaking down power imbalances, Roy (2014) argues that deliberative democratic processes are not only incapable of resisting neoliberal power structures, but can help reinforce them.

Government departments have embraced partnerships and participatory models (Dinham, 2005; Roy, 2014). Head (2008, p. 447) explains four main reasons for this: better informed decision making through increased involvement by stakeholders; shared responsibility; allocating responsibility to the community which is in line with government doctrine of reduced intervention; and increasing trust in government while at the same time reducing support for protest movements. Adding to the final point, Cornwall (2008) argues that community engagement is more of a political process than a technique, referring to the use of community engagement to justify already made government decisions. Community engagement has come to mean different things in different contexts, and there are tensions in the use of the term.

Interview data from this research project indicates that reference groups that are set up to comment on neighbourhood renewal are rarely established with a high level of
empowerment in mind. Research also indicates that empowerment is rarely an identified goal for practitioners (Cornwall, 2008; Lawson, 2010). Rather than an opportunity to learn from the knowledge and strengths in the community, reference groups are sometimes set up to justify decisions that are already made, as discussed below by Cornwall:

Consultation is widely used, north and south, as a means of legitimating already-taken decisions, providing a thin veneer of participation to lend the process moral authority. Its outcomes are open to being selectively read and used by those with the power to decide. Rarely are there any guarantees that what is said will be responded to or taken into account (Cornwall, 2008, p. 270).

A practitioner interviewed for this thesis had the following to say about engagement designed to give moral authority to an already made decision:

When someone comes in and says this is what we’re going to do and delivers something, quite often people are not engaged. So I’ve worked in various organisations and some of them will try to do it first, and then try to engage the community to be involved, so they can take more ownership and then they can pull away. But that hasn’t worked really, because they’ve really done it first, and then they’re like, come on, get onto my idea (participant interview, 28 November 2014).

This practice erodes trust and leads to disengagement. Abbott notes that governments that are threatened or insecure are less likely to be open to the idea of community involvement in decision making (Abbott, 1995). In this situation community involvement becomes a form of manipulation, seeking approval post decision. Meikle and Jones (2013) note that while communities want greater transparency, a great deal of community engagement in Australia appears to be ‘a tick box’ exercise.

**International Association for Public Participation**

As explained in Chapter Two, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)
model has become the dominant community engagement tool in Australia. The model has developed an internationally recognised spectrum of public participation, that guides practitioners on levels of engagement relating to the decision making power given to stakeholders. IAP2 has internationally recognised training modules for community engagement practitioners, and consultants working in the field are endorsed through membership of IAP2. A number of practitioners interviewed for this thesis use the IAP2 model to guide their community engagement approach. For example, “We use the IAP2 Spectrum. Our promise to the community is consultation, but we try, and do, deliver much more. In instances where the community knows how to deal with government and what we do, we can go further” (participant interview, 5 September 2014).

The spectrum provides a clear process where the decision making is largely top down. Community engagement is a complex process (Meikle, 2013), and the IAP2 model provides a useful starting point for organisations embarking on this practice. However, the spectrum is broad (see Figure 1 below), as such, the concept of participation can easily be defined to meet almost any interpretation (Cornwall, 2008). Community engagement has its roots in community development as a tool for empowerment (Dinham, 2005), however the lower ranges of the IAP2 spectrum are a dilution of the concept of community engagement, and a move, in some instances, to an exercise in marketing.
The IAP2 model of engagement is developed as a guide for practitioners, and while there is some interactions with Arnstein’s 1969 ladder of participation (see Figure 2 below), the outcomes for community are open to question.
Most neighbourhood renewal practitioners operate somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. However, “being involved in a process is not equivalent to having a voice” (Cornwall, 2008, p. 278), and levels other than ‘empowerment’ do not offer any commitment to following the will of the community. “It is even more common for rhetoric about involving people in decision-making to boil down to engaging them in marginal choices when the real decisions are clearly being made elsewhere” (Cornwall, 2008, p. 279). Telling a community that half the housing in the area is going to be redeveloped and sold, but they can choose where the swing set will go in the park, does not reflect real choice. While this may be a legitimate decision for government bodies to make, screening the big decisions with consultation on low level items is arguably manipulative.
At one end of the IAP2 spectrum, ‘inform’ means that the public will be provided with “balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions” (International Association of Public Participation, 2014). This contradicts one of the core values of IAP2, that “Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process”. Being informed is not equivalent to being involved in the decision making process. The United Nations Brisbane Declaration on community engagement states that:

Community engagement is a two way process: By which the aspirations, concerns, needs and values of citizens and communities are incorporated at all levels and in all sectors in policy development, planning, decision-making, service delivery and assessment (United Nations cited by Butteriss, 2014).

Compared with asset based community development, the IAP2 model falls under an entirely different paradigm. IAP2 defined participation refers to invited participation, where decision makers invite community to participate on a level decided by the decision making body. The IAP2 model does not include voluntary participation, or ‘autonomous participation’ (Cornwall, 2008, p. 282). “The limitation of the Spectrum is that it is a very useful framework for community engagement around decision-making, but is less useful for relationship development and capacity building” (Butteriss, 2014). Relationship development and capacity building are often cited as goals for neighbourhood renewal, and the IAP2 model is not a complete solution to those goals. Relationship building and capacity building can be successfully introduced with an ABCD approach, where practitioners facilitate networks between local residents, local associations and local institutions (Kretzmann, 1993), and develop capacity building models that are internally agreed.

**Community development and project management approaches**

Tensions between a community development and a project management interpretation
of community engagement are concerned with power. Reducing the impact of power and inequality is key in ABCD, and a significant goal for empowerment theorists. However the power in neighbourhood renewal typically sits with the government department leading regeneration work. For example: “Consultation for us means meaningfully giving community an influential voice. Listen to their views and record their views, check back that we heard right, and then seriously consider how those views can be used in the project. We report back to the community on what could and what couldn’t be used, and are clear about the reasoning behind it” (participant interview, 5 September 2014). This response represents best practice in the IAP2 model. In this example, the decision makers may use the community’s ideas if they can, and they may not, either way it will be at their discretion. This is not to say that community engagement is in itself immoral, what this does, is illustrate the leading paradigm in this work, which puts the practitioner, not the community, in the driver’s seat.

Neoliberal interpretations when compared with communitarian and empowerment approaches of community engagement are, on face value, similar, in that both approaches favour individual responsibility. However, neoliberalism prioritises the market and individualism, while empowerment theory and communitarianism are concerned with social justice and community voice. In other words, the latter are concerned with challenging the status quo in a bid to enable radical, structural changes if driven by the community. This highlights the main challenge to the integration of empowerment theory and communitarianism in the current neoliberal approach to community engagement. As the dominant instrument of choice, the IAP2 spectrum, at one level maintains the current power structure between government departments or out-sourced development bodies while still employing the rhetoric of community engagement. The implication therefore is that the more dominant forms of community engagement do not encourage deep seated change.

On the other hand, ABCD puts the community in the driver’s seat. This requires a significant shift in the way that practitioners view their role. As Associate Professor from
The University of Newcastle, and ABCD practitioner, explains:

An ABCD approach requires a shift in the thinking in the workers. So it’s about a change of thinking in myself, how I think about things and am I willing to let go of things. It’s essentially a way of reframing the world. So often in neighbourhood renewal projects they are set up around the idea of here’s a group of people or here’s a neighbourhood and it’s got a deficit, or some sort of problem and some sort of needs that need to be addressed. So it’s the classic thing then about who’s seen as having agency, who’s seen as being the doer, who’s seen as being the done to. So for me ABCD is about trying to reframe that way of thinking about the world and so that way of acting in the world. When you talk to people who are in communities about a strengths based approach they get it immediately because they’ve been at the pointy end of what it’s like to be people who are ‘done to’ (participant interview, 17 April 2015).

There are challenges to adopting an ABCD approach, most of which sit with the neighbourhood renewal organisation’s ability to work on the high end of the IAP2 spectrum. The assumption in empowerment theory is that local residents should not only be determining the approaches to local issues, but should also be determining the focal issues and goals of development projects (Christens, 2012).

Practitioners also have interests of their own. Community and stakeholder engagement has become big business. Hendriks and Carson (2008) examine the commercialisation of community engagement, as consultants vie for work with decision makers in consultation and facilitation. Many of these consultants align their practice with the IAP2 model of engagement. A key distinction between the disciplines of community development and stakeholder engagement, is that the former has an ethos of social justice, inclusion, and community empowerment (Ife, 2002; Kenny, 2006) whereas stakeholder engagement is driven largely in Australia by the IAP2 model of engagement, that includes a range of methods to suit the needs of the decision maker. Fawcett et al. (1995) claim that partnerships change the relationships between participating groups
and individuals. Ideally the power structures would be reduced and new connections would be formed. However, community engagement consultants are contracted by decision makers in governments and organisations, and as such, are answerable to them, rather than the community. This arrangement is unlikely to bring about any real shift in power differences between community and decision makers.

**Representation**

Communitarian theorists assume that local people are best placed to make local decisions (Tam, 2014). Partnership models are based on this premise. However, given that there are social, economic and cultural barriers to participation, there are challenges in establishing reference groups that are representational of community diversity. Typically, reference groups are made up of a selection of community members who self-nominate to represent the broader community. However, communities are not homogenous and participating community members have quite a responsibility in representing the interests of many different people with diverse backgrounds and diverse interests.

In this project, practitioners commented on the difficulty of achieving a diverse representation of people on reference groups in community engagement generally. For example: “Traditionally we had ward based community advisory groups. They would meet every month, it’s difficult to get a broad demographic to those meetings” (participant interview, 6 March 2015). There are some people who like to attend meetings, and others who don’t. More specifically, in neighbourhood renewal projects, evidence from researchers suggests that marginalised people are less likely to participate in consultation meetings. There are a number of reasons for this, including lack of confidence, being outside of the communication loops, and information being presented in an inaccessible format. In a study conducted by Woods (2002, p. 5) “the task of promoting participation in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is not a straightforward one. The study revealed how several life experiences and other barriers had combined to effectively exclude local people from the process of renewal”.
This was also reiterated by practitioner interviews. For example: “Engagement was difficult, and we were always aware that the area that was more disadvantaged wasn’t getting as much representation as the other one” (participant interview, 17 September 2014). Practitioners were aware of this challenge, however the State Government in Victoria claimed 50% participation as a key outcome achieved for the overall redevelopment project. “Steering Committees and Strategic Partnership Groups established across all eight sites, featuring at least 50% resident membership” (State Government of Victoria, 2011). The reality was quite different. The practitioner on the ground describes their experience with the prescribed model of partnership:

There was a governance structure that was set up from the start that was defined by the funding guidelines. There was a steering group that was made up of some service providers, theoretically it was to have half of the members being residents, and council reps as well... The project had two areas, divided by industrial land. It was easier to get the community engaged in the steering group from one end than the other. The area that was harder to engage with was an area that was more disadvantaged. So we never really did meet the 50% ratio for the whole project (participant interview 17 September 2014).

As these comments suggest, there is some disconnect between goals of funding bodies and claims, and ‘real on the ground’ experience. Looking at this through the lens of empowerment theory may be useful in understanding how to improve participation. Research shows that psychological empowerment has been found to be associated with greater levels of community participation (Christens, 2012, pp. 543-544). Therefore, if participation is the goal, working in ways that empower individuals and communities may be useful. This is important for a number of reasons. The point of reference groups is that they should be representational, or put differently, if they are not representative of the community, practitioners cannot know the view of the broader community.
To ensure broad representation, alternative techniques may be required. Woods notes the potential for practitioners to use small group techniques, which can build confidence and tap into the interests of local communities:

Efforts clearly need to be made to ensure that the structures and processes that they adopt are more amenable to local people. While training can be provided to enable residents to participate in conventional frameworks there are dangers that this simply leads to their co-option and an alternative approach is to adopt structures and processes that facilitate wider involvement in decision making. A key part of this and something highlighted in the fieldwork is the use of small group techniques (Wood, 2002, p. 5).

Summary
This chapter has highlighted some of the themes drawn from the interviews with practitioners. The chapter explored the concept of participation and the use of partnership models, comparing current models with community development principles. The chapter also explained why some partnership models do not allow equitable representation, and why it is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect a handful of residents to be the voice of a community. Further, the chapter highlighted some limitations with the International Association for Public Participation model from a communitarianism and empowerment theory perspective. It is important however to state that this chapter is not suggesting that community engagement through the IAP2 model is flawed. Rather, that the IAP2 model employs a diluted approach to community engagement, and perhaps more importantly, that the model has become a commercial product that appears to do little to ameliorate power structures when used in community renewal projects.
Chapter Seven:

Improvements to practice: a discussion on asset based community development in neighbourhood renewal

Introduction

The previous two chapters have explored emerging themes from this research, and some of the challenges in the practice of community engagement in neighbourhood renewal. These chapters have focused on current models and the reasons why they can be problematic. This chapter develops an argument for the use of asset based community development (ABCD) as a useful approach in this field of work. As explained in the Introduction, this study questions why ABCD is not utilised more often in current neighbourhood renewal projects. When applied in the early stages of neighbourhood renewal, ABCD can improve acceptance and participation from the community, and it can also be used in combination with other approaches at different stages of renewal depending on the situation. ABCD aligns well with communitarianism and empowerment theory, and information from practitioners indicates that these principles may serve communities in more effective ways than the current approaches.

Asset based community development background

ABCD was developed by Kretzmann and McKnight, who set up the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at the Centre for Civic Engagement at Northwestern University, Illinois (Kretzmann, 1993). It has been used by community development practitioners in Australia since the 1990s (Brooks, 2015). The practice of working with strengths was present for many years, and examples of this can be found in community work as far back as the 1920s (Brooks, 2015). Neighbourhoods earmarked for renewal are usually chosen based on perceived socio-economic disadvantage (Wood, 2002). ABCD inverts the idea of disadvantage by using various strategies to uncover community capacity. When community engagement in neighbourhood renewal is viewed through the lens of empowerment theory, ABCD becomes a useful approach in that it asks
communities to identify strengths, and the environmental barriers that may be in
operation. Empowerment theory research focuses on identifying strengths instead of
risk factors, and investigates structural contexts of social issues rather than targeting
individual factors that locate blame with the victims of disadvantage. In both
empowerment theory and ABCD, professionals are viewed as collaborators instead of
authoritative experts (Perkins, 1995). In a similar way, community development
principles and communitarian theory view the community as the expert on matters
relating to their community (Toomey, 2011).

Working with an ABCD approach requires a shift away from a needs based paradigm of
community work. Practitioners interviewed for this project who were working in this
model had reflected on the process and thus highlighted many benefits of ABCD:

I was involved in state government, and became conscious that our whole
approach was top down – what the community needed was this cavalry that
would come in and deliver a set of programs. I came to the realisation that
communities have never been built to be sustainable in that fashion. The only
communities I’ve seen that are really sustainable are ones that are built from the
inside out (participant interview, 13 February 2015).

A practitioner who was in the final stages of community engagement for a
neighbourhood renewal project considered their process: “It was more of a visioning
exercise, a focus on gaps more so. On reflection there could have been more of a focus
on a strengths based approach” (participant interview, 17 September 2014).

**Challenges in implementing asset based community development**

The dominant paradigm in the development sector is needs based and top down, with a
preoccupation on externally-driven agendas and results (Peters, 2013, p. 3). In this
environment, adopting ABCD is a considerable challenge. Practitioners who were
interviewed were aware that this shift was not an easy one: “ABCD is aspirational. It is
about the journey, not prescribed destinations” (Brooks, 2015). Transitioning to this
approach in neighbourhood renewal is not easy because of the focus on prescribed outcomes. It is this tension between engaging with communities without predestined outcomes and engaging with communities with a view to implementing prescribed neighbourhood renewal projects that is one of the barriers to adopting the ABCD model.

Another practitioner discussed the dependence on need that communities develop when it leads to increased funding: “The biggest challenge is how we move departments to think about things in a different way, because all the funding models are about who has the biggest need, and the most money goes to the community who has the most needs” (participant interview, 17 April 2015). This is a self-perpetuating cycle. This sets up the dynamic that reinforces the idea of need such that communities with the most need receive the most resources, there is less incentive to be self-directed.

**Benefits of using an asset based community development approach**

The use of ABCD can reduce the risk of community backlash in neighbourhood renewal. Community resentment can be minimised by entering the community in a positive way. A strengths based inquiry, at least as a starting point, is more empowering and more confidence building than a needs analysis. Communitarianism supports bottom up methods of work in community, and empowerment theory assumes that a strengths based approach will create an improved result over a needs based approach. Using these principles may improve participation from communities, and ensure that people are not alienated from the process from the beginning by inappropriate language and assumptions about their communities, as discussed in Chapter Five.

Approaches to community engagement in neighbourhood renewal are varied in goals and techniques, but all involve some level of dialogue with the community. The use of language impacts on the perception of the project from the very beginning. Practitioners spoke about this impact, for example: “Community building implies that there is something missing. Other language used in ABCD is around mobilising” (participant interview, 17 April 2015), and “It’s not me building a community, when you
say community building some people may say well the community doesn’t need to be built. We’re quite happy with our lot” (participant interview, 28 November 2014). Empowerment theorists argue for practitioners to think in terms of competence and strengths as a starting point (Perkins, 1995). Empowerment research focuses on identifying capabilities instead of risk factors, and investigates environmental influences of social problems and structural inequality, rather than blaming the victims of these problems. It may also be useful for practitioners to talk about ‘reducing structural barriers to wellbeing’, so that the discussion concerns the environment rather than the community, and does not further stigmatise community members.

One practitioner working in a capacity building model used the phrase ‘educating the community’ in relation to community engagement and capacity building, whereas practitioners working with an ABCD approach often referred to ‘listening to the community’ as key in community engagement. ‘Educating the community’ implies that the practitioner has something that the community needs, conversely, ‘listening to the community’ implies that the community has something that the practitioner needs. These are the languages of capacity building, versus asset based community development. Democratic communitarianism embraces the concept of subsidiarity, meaning, “the groups closest to a problem should attend to it, receiving support from higher level groups only if necessary” (Etzioni, 2003, p. 226).

Community development practice emphasises the role of the practitioner as collaborator or facilitator rather than expert, respecting local community knowledge. “In community development, local participation is regarded as axiomatic, both to the success of any local initiative, which requires ‘insider knowledge’ and expertise in order to make appropriate and sustainable interventions” (Dinham, 2005, p. 303). Community development acknowledges the starting point of participants, their skills, capacities and abilities, and encourages them. Therefore, when applying community development theory, practitioners should only ‘educate’, if and when there has been substantial ‘listening’ that has shown that capacity building is of interest to the community.
Labeling communities as disadvantaged can work to reinforce that disadvantage. Moreover, communities can become dependent on disadvantage for access to their share of government budget in a never ending cycle of need and service. An ABCD practitioner discusses a community defined by disadvantage:

I remember in the Valley the Victorian government had done a report on local areas. And one of the counsellors was outraged because Latrobe Valley wasn’t at the bottom! Being at the bottom was a considered a good thing because then they got more resourcing” (participant interview, personal communication, 17 April 2015).

This model does not encourage empowerment, because communities are taught to need. They are taught that their wellbeing depends on agencies and external expertise. The erosion to confidence and capacity makes this a self-fulfilling prophesy, as there is no real incentive for self determination and independence.

In Chapter Five, the impact of stigma on community confidence was discussed, as well as the ways in which labels can impact on identity and engagement. Beginning neighbourhood renewal with the assumption that communities are in deficit adds to this stigma. In contrast, asset based community development challenges labels and stereotypes. Disadvantage is not ignored, but it is acknowledged that this is only part of the truth (Kretzmann, 1993), and that in addition, strengths and assets exist in all communities. Placing the focus on these strengths and assets instead of on deficits, can build community confidence rather than erode it. By engaging sensitively with the community on their own terms, and by engaging in a non-threatening way, barriers to participation can be reduced.

**Asset based community development in practice**

ABCD practitioners aim to discover what is already working in a community, so the questions that are asked are positively framed. For example:
What do they love, what are the best things in your community and what can we build upon. Rather than saying well we feel you need a new community centre, and your community needs to be revitalised and so forth (participant interview, 28 November 2014).

These assets can be built on in order to build confidence and social capital. An ABCD technique is the facilitation of an asset mapping process that focuses on the personal, organisational and institutional strengths in the community. Included in this are the organisations and institutions, and the capacities of residents (Kretzmann, 1993). This mapping process can uncover strengths that may have been overlooked, and new opportunities for partnerships. By “connecting the dots” between assets through relationship building, the circle of community involvement widens, with networks that can support and sustain community over time (Snow, 2001). With this approach, bridging social capital can be developed.

In ABCD, programs are not imposed on communities, as there is an awareness that this top down approach does not work: “Simple principle – you never enter a community unless the community wants you to enter it. So if community doesn’t sense a need it is a total waste of time” (participant interview, 17 April 2015). Previous examples have illustrated the difficulty in achieving buy in from communities where there is not an overt interest in renewal. The ‘why us?’ response is common in these situations.

Practitioners discussed the point of entry as being particularly significant. A number of practitioners discussed the need to spend time learning about the community, discovering who the significant players are, and developing a relationship with these people in order to enter the community. The following examples illustrate this idea:

The phrase I use is ‘how do you enter?’ and ‘who do you enter through?’ It’s often good to start with a number of ways. One is through trusted gatekeepers, who are people trusted in the community, sometimes that’s the local Councillor, sometimes it’s the library (participant interview, 31 October 2014).
In the broader community it might be a key community leader or something like that, and starting to build that relationship, and them understanding the reasons or purpose of what we are there for, and looking at what was already working well in their community and tapping into that. Doing that, then the leader, or manager/owner in our case, would let the community know well this is what they’re here for, this is what’s going on, and it could be fun! Which it quite often was (participant interview, 13 March 2015).

ABCD practitioners above noted the importance of finding community connectors, or community champions, who are able to take on a role in linking the community and renewal practitioners. In these projects, the practitioners did not experience community backlash. In contrast, backlash or disinterest was common in examples where renewal was imposed, as discussed in Chapter Five.

Neighbourhood regeneration is often launched with an advertisement in the paper, or flyers advertising for community members to become involved in workshops. For example, an interviewee describes the following case:

A local government south of Perth wanted to do a project. I said “before you send out flyers, do your homework, find out who are the community builders, who are the movers and shakers, have a session with them. Ask them – is this valid? Is this useful? Is it the right time? What would you do? Once you’ve got them use them as your working group.” But no, the LGA wanted to go straight in with their flyers, and they got 2, 5 and 12 people turning up. So that pre-work is essential (participant interview, 17 April 2015).

Another approach is to empower the local community to undertake the research themselves.

In Latrobe Valley we hired local people who we thought would have good interpersonal skills, be good listeners. They went out into the community to talk
to people. So when we did meet people it was through them, the local interviewers (participant interview, 17 April 2015).

Benefits of this approach include income generation for local people, identification of future community leaders and increased likelihood of continued involvement in community work. The difference between the above approach and conventional approaches is that existing community leaders are given respect for their local knowledge in the first instance, building rapport and increasing the likelihood of broader community buy-in. Communitarian theorists would consider local people to be best placed to represent the community and take ownership of community matters. This approach operationalises this theory, placing responsibility with community.

Freire distinguishes problem solving, which is the approach of conventional development practice, from problematizing. In problem solving, the problem to be solved is defined by outsiders (the state, the renewal organisation, for example). The people affected by the problem have little role in defining it. This is the approach typically taken in neighbourhood renewal projects. “In contrast, problematizing requires the people to determine what the problem is, so that they "own" the problem, which is the first necessary step for them to exert themselves for the solution. Problematizing is agency-generating whereas problem solving reinforces the agency-less passivity”. (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 22 cites Freire 1973). This approach, of ‘problematizing’ may be useful in neighbourhood renewal. If practitioners take the role of facilitator rather than service deliverer, community ownership of local issues is possible, and can ensure that agency remains with the community. Neoliberal approaches give agency to the private sector (Wright, 2013), through this lens problems are necessarily economic. However taking a broader perspective on the whole system allows diverse perspectives to be heard and local knowledge to emerge. When considered with an ABCD approach, with its focus on asset mapping, drawing in the local human and organisational assets would bring a variety of perspectives to bear on any issue.
The ultimate reason for a discussion on best practice in community engagement, is for improved community outcomes. Evidence suggests that “well-being is higher in areas where residents can influence decisions affecting their neighbourhood; have regular contact with their neighbours; and have the confidence to exercise control over local circumstances” (Adamson and Bromiley, 2013, p. 191). Asset based community development includes all of these community development drivers as desired outcomes of community work. Proponents Kretzmann and McKnight (1993, p. 9) outline three characteristics of ABCD: 1, it is asset based, starting with the present capacities of residents, workers, organisations and institutions, not what is absent; 2, it focuses on the agenda building of local residents, not outsiders; 3, it is relationship driven, building networks between residents, organisations and institutions. These characteristics align closely with well-being indicators above.

To achieve the outcomes listed above, practitioners must be willing to be guided by community interests and concerns. In a study of six neighbourhood renewal case studies in Australia, Wood (2002) notes widespread agreement about the importance of involving local people from the beginning, before any significant action has been taken. This was highlighted in the current study, where practitioners discussed the benefits of starting with the concerns of the community, rather than those of the institution. For example:

There was a key group of people who came together who wanted to have a say around those sorts of things. Once the investment happened in that area, a lot of people were interested. They wanted a say in what was happening. It wasn’t led by the Department for Housing it was led by the community but supported by Satterley Housing Group and the Department of Housing. They gave them a certain amount of funds each year. It was a fund where the community could decide on what they wanted. There were events, a few parks, issues around anti-social behaviour, so they wanted to look at those areas first (participant interview, 28 November 2014).
Practitioners working with traditional approaches were more likely to conduct engagement driven by the goals of the organisation. For example:

We have been involved with that community for a long time, they know us now, and there is a high level of trust. So we have been able to do capacity building and engage them in co-design. The capacity building model involves running workshops on master planning and what it is. We ran planning workshop. (participant interview, 5 September 2014)

This comment does show a commitment to community involvement. However community engagement was centred around the desired outcomes for the institution, a master plan, rather than asking what the community itself wanted from the process.

ABCD practitioners lead by stepping back, to expand democratic participatory space (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003). In addition, with its focus on network building, ABCD practitioners build social capital with citizen to citizen ties, and reducing the risk of social exclusion by removing barriers to participation. ABCD practitioners argue for the acknowledgement of assets in the form of local organisations. These groups, already established and often including community leaders, can be a starting point for practitioners. In working with existing groups, rather than setting up additional steering committees and reference groups, practitioners can potentially reach a great deal more of the community. For example, liaising with sporting groups, seniors groups, residents associations and cultural groups, will all bring a new dimension to engagement. For practitioners playing the role of facilitator or catalyst, this is ideal as locally driven organisations can interact with the renewal process and build their own capacity with support from practitioners. “While guidance often encourages agencies to go beyond local activists, it is also possible to identify and work with the most representative and open groups: facilitating and encouraging democratic practices and the widest possible involvement of local residents” (Wood, 2002, p. 13).
It is useful for practitioners to be self-reflective about their role in empowering communities. Writing from an empowerment theory perspective, Fawcett (1995) notes the following enabling activities for building leadership and internal capacity: enhancing experience and competence; enhancing group structure and capacity; removing social and environmental barriers; and enhancing environmental support and resources. Community work for practitioners working with an ABCD approach is about enabling empowerment within the community. Several comments from this study emphasise the point, for example:

Give the platform for residents who otherwise think they’ve got nothing or are nothing, an opportunity to realise how much they have or they are. Identifying their own skills and abilities makes my hair stand on end, seeing people have that realization of how much they already have, and how much they already have in community and how much they have in common with their neighbours (participant interview, 13 March 2015).

So it’s really giving people the scope, the skills and the networks to be able to develop their own communities. So that’s how I like to approach it, where we’re just a resource to help them to do it for themselves. And I think once you’ve got that ownership, and people are going on their own way, and there’s a really strong energy, I think that’s when things work (participant interview, 28 November 2014).

If there are great ideas coming from the community, it’s about, this is your idea, how can we help you to make it happen? What sorts of funding sources can we tap into? So just making it easier for them, and then they learn how to do that and that’s the capacity building side of things (participant interview, 28...
These comments place the practitioner in a position of facilitator or catalyst. Practitioners working in conventional models still saw their role as decision maker in community building, albeit with community input. For example:

It’s about the community having the opportunity to have input. The community having that opportunity to contribute, genuinely, into how their community operates, runs and looks etc. (participant interview, 17 September 2014).

As previously discussed the paradigm shift is significant, and this is a major challenge for the uptake of ABCD.

Asset based community development is not a model that can be rolled out in the same way in any community. Each community is unique and requires time and flexibility from practitioners. “I don’t like the idea of a model because it implies a prescriptive approach, something that can just be rolled out, transplanted in a different context. The thing is with ABCD is that it is context specific” (participant interview, 17 April 2015).
ABCD is as much about the process as it is about the outcome. A key difference between a needs and a strengths based approach is that the former sees community as consumers of services and programs, these programs can be determined at a management level, while the latter sees community as citizens, empowered to determine their own futures (Green, 2006). As this approach is necessarily community driven, outcomes are not able to be set without first engaging with community. This is a challenge for funding bodies and government agencies, which tend to require clear outcomes and objectives at the onset of project work, before allocating funding.

Community Development approaches are required to build the required relationships and facilitate participation, in order to understand the given context. In a study of community engagement in Wales, in the UK’s Communities First neighbourhood
regeneration program, “research showed ... In the wider evaluation of 23 partnerships in the RCT unitary authority it was clear that the skill of the development teams in engaging and involving community members was highly variable and where inexperienced teams were appointed with little collective experience of community development techniques, it was evident that levels of public engagement were lower” (Adamson, 2010, p. 117).

Community development is in many ways at odds with government prescribed neighbourhood renewal. With a history of using conflict and community action, there is a tension between community development ethos and community development used in neighbourhood renewal. Community development acknowledges social, political and economic structural factors in society and engages with issues of power and the relative powerlessness of marginalised groups (Wood, 2002, p. 10). “The challenge for community development is to be able to both enable those who take up these seats (reference groups) to exercise voice and influence, and help provide whatever support is needed – material, moral and political – to popular mobilization that seeks to influence policy through advocacy rather than negotiation” (Cornwall, 2008, p. 14). Managing this balance, and also maintaining an awareness of community development principles will guide practitioners working with community. While there are conflicts and tensions, referring back to community development principles of participation, empowerment and ownership (Dinham, 2005) will keep practitioners on track in working with communities. Community development techniques will be useful for navigate competing interests.

Summary

This chapter has focused on ABCD as a tool for approaching community engagement in neighbourhood renewal. Despite the challenges, ABCD has a great deal to offer in neighbourhood renewal projects. When practitioners search for what is positive and vibrant, those who are a part of the community are more likely to become engaged in the process. This is important from the very beginning. I have shown how entry into
the community can make or break a community engagement project. Practitioners may benefit from carefully considering who to approach in the first instance, and can learn from the leaders and connectors in a community. Asset Based Community Development requires a significant shift for many neighbourhood renewal organisations, and a willingness to trust community to have the answers. Practitioners need to have core community development skills and experience in order to competently deliver on this approach. These must include solid facilitation skills, experience working in community lead initiatives, a willingness to take a strengths based approach and an ability to work for funding organisations while at the same time supporting the empowerment of communities. Neighbourhood Renewal could take a very different approach, and find that communities benefit from increased empowerment and capacity.
Chapter Eight: Conclusion

The significance of community engagement in neighbourhood renewal for community is explained by Toomey:

> When a project goes wrong, the development practitioner has the option of quitting his job and going home, but the development subject cannot ‘go’ anywhere; she is already at home and must deal with the situation as it was left behind. For this reason, it is vital that development practitioners fully understand the implications of the roles that they are asked to play when interacting with communities, especially in terms of what will happen to the subjects of such development projects after the practitioner has moved on (2011, p. 182).

This research has highlighted the importance of a considered approach to community engagement in neighbourhood renewal. I have argued for the use of community development principles and techniques, and for the benefits of using an asset based community development (ABCD) approach. Neighbourhood renewal projects are costly, both in terms of time and money; there is a responsibility, not only to those involved in renewal as illustrated in the quote above, but also to the general community, to deliver the best outcomes.

This research project involved interviewing practitioners who work in the field of community engagement in neighbourhood renewal. I thank them for their candid reflections about their practice, and for sharing stories about their successes and failures. Some practitioners had empowerment as an overarching goal in their work with communities. In these instances there was an intention to be led by community. These practitioners were aware of some of the pitfalls of insensitive communication strategies and the backlash and disengagement that can result. Overall though, community engagement in Australia is guided by the IAP2 spectrum, as discussed in Chapter Five, and while this can be an effective tool for allocating decision making
power, it can also be used as a justification for what could be deemed tokenistic engagement.

My argument assumes that community engagement in neighbourhood renewal projects is best delivered when it is based on community development principles. The origins of community engagement, and the stated outcomes of neighbourhood renewal often have a community development focus and community development goals. I have explained two approaches to community engagement, a neoliberal approach and a community development approach. I have argued that using current best practice in community development may be beneficial for communities and for practitioners. One of those current approaches is ABCD.

In Chapters Five and Six I discussed two main themes emerging from the research: community confidence and approaches to participation and representation. Interviewees provided insights into the ways in which language can erode community identity and confidence. This was compared with alternative practice from a communitarian and empowerment theory perspective.

ABCD does not dismiss challenges, or pretend that inequality and marginalisation do not exist. However it approaches challenges with the view to empowering communities to come up with their own solutions. It is underpinned by community development values of social justice, empowerment and citizenship. An ABCD approach aims to empower communities, and recognise champions within it. It also includes mapping the assets within a community for the purpose of mobilising them for community building and connections. These are valuable tools for practitioners in neighbourhood renewal.

In the context of neighbourhood renewal, this project has found examples to support the premise that ABCD is more likely to build individual confidence, thereby increasing participation in the renewal process. It is also more likely to build community confidence through a focus on strengths and assets rather than weaknesses, which is evident when communities are labeled with stigma. Taking an ABCD approach to community
participation involves a commitment to relationship building, where the practitioner takes on a facilitation role rather than a decision making one. This is a more time consuming practice, as learning about who is involved in a community takes time. However the benefits of this can include increased social capital, and communities able to support themselves. Taking engagement to the community, rather than expecting community members to participate in structures that suit the developer, will improve representation from marginalised groups, who are typically difficult to engage.

The main challenge to the integration of empowerment theory and communitarianism is the current neoliberal approach to community engagement. While on face value there are similarities in that both approaches favour individual responsibility, the differences are significant. Neoliberalism prioritises the market and individualism, while empowerment theory and communitarianism are concerned with social justice and community voice. This thesis has highlighted this problem with a focus on communitarian underpinnings of community engagement.

This research has shown the links between ABCD and the work of community psychologists in empowerment theory. This theory, as it is applied to the concept of community empowerment, provides opportunities for learning for community development. Community empowerment occurs through collective action to overcome obstacles and create social change (Hur, 2006). Combining empowerment theory with communitarianism, as explained throughout this project, provides a good framework for community development work. Viewed through the lens of communitarianism and empowerment theory, practitioners working in this space have a very clear role, and responsibility to the community. That is to focus on the community’s strengths and assets as a starting point, to focus on the necessary relationships in order to establish trust within the community, to encourage participation through confidence building practices and to be open to being guided by community knowledge.
Reflections for further study

Working on this thesis has provided me with an opportunity to examine work practices in relation to community engagement in neighbourhood renewal. There are limitations to the research however which are outlined below. The point also must be made that this thesis is written from a community development perspective. The biases that go along with that, such as a focus on social justice, participatory practices and a focus on community outcomes are acknowledged here.

This thesis was based on interviews with 10 practitioners. I am aware that this is by no means a definitive study, but a limited investigation into the practices and outlook of those interviewed. To add to this from a global perspective would be useful. Interviewing practitioners with more experience in asset based community development in this context would give more insight into opportunities to improve practice. In particular, this may be successful in areas where asset based community development has been consciously implemented more widely such as in the UK and the USA.

A follow up research project, applying the principles of asset based community development and empowerment theory would be well placed to test the assumptions in a local project. Time did not allow for this to happen as part of the scope of this study.

Finally, discussions with community members who have experienced neighbourhood renewal from both a needs based and a strengths based approach would be another avenue for further research. This is the only way to understand the true experience of communities involved in neighbourhood renewal. Discussing approaches with practitioners, and then also discussing the approach with community members who were part of the process would be a useful way to understand the connection, or the disconnect, between the intention of the practitioners and the lived experience of community members.


