The risky business of ABCD/SBA

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Strengths Based Approaches

- ABCD
- Appreciative Inquiry
- Strengths Perspective in Social Work
- Person Centred Approaches
- Solution Focused
- Narrative Approaches
Strengths Based Perspective in Social Work

“People are often doing amazingly well, the best they can at the time, given the difficulties they face and the known resources available to them. People have survived to this point – certainly, not without pain – but with ideas, will, hopes, skills, and other people, all of which we need to understand and appreciate in order to help.

Change can only happen when you collaborate with clients’ aspirations, perceptions, and strengths and when you firmly believe in them.” Saleeby 1992.p.42
Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)

- Kretzmann and McKnight (1993): Building Communities from the Inside Out:
  - Strong and vibrant communities grow from the inside out.
  - Relationships rather than programs drive change.
  - Focus on assets and strengths rather than needs and deficits.
  - People are citizens not clients – everyone is needed and is a decision maker.
Michael White and John Epston: Dulwich Centre

- People are experts in their own lives
- Professionals are collaborators with people who come to see them.
- Stories are central to people’s lives creating and/or limiting opportunities for change.
- People can reframe and change the narrative in their life and professionals act as collaborators in this process.
- Problems are separate from people and the relationships between people and their problems can change.
Common Themes

- Critique of the relationship between professionals/services and those they work with.
- Language matters
- Invitation to change your lens or perspective.
- Recognition of people as more than and different from problems.
- Relationships are central
- Start with strengths
- Lead with questions rather than answers
- Context matters
Critiques of SBA and ABCD

- Puts responsibility back on people and communities
- Excuse for cutting programs
- Tool for neo liberal agenda
- Can result in blaming individuals and communities for structural disadvantage
Context Matters

- **Australian context**
  - St Lukes, Bendigo
  - Family Action Centre
  - Central Coast Community Congress

How can services work differently?
How can we shift decision making power?
How can we make change from the ground up?
How might services subvert competition and collaborate?
How do we move on from disempowering stories about ourselves?
26 interviews
Central and Northern Australia
Aboriginal and non Aboriginal services, projects and workers.
Health, child protection, family services Including DV, children and families), environmental management, land councils, Congress, community development, drug and alcohol services, mental health services, economic development, appropriate technologies.
“So I think it's quite hard for us culturally - and that's including everybody in that, it's Australian culture - to talk about strengths, to actually acknowledge them within ourselves and to then highlight them to others. I think people struggled with that a lot. It was a bit that notion of shame job; just everyone was a bit ashamed to kind of go oh well I'm a great this or I've got really wonderful talents with that.

So we'd focus activities on strengths. So we would say hey we've got beautiful nature strip down here, let's have a morning - a barbecue in the morning, a breakfast, everyone get together and make sure everyone feels invited or whatever. So we would have strengths-based activities that really made the most of what we had in our neighbourhood.” Participant AB
“So for instance, somebody with schizophrenia, that's only a little bit of who they are. So we don’t think of them as – although the community does sometimes, as they might say, a person, a schizophrenic – but we say, that person, that schizophrenia is only a part of their life. They have all these other parts. Unfortunately sometimes those things affect other parts of their life like their social relationships or their housing or whatever, but they still are who they are and they are not their illness. If you think like illness or the problems that it brings them. Participant AF
How were workers using SBA - subverting

“...and it's a little bit messy but in a sense there's a little bit of translation that maybe goes on. So what we tell so a donor that we're doing with their money of course we're doing that but I guess there's certain things within that money that will really pump up that are happening and that are going and that are really good...

Probably not only is that less constructive in that you don't just get on sometimes with the things that are really good as well as addressing the problems. It's just not good for the whole relationship aspect and the energy of a project if it's always framed around fixing things that are wrong.

So yeah I think it's both constructive and pragmatic as well as just a lot more of a better way to foster real relationships and probably foster a space for hopefully more of a positive open space that allows a proper relationship; a functioning relationship, not one based on one person dominating and telling the other what's wrong and things like that. “ Participant AD
How were workers using SBA - resisting

Well, the sort of engagement opportunities that you have can come from within the group, and are more likely to then inspire the group to continue to participate and therefore you can be more ambitious for where the government might go. The trouble with working in a sort of poor bugger you're really sick sort of thinking is that actually people don't like to be described particularly like that and it doesn't always lead to the client's actually supporting you working with them so they don't turn up...Yeah, and the case management sort of approach which is getting enormous amount of funding... without service provisions to sort of underpin it as well, who wants to be managed in the Aboriginal community? Who wants to be managed in the vulnerable white community either? .

Participant  AE
Things to watch out for

- Appropriation of ABCD and SBA language without the power and political analysis.

- Framing it as blind optimism

- Using ABCD and SBA to suppress or downplay the existence of problems.

- Formulas and prescriptive approaches.
What does it mean for my practice

- Power
- Vulnerability and connection
- Moving away from problem solving
- Shift your gaze
- Action matters as much as analysis
- Think about language
- Starting points matter
- Think less about scaling up and more about viral change
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