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PRACTICE-BASED ARTICLE

Reflections on Evaluators' Role in Community Needs Assessment

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Abstract

Evaluators play a critical role in shaping evaluation practices, but in practice this can be challenging to accomplish in ways that are productive as well as healing. This article discusses evaluation practices in the context of a project *commissioned as needs-based* to assist with community recovery after a racially motivated mass shooting in an urban neighbourhood marginalised by crime, income, race and unemployment. Development of an unmet needs survey included incorporating initial data collected by empowered community leaders with subsequent data collected by evaluators through focus groups and surveys. Evaluators then analysed and organised the data into a report that community leaders could submit to local and state officials. Identifying details were omitted out of an abundance of concern and respect for the privacy of the communities and constituents that were directly and indirectly affected by the tragedy that inspired this discourse.

This article presents a reflective discussion between evaluators on whether or not it would have been appropriate to suggest integrating an assets-based community development (ABCD) approach within a commissioned community needs assessment. It also covers the evaluators' process of using a critical lens to retrospectively assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of adopting an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach. The discussion emphasises the importance of acknowledging and engaging with the diverse perspectives held by the wider evaluation community. It recognises, too, the value of ongoing dialogue and debate to encourage evaluators to critically reflect on the appropriateness and implications of integrating a variety

of approaches within community needs assessments. This article also explores how the authors 'made space' for this conversation, including aspects of content analysis and consideration of crucial conversations, parameters and ethics, in the hope of further stimulating discussion and fostering a decision-making process that would encompass a range of viewpoints, ultimately driving more effective and responsive community development practices.

Keywords

Evaluators; Community Needs Assessment; Assets-Based Community Development; Evaluation Perspectives; Critical Reflection; Mindset

Introduction

This themed issue of *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement* posed the question: 'Can an asset-based orientation *help position community participants as peer "experts" alongside their academic partners, sharing power and authority in the collaboration?*' This question reflects the inherent desire of ABCD practitioners to elevate community participants to the level of 'peer' and for professionals to accept guidance through the insights and voices of community participants. This article reframes the question in order to explore how the mindset of empowered community leaders can predetermine roles for both community and professional partners in ways that foreclose recommendations rooted in community voice or professional expertise (authority).

The decision to write this article was inspired by the lead author's concern that this project had not adequately considered the efficacy of using an assets-based approach to assessment. The article was intended to highlight a reflective and thoughtful discussion between the lead author/co-evaluator and the lead evaluator, when examining what appeared to be an omission of best practice in the context of seemingly unified community intentions. However, the process of analysing archived material somewhat shockingly revealed that community voices had clearly articulated an *eight-point asset-based vision for a thriving community and expected outcomes of that vision*. The archived material also revealed a recommendation to include this vision when constructing the assessment tool, but this methodology did not make it to the centre of the evaluation commissioned by community leaders who were, and still are, deeply rooted and trusted community individuals and organisations. This combination of well-defined vision and expected outcomes unmistakably suggested starting points for an assets-based approach, and inspired the idea that our article should be guided by two critical themes: how evaluators consider the intersection of asset-based and needs-based evaluation methods, and how evaluators conduct self-evaluation. As such, this article explores common and uncommon ground between evaluators who served in different roles and thus had different perspectives on the evaluation process: one served fully immersed with empowered community members who directed both development and implementation of the needs-based assessment; the other (lead author) served externally and supportively as a focus group facilitator, session host and content analyst.

As evaluators committed to equity, it was tempting to advocate outright for assets-based evaluation because it appears to create allyship with marginalised communities and populations by lifting up the 'social networks, history, small businesses, [and] talents of the people living there' (Axel-Lute 2019, p. 1e). An assets-based approach certainly changes some of the language used to describe communities but, for some, a concern remains that:

using exclusively positive language can have similar kinds of problems with feeding into the "bootstraps" narrative as deficit-based language does — if everything is so great, what's the problem? Why are we putting resources there? If we don't name the harm that has been done and assign responsibility, are we really undoing the perception that populations and neighborhoods in trouble brought it on themselves? (Axel-Lute 2019, p. 1e).

It has been suggested that, by focusing on internal community assets, ABCD can seem to gloss over persistent systemic harms, specifically the power in these systems that is inextricably linked to issues including poverty, inequitable access to healthcare, inequitable access to capital, and homelessness ([McClure 2023](#)). Unaddressed, these power-based systemic harms may continue to define communities by disparities and negative statistics because they cannot be overcome solely by citizens leveraging local assets. Discussing the adaptation of ABCD to address oppressive power systems is beyond the scope of this article, but the authors acknowledge that communities are not power-neutral. In our case study, the decision to frame a community response to the tragedy as need-based versus asset-based was very much determined by empowered community leaders' understanding of who (or what) entity in the community was capable of influencing outcomes (Christens 2019).

We hope this article will prove beneficial to readers who are interested in, or contemplating, development of approaches that combine best practice, with multiple voices representing multiple aspects of that community. The contributions of context and voice are critical to making decisions about how to proceed in a way that both respects the power of the community and fully utilises the experience-based authority of the evaluator.

The case study

THE COMMUNITY-BASED STEERING COMMITTEE (CBSC)

In direct response to the tragedy, a community-based steering committee (CBSC) was assembled from community members and trusted local organisational leaders. As a first step towards healing, the CBSC conducted 'listening sessions' with community stakeholders. These involved facilitated breakout groups, in which participants answered questions about assets, gaps (needs), the ongoing role of the steering committee, and community inter- and intra-collaboration efforts. The breakout sessions included discussion of a future community vision and some references to assets but were primarily focused on gaps (resources missing or needed). An online interactive Community Resource Map was introduced, but asset icons were limited by the software to customary and ordinary public institutions (churches, colleges/universities, government offices, hospitals/clinics, libraries, museums and schools) and so did not have options for revealing community assets rooted in local associations, informal networks, land, residents and shared stories ([Russell & McKnight 2022](#)).

The CBSC hosted at least three subsequent community meetings to communicate their findings, ongoing efforts and learning, using PowerPoint guided agendas that generally consisted of an empathetic opening (poetry) and remarks from a community leader, followed by slides that detailed their actions in and with the community. The presentations concluded with information regarding resources, upcoming activities and comments from partner organisations (the evaluation team, local nonprofits and representatives of local government). The last PowerPoint slide provided a series of questions intended to guide the conversation of attendees after they divided into smaller breakout sessions that ran in length from 5 to 15 minutes. The questions ranged from survivors' needs to coordination of organisational communication, capacity building for sustainability and speed-identifying future action items (the five-minute group).

Eventually, the CBSC determined a general need for professional evaluation support to address the immediate and long-term needs of community members who were impacted by the racially motivated violence. This was defined as assistance with developing a survey that would elevate the participation and voices of community members during the process of identifying unmet needs. More specifically, the CBSC wanted analysis of the survey data that could be used to assist with securing funds to support itself and other local CBOs; in other words, funding 'the internal needs of organizations before addressing the needs of the community'. With this support, the CBSC hoped to present findings that would satisfy what state

funding offices described as a ‘flexible and holistic’ trauma-informed response to the community violence that would meet with approval at multiple state levels.

In relation to the survey, the CBSC reviewed the intentional design and implementation of the instrument for ‘collect[ing] data about unmet needs to help secure funding/resources and inform the planning of services at local CBOs’. However, despite creating multiple access points (paper and online/QR links) and providing supportive administration guides, consent forms, flyers and a support person, the CBSC found that it was not receiving enough community response to generate meaningful survey information. In consultation with the evaluators, it was decided to implement focus groups that would mimic the format of the successful initial listening sessions, while discussing unmet needs and survey questions, and incentivise participation through a catered evening meal and Amazon gift cards for all participants.

FOCUS GROUPS

Developed collaboratively by members of the CBSC and the evaluators, the focus groups mimicked the format of the initial CBSC listening sessions but were no longer held in the local community centre. Instead, a training room in the evaluators’ agency was deliberately chosen for its accessibility and neutrality. The familiar format was modified by the presence of evaluators as participant researchers. Actively involving the community in research in this way required obtaining verbal permission from all participants before evaluators could be engaged to ‘scribe’ these meetings for the purpose of analysing, reporting and archiving the shared information.

Two family groups and three survivor groups convened on consecutive dates for the purpose of focusing on ‘the unmet needs’ of individuals in these groups. After sharing a meal, participants joined a group led by a member of the CBSC, the partner organisation, who followed a scripted outline of the needs survey. The valuator/scribe recorded participant responses to questions about needs in the following areas: finances, services and support.

Additional groups convened in the training room to solicit the wishes of family members and survivors regarding any activities that might take place in commemoration of the victims. During the local trial, community members further utilised the training room for a three-hour respite space that provided a shared meal, the solace of privacy, and unobserved family activities.

THE FINAL REPORT

The final report presented a narrative and visual analysis of participant responses to the needs-based survey questions, which were grouped as follows (abbreviated here, in order of most frequent verbatim responses):

- Financial (childcare, transportation, rent)
- Medical, mental health and counselling support (vacation, therapeutic massage, mental health counselling, open bar events)
- Community support and gatherings (co-worker hangouts, neighbourhood support, neighbour/friend gatherings)
- Healing, bonding and grieving (more togetherness, youth sports and activities, walks in the public park, talking about problems, public benches)
- Communication.

Additionally, the report discussed ideas for moving forward that would reflect the groupings referred to above. These highlighted:

- a general lack of information regarding support in all the referenced areas, which included identifying specific supports and access routes to those supports
- limitations on emergency response funding, which included dispersal to organisations rather than directly affected individuals and discouraging application processes for individuals seeking compensation
- a need for ongoing gatherings so as to fully understand the needs of the community.

This report was given to the governor's office, which advised that the content would be used to inform funding decisions for community programming. At the time of writing, it was unclear how that process would proceed and if it would address both the assets and needs of the community. At one of the last CBSC meetings (at the time of writing) federal and state funding to date was reviewed, and this was directed towards agencies and organisations and was unmistakably oriented towards clinical interventions. PowerPoint slides identified specific activities for achieving goals in these areas, including a visual reference to utilising existing relationships while building and leveraging new ones. However, the last slide diminished the potential for leveraging community-based relationships when it presented an organisational chart that put the assets of mostly outside agencies and organisations in positions of committee leadership.

Discovering the eight-point vision for a thriving community

As mentioned, it was only much later that we were able to undertake content analysis of early documentation and material in a more thorough and less rushed fashion. It was then that we discovered the community-voiced *eight-point vision for a thriving community*, which appeared across four slides presented during a meeting of the CBSC. All four slides shared the title 'Vision for a thriving community'. The eight points were presented as bullet points across three of the slides, while the fourth slide offered a list of outcomes. Below, the vision points are shared unedited and in the order in which they were originally presented:

1. Community bonding/building
 - Programs that target youth / Programs that target seniors
 - Culinary classes
 - Picnics for seniors
 - Senior meetings
 - Bingo
 - Knitting
 - Dancing
 - Writing
 - Painting
2. Mentorship opportunities
 - For youth and adults to connect
3. Community outreach
 - More outreach workers to be engaged with the community
 - Increase in organisations serving hot meals within the community
4. Resource accessibility
 - Agencies for mental health support to be closer
 - Educational stipends and resource linkage
5. More businesses within the community
 - More grocery stores to be available
 - Provision of ice cream shop/hardware store/movie theater/fast food restaurants

- Extended hours for the NFTA transportation
- Extended hours for businesses
- 6. Strict gun laws and their accountability
- 7. Viable jobs within the community
- 8. Proper surveillance
 - Security staff receive updated training on how to respond to and handle dangerous situations
 - Security with proper equipment to protect
 - Security in stores and an increase in its presence
 - Crime prevention involving environmental design programs and community input

The expected outcomes did not directly correspond to specific points in the eight-point vision. Below, they are shared unedited and in the order in which they were originally presented:

- Cohesion, good communication, and general respect across generations
- Space for youth to be youth
- Restoration of the community
- Diversity and inclusion incentives
- Sense of safety within the community
- Security staff in stores and an increase in their presence.

What we missed

THE COMMUNITY-VOICED EIGHT-POINT VISION FOR A THRIVING COMMUNITY

We, the evaluators, missed the significance of the community-voiced eight-point vision for a thriving community that appeared during a meeting of the CBSC. Looking at the vision now, it's easy to imagine how these categories rose out of an awareness of assets already present in the community, those which could enable residents to either meet their own needs or meet those needs with some support. We missed the opportunity to clarify aspects of the vision for greater understanding. Additionally, we missed an opportunity to ask exploratory questions that would have actually built on *the asset-oriented narrative of a thriving community* that is suggested by the visionary examples supplied above by participants:

- *Where in this community can you find places for picnics?*
- *Where in this community can you find a lively game of BINGO?*
- *Where in this community are you likely to run into people who create things (artists, cooks, dancers, knitters, painters, writers)?*
- *Where in this community can you find some kind of congregate dining?*
- *Where in this community can you find places where age and youth interact and develop mentoring relationships?*
- *Where in this community would there be a good place for a hardware store? Fast food restaurants? An ice cream shop? A movie theater?*

Subsequently, we discovered that the embedded evaluator had been recorded in meeting minutes suggesting that survey development be structured around the four thematic areas identified in the initial listening sessions, which included the *vision for a thriving community*. The remaining themes included assistance and resources received/not received, and the personal impact of the tragedy. We also missed an opportunity to appropriately leverage our authority, as evaluation experts, in a way that could have resulted in overlapping a community-voiced asset-based vision for recovery and growth with the needs-based assessment required by applications for grants and emergency funding.

FOCUS GROUPS

We also missed an opportunity to fully explore a majority of suggestions from focus group participants that community members might have been able to produce themselves using assets from within the neighbourhood. And we missed an opportunity to fully explore the power inherent in the persistent ‘sharing of self-as-an-asset’, in the form of mutual aid and networking that occurred within these groups. This was expressed in what one evaluator-scribe noted as ‘some participants seemed to be deflecting questions asked by the facilitators, preferring to talk about other sources of support in the community, i.e. mutual aid.’

Therefore, additionally, we missed an opportunity to acknowledge and build on the fact that these gatherings were, in effect, opportunities for mutual community bonding/building so frequently mentioned in the examples used by community members to describe the eight points in their ‘vision for a thriving community’.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS

We also missed an opportunity to fully explore the balance between addressing the immediate needs of empowered community organisations like the CBSC and addressing the ongoing needs of relatively unempowered community residents. Fully exploring the nuances of this balance would have further informed our authority, as evaluators, to recommend assessment approaches designed to achieve useful outcomes for both the organisations and the communities that they serve. The opportunity presented itself in two of three PowerPoint presentations, in which the CBSC appeared to convey a belief that the community would not get their needs met if the CBSC was not able to do its work properly, and thus the needs of the CBSC (and other organisations) had to be met first. This clearly identified the priority given to ‘funding the internal needs of organisations before addressing the needs of the community’, and appeared to highlight the interdependence and crucial role that such organisations play in supporting and serving communities. Understanding this interaction is essential for effective community development and well-being.

Q & A between evaluators

Acknowledging we missed truths made us bold in reviewing our processes and decisions. [Axel-Lute’s \(2019\)](#) powerful argument for truth telling in evaluation supports our reflection on what we might have missed by focusing on needs only rather than assets or a hybrid methodology.

Our reflection on using a single method of assessment (needs-based) began the process of creating space in which to discuss how, when and why we, as evaluators, would recommend using alternate or hybrid methods. Our intention was to emerge more mindful of how we must analyse our practices and results carefully for aspects of truth that may help both evaluators and participants move beyond accepted mindsets.

- *What was the advantage to us, the evaluators, in utilising a needs approach over an assets approach?*

We, the evaluators, had not really considered utilising an assets approach. The community inserted us in a part of their needs-focused sub-committee within the larger steering committee because of the known trauma-informed structure of our organisation and our unique experience in evaluation methodologies. From the start, we were tasked with implementing evaluation activities that assessed what the community experts described as ‘the immediate unmet needs of survivors, employees, and loved ones of the victims. Once this assessment was completed, we planned to play a part in assessing what the community experts described as the ‘long-term, unmet needs of this community’.

Reflecting back, we can understand the benefits to us of using a needs-based approach instead of an assets-based approach, based on the concept of meeting the participants where they were. They had just

lived through an unspeakable act of hate and were simply trying to get through each day. It was a fine line we walked between avoiding the impression of the ‘white saviour complex’ (meaning that we had the solution, i.e. proposing ABCD as an alternative to the community desire to assess needs) wanting to ‘fix’ everything for individual participants, and giving the impression that recovering from this tragedy placed the burden on them to ‘fix’ everything that had gone wrong.

- *How could a discussion about ABCD, or a hybrid of ABCD, and needs assessment have been introduced into community conversations?*

Conversations about assessment development were initiated by the community experts, and from the start focused on needs. As contracted experts, we felt a primary duty to be guided by the community leaders and their identified goals (meeting the requirements of funding applications) rather than evaluating their decision-making process or discussing whether or not a needs approach could meet the desired outcomes identified by community participants in their vision for a thriving community. Looking back, knowing what we know now, we can see that, from our supportive role, we might have been able to perform content analysis in a timelier fashion, and then present and recommend the results as supplemental to the focus on needs. In this way, the community voice would have stayed on the table and our authority as evaluators could have been utilised to provide a truly grounded context for considering the merits of combined asset- and needs-based assessment.

In considering the greater likelihood of achieving the community-identified outcomes through either an assets-based approach or a needs-based approach, or a combination of both, one evaluator said ‘both’ and one evaluator said ‘assets’. The evaluator who hesitated to identify one approach over the other described the inherent complexities in white evaluators suggesting asset-based practices to leaders of an African American community that has been defined for generations by its needs, and thus able to command resources for programming and services by amplifying those needs through charity and grant applications, and lobbying efforts.

The evaluator identifying ‘asset-based’ as the preferable approach referred to the participants’ list of outcomes as more suggestive and supportive of the capacities, gifts and skills – the assets – inherent in community residents and associations, with the exception of security personnel in community stores. Both evaluators agreed that this list of outcomes was significantly impacted by unmet needs in the community, but that nearly every outcome could be reached through the supported strength of community connections.

If we had suggested transforming the assessment approach from needs to assets, we would have explained the differences between those approaches and supported the participants’ informed choice for using one or the other in advocating for change in their community. However, being truly trauma-informed in this partnership would have meant recognising how community building and community self-sufficiency are impacted by racial disparities that affect what issues are addressed and who makes the decisions on them. It would also have meant being aware of how marginalised communities are often blamed for poor outcomes and then abandoned so they can discover their own assets or ‘bootstraps’.

- *Who would have benefited from transforming the focus from needs to assets?*

When we, the evaluators, became a part of this project, we knew from experience and training that we had to approach the work through a trauma-informed lens. A trauma-informed lens ‘understands and considers the pervasive nature of trauma and promotes environments of healing and recovery rather than practices and services that may inadvertently re-traumatize’ ([Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care 2015](#)). As evaluators, our experience generally allows us to know which methodologies will produce the best information for answering the identified questions, or our experience guides us into a discovery process that reveals a more appropriate methodology. As we retrospectively consider the benefits of shifting

methodology in this project, we have to recognise that not everyone would benefit in the same way, or benefit at all, and we must also include ourselves in this analysis. A trauma-informed approach dictates that participants should always be prioritised over the evaluation process, but it also includes elements that support making well-informed processual suggestions: boundaries, task clarity, consistency and a strengths-based focus.

In this instance, we could speculate on how participants would have benefited from an assets focus. In each gathering, participants shared self-as-an-asset, shared assets made up of knowledge, skills and space, and identified the strong sense of association created by this communal tragedy as an asset. An assets-based approach might have built on that tendency towards mutual aid by mapping resources embedded in the *eight-point vision for a thriving community*: picnic areas, active BINGO games, creators and makers, congregate dining, intergenerational mentoring, tools, good food, dessert food, entertainment, etc.

- *Does timing make a difference when considering introducing new approaches?*

The completion rate for the needs-based surveys was poor. Would there have been a better response to an assets-based survey? Now that a year has passed, perhaps the timing would be more appropriate for an asset-based assessment of the community, beginning again with the original *eight-point vision for a thriving community* and desired outcomes for it.

Interestingly, a group of thirteen community leaders convened on the anniversary of this community tragedy. The group included state and county department heads, elected state, county and municipal politicians, and local nonprofit directors and board members. Roughly 50 percent of this group had immediate and personal ties to this community. One person, among those with community ties, viewed community assets as a resource, for which state funding could be used to strengthen and support existing capacities rather than be a replacement for community assets. This person also referred to the capacity of this community to come together and restore what others had tried to tear down, and the collaborative ability of residents to build a thriving community. This community voice reamplified the overlooked eight-point vision for a thriving community that inspired the discussion in this article in the first place. It also suggested that power should be shifted back to ownership and control by the community.

- *What was it like for us to participate in this conversation?*

First and foremost, this conversation was remarkable for critically and respectfully exploring common and uncommon ground between evaluators. One evaluator was deeply involved in the community process and with residents and survivors from the beginning, while the other was engaged in a supportive role, gathering background and research material, facilitating and scribing group discussions and providing some qualitative analysis. The less deeply involved evaluator discovered the overlooked eight-point vision and started asking questions about why an asset-based approach had not been considered. It would have been easy for the evaluator more intimately familiar with the most deeply affected community residents to take offence at these questions and the invitation to 'talk about them'. However, it was the more deeply involved evaluator who pointed to our shared social work training and commitment to a critical social work mindset who sought to be both educational and insightful.

We don't know how the survey is being used or whether we will be invited to participate in the next phase of assessment. The original community-based response structures are reorganising themselves around the control of state funding. The limited time frame did not allow us to gain clear insight into the impact of influence, power and privilege exerted by people in their own community. We appropriately ceded power to the community without fully understanding the difficulty some community members might experience in taking ownership and responsibility for the assessment, in the context of millions of dollars being made available for community recovery.

How we created space for this discussion

SETTING THE STAGE

The lead author set the stage for this discussion by reading and reviewing the archived evaluative process for responding to a community tragedy, reflecting on personal experiences, soliciting reflections from an evaluator deeply engaged in the process, and participating in a crucial conversation with colleagues who knew something about comparing and combining ABCD methods with other modalities. Archived evaluative materials documented the process of a steering committee, gatherings for listening to families and survivors, gatherings for processing a commemoration of the tragedy, and the process of making safe space. Personal experiences included observations by evaluators involved in the planning and delivery of these experiences and services. Crucial conversations included feedback sought from other professionals practising or teaching asset-based community development and from the evaluators directly involved in the committees, groups, meals, spaces and surveys described in this article.

CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

The desire to initiate this discussion was stimulated by what appeared to be a singular focus on the ‘needs’ of a traumatised community rather than discovery and investment in local health, power and wealth, as suggested and practised by well-regarded asset-based community development leaders ([Russell & McKnight 2022](#)).

[Altschuld, Hung & Lee \(2014, p. 91\)](#) described the validity of criticising a ubiquitous needs-based approach to evaluation and went so far as to say that ‘perhaps the two ends of the needs-versus-assets spectrum overlap to a higher degree than apparent upon first glance ... and a synergism across them is appropriate and worthwhile’. Current literature across several disciplines, including community development, public health, social work and trauma, offered important discourse that comparatively reflected on the effective and practical applications of both asset-based and needs-based approaches to evaluation ([Altschuld 2014](#); [Cunningham et al. 2022](#); [Kennedy 2021](#); [Nel 2020](#); [Panzarella et al. 2023](#)).

Through reflective conversation with other authors contributing to this themed journal (Gateways Themed Volume Writers’ Workshop, personal communication, 5 May 2023), it became evident that any effort to understand our part in choosing a needs-based approach over an assets-based approach would require broadening our discussion to include the reality of how ‘trauma, anxiety, and despair [can] reduce the capacity of people to take control over their lives and engage in collective action’ ([Curato 2019, p. 1](#)). This reality could actually make a well-intentioned asset-based approach seem insensitive to:

[the] power in surviving tragic moments. Misery provides affective foundations for democratic politics to take root. Bearing witness to others’ suffering can drive spectators to become political actors by interrogating the underlying causes of misery, while building solidarity with those suffering from a distance ([Curato 2019, p. 2](#)).

Evaluators must be able and willing to filter the intentions of any approach through Trauma-Informed Community Building (TICB) principles (do no harm, acceptance, community empowerment and reflective process) and intentional strategies at the levels of individual, interpersonal, community and systems ([Weinstein, Wolin & Rose 2014, p. 13](#)). A trauma-informed lens prompts our consideration of ‘assumptions about inclusiveness, voice, and accountability in relation to the material, social, and affective consequences of communities surviving a spectacular tragedy’ ([Curato 2019, Abstract](#)), and reveals possible challenges to a best practice like ABCD that can include lack of trust and social cohesion; lack of stability, reliability and consistency; inability to vision the future; disempowerment and lack of a sense of community ownership;

high level of personal needs; and the real depth and breadth of community needs ([Weinstein, Wolin & Rose 2014](#), p. 6).

Acknowledging those challenges forced us to take into consideration the ‘value’ of holding on to a deficits perspective. In the wake of enduring economic and social neglect, a community and its constituents might find solace, solidarity and strength in being able to command the deficit-based attention of larger community systems that share responsibility for that neglect. This intense needs-based attention drives beneficial service delivery, even as it reinforces what [Kennedy \(2021\)](#) refers to as the traumatic perception of

lacking something and therefore need to be ‘fixed’ and brought into the norm in order to be successful ... Historically, if there is support available, it is entirely focused on bringing others into the norm, rather than changing the norm to accommodate others. This can be a painful, even violent experience (Chelsea Heinbach, interviewed by Kennedy).

Evaluators must be able to talk critically and openly amongst themselves and with community partners about identifying the lived experience of challenges to both asset- and needs-based approaches.

The discussion parameters

How do evaluators start a conversation among themselves about reconciling asset- and needs-based practices with trauma-informed best practices and a variety of community voices? It is duly noted that evaluating self and ‘how things could have been done differently’ often sparks uncomfortable feelings that co-workers have difficulty expressing in ways that feel healing and productive, both personally and professionally. Yates (2018, p. 1e) refers to how ‘the perceived fear of evaluation interferes with the brain’s capacity to take on new information, generating an ‘away-response’ that minimizes danger’. The reflections shared in this practise article are intended to help evaluators emphasise a development focus that generates a ‘toward-response’ that maximises reward, while having crucial conversations about their own work. A rewarding conversation can include, but is not limited to, setting goals, the gift of feedback, relevant coaching and honest appraisal (p. 1e). Therefore, our discussion assumed the adequate utilisation of the skills of inquiry, listening and learning ([Forbes Coaching Council 2017](#)) as ways and means of maintaining the following:

- Showing respect and staying objective
- Maintaining collaborative communication
- Starting with what is working
- Pointing out opportunities, not faults
- Focusing on how to change.

The discussion ethics

[Dawson \(2014, p. 1e\)](#) writes that ‘tragedy is an industry and one that our society is implicitly comfortable with’. As public health and social workers, the authors of this article share a keen awareness of how their disciplines benefit from the commodification of community tragedies in terms of profit, praise, publishable material (like this article), enhanced reputation and visibility. There is no doubt that communities weathering the trauma of mass shootings are also actively mined for ‘points of convergence for the interests of employers, businesses, and academia; the messages of the media; and the services of governmental public health agencies and the health care delivery system’ ([US Institute of Medicine 2002, p. 178](#)). Benefits are accrued to professionals and public institutions through engaging in the provision of programs and services, rather than appreciating and engaging the role of the community in achieving health, power and wealth for themselves. This discussion endeavours to be cognisant of this accrual that favours helpful outsiders.

Concluding thoughts

In this article we have explored how one clearly defined combination of community-voiced vision and outcomes was excluded from the focus of an evaluation process. As evaluators, we have to ask ourselves, *if we had recommended an asset-based approach, or at least some kind of hybrid of assets and needs, would that have facilitated (1) a more thorough review of the material collected from the initial listening sessions with survivors, and (2) greater collaborative sharing of power (community) and authority (evaluators) so that the alternative eight-point vision and related outcomes could have been included in the report recommendations?*

Initiating and sustaining this kind of dialogue between evaluators creates a mindset that challenges all evaluators to subject their actions and processes to continuous review, even if their practices appear to follow ABCD methodology. This kind of discussion and reflection is challenging for all members of the evaluation process (Nel 2020), but it is a good way to ensure that the hard work of building connections and mobilising the community to meet expectations of funders doesn't overshadow the nuances of a *community-voiced eight-point vision for a thriving community* and strategies for mapping and supporting existing community assets that support that vision. At the very least, this kind of dialogue supports creating space for using 'two working groups so that needs and assets can be looked at independently, not contaminated by the other before comparing what is found for each' (Altschuld 2014).

As evaluators guided by utilisation-focused principles, which include 'make sure intended users understand potential methods, controversies and their implications' and 'be accountable, learn, and improve' (Better Evaluation 2022), it is prudent to reflect on at what point we, as evaluators, could have directed attention to an alternative method for assessing community needs, perhaps as a function subsequent to focusing first on the inherent community assets. Clearly, this needs-based request was of and by the community, and this discussion does not question the decisions made by an empowered community leadership, but rather the onus was on evaluators to challenge a deeply rooted mindset.

As evaluators, we are questioning ourselves and our decision-making (or lack thereof) in light of an apparent mindset shift evidenced in growing support for asset-based community development. Emerging evidence suggests that highlighting capabilities, dignity and empowerment (lifting up) inspires funding as much as the idea of rescuing victims (charity) (Thomas et al. 2020). Navigating this shift highlights the dynamic and sometimes complex nature of participatory evaluation processes that amplify community voices, then encounter a wide range of perspectives that may not align with established best practice. As evaluators, we challenge ourselves to respectfully address that misalignment as a way of finding solutions that are both evidence-based and respectful of the unique needs and values of the community being evaluated.

The difficulty for people transitioning to an ABCD approach when they have become used to a needs-based approach is that it requires a change in mindset. Bringing about such a change is challenging and calls for capable and resourceful organisers and facilitators. It requires a mindset change, not only within communities and organizations driving the processes, but across all levels of society and including all stakeholders, such as government, funders and the business community (Nel 2020, p. 275).

The experience of conducting this retrospective discussion reminded us to keep in mind both simple and complex points when working with historically needs-oriented communities that, with support, might significantly benefit from transforming the focus of their development work into an asset-based, or a hybrid of assets and needs, approach. Providing that support challenges us to be thorough in our discovery and exploration of each community so that 'meeting the client where they are at' doesn't preclude important opportunities to synergistically overlap a range of community visions and voices with best practices for community assessment.

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