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The seven deadly sins of community development

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ABSTRACT

As a result of our experience and, at times, frustration with the field, we offer “seven deadly sins” of community development. We believe that community development work remains undervalued and under-invested across the world in part because of its own sins, and we maintain that unless we address them, it will remain so. We share our perspectives on the “darker side” of community development by exploring and critiquing the following issues: anti-expertism, localism, and self-help, an overemphasis upon social capital, an over-righteous non-governmental (NGO) sector, and an overemphasis upon collectivism, discipline capture, and self-effacement. Our aim is to challenge readers to reject lazy groupthink and encourage more critical thinking and reflection. We surmise that our field risks further marginalization unless we address these.

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Introduction

As a preface to our piece, let us first explain a bit about our backgrounds and experiences in the field of community development as it speaks to the message we endeavor to communicate and our call for renewed reflection and revitalization. Both authors are strong advocates for greater professionalism across the field of community development practice and of it becoming a more recognized and thus, hopefully, financially supported employment sector in the years ahead. Communities across the world are challenged with more crises than ever as we emerge from the Covid pandemic – a global recession, great power conflict, growing poverty and inequality, rapid and unplanned urbanization, catastrophic biodiversity loss, and climate change, to name but a few. Never before has the technical expertise and resources that our multidisciplinary development practices can provide been so necessary. Yet, despite several decades of recognition by the United Nations (UN), most recently with the UN Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2015–2030, much of our work remains under-appreciated and in the shadows, with negligible legislative support, job losses, and increasingly short-term funding. In this article, we seek to address some of the reasons as to why this is so.

The first author has been involved in supporting community development work for 50 years, moving after a decade from the world of practice and teaching community

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development practitioners, to hold a number of senior posts supporting community development policy and practice, primarily in Europe. He played the lead role in reestablishing the International Association for Community Development (IACD) and has served as President. The second author has been involved in community development work for just over 20 years, primarily in community development education through academic settings in the United States. He has also worked in Central America and Nepal. He is a past President of IACD and has played a lead role in highlighting the importance of the climate change agenda for community development practice.

For both of us, it has been a privilege working in this field, alongside some of the most inspiring and empathetic changemakers, academics, development practitioners, and community activists, as well as local and national politicians, the corporate sector, foundations, and media in support of disadvantaged and vulnerable people, advocating for more holistic multidisciplinary approaches to community development. Yet, we have often been frustrated with and critical of our field for what we will call, tongue somewhat in cheek, its “seven deadly sins.” There is more but let this suffice.

In commenting upon each, let us say that the primary proposition we offer is that **community development work remains undervalued and underinvested across the world in part because of its own sins. And unless we address them, it will remain so.** These contribute toward what this publication has termed the darker side to community development, upon which we seek to shine some light and about which we care deeply and sincerely hope to address in part through this piece. That said, we strongly believe that the main culprit for the reduction in investment in community development programs has been conservative governments across the world. We also recognize the pernicious role of the conservative media in undermining the social justice and democratic values that underpin what community development practice should be about.

In no particular order, we share our perspectives on the darker side of community development by exploring the following seven deadly sins:

- (1) Anti-expertism
- (2) Localism and self help
- (3) An overemphasis upon social capital
- (4) An over-righteous NGO sector
- (5) An overemphasis upon collectivism
- (6) Discipline capture
- (7) Self-effacement

Number one: Anti-expertism

In the late sixties/early seventies, just as community development practitioners in different parts of the world were beginning to set up national professional associations, to launch academic journals, and to see a growth in state investment in employment opportunities and undergraduate and graduate professional training courses, the libertarian left-writer Ivan Illich published a number of books critical of professions (Illich et al., 1977; Illich, 1972). His argument, in brief, was that professions promote their own self-interest and adopt mystifying language at the cost of the people they are there to serve. Illich (1972) caught the zeitgeist of the times and many development professionals

doubted their professionalism, preferring to see themselves as activists and arguing that we should become the vanguard anti-profession. Not all of course, most equally committed to social justice and democracy building, just got on with the job and continued to create an architecture to support their profession. As such, we define anti-expertism in the same context as anti-intellectualism as a hostility toward and mistrust of intellectuals and intellectualism as commonly expressed through the general criticism or disapproval of education and philosophy.

This anti-expert/anti-profession thinking was especially influential within universities and in publications such as the *Community Development Journal* published by Oxford University Press. Proponents of greater professionalization were criticized, as Illich's anti-expertism influenced scholarship and undermined practitioner confidence for decades. But most damaging of all, this thinking fed into the emerging anti-state, anti-expert libertarian right-wing populism from the 1980s onwards. Why do we need development experts the neo-liberals and neo-conservatives said? Just give a little bit of money directly to support self-help and volunteering initiatives in poor communities or better still do not invest in community development programs at all. The libertarian left had met the libertarian right and given the latter a rationale for disinvestment.

More recently, we have witnessed this phenomenon of anti-expertism through the dismissal of expert information from life-threatening topics ranging from the Covid pandemic to the climate crisis. As Stickels (2020) notes with regard to Covid, "a sector of the population continues to dismiss intellectual authority and spread misinformation, increasingly over social media outlets and other internet platforms." Anti-expert dogma is couched in anti-science rhetoric and has misguided and dangerous implications for the vulnerable communities with which we work.

The rejection of experts has grown for many reasons since Illich was writing 50 years ago, including the ubiquity of information on the Internet and social media platforms masquerading as authoritative sources mixing scientific fact with science fiction to create wild conspiracy theories and the amalgam of news and entertainment (info-tainment) by political pundits. Nichols (2017) brings this message home through his book, *The Death of Expertise* and notes that rather than ushering in a new era of enlightenment, the internet and information age has helped fuel a surge in narcissistic and misguided intellectual egalitarianism that has crippled informed debates on any number of issues. The result is an alienated, divided, and increasingly angry populace who denounce intellectual achievement and distrust experts. As such, citizens increasingly think no one knows more than anyone else and democratic institutions fall prey to jingoistic populism.

Corporate interests also play into this high-stakes game-seeking short-term profits by spreading misinformation and exploiting scientific uncertainty to sow seeds of doubt by any expert whose confidence interval is not absolute. Examples abound in the tobacco or fossil fuel industry who become *Merchants of Doubt* by creating controversy over well-established, scientific evidence simply by posing rhetorical questions; the result has become a public with "no way to know that this 'evidence' was part of an industry campaign designed to confuse. It was, in fact, part of a criminal conspiracy to commit fraud" (Oreskes & Conway, 2011, p. 32).

Perhaps just as troubling as citizen's gravitation toward anti-expertism is the inclination of experts themselves to self-censor. Our conjecture is that this has certainly happened in community development scholarship and practice, for example,

where science with regard to health issues is placed on an equal footing with indigenous wisdom. With regard to university scholars, Anderson et al. (2022, p. 124) ask the question, “Isn’t the role of academia to find the cracks and let the light shine with integrity and honesty?” further noting, “academia has sat back and either been party to the insanity or been quiet.” Anderson (2022) goes on to assert that many experts have abdicated their responsibility to be direct and honest stating, “In my view the academic/expert community has been deeply political in relation to (climate change) mitigation, either through developing systemically biased scenarios or staying relatively quiet about them.”

Haidt (2022) notes that the major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies include trusted institutions and shared stories since “When people lose trust in institutions, they lose trust in the stories told by those institutions.” Whether citizens refuting expertise or development experts self-censoring, the results have profound impacts on community development programs. The outcome can be the nullification of expertise, the rise of fantasy narratives and conspiracies, and most troubling, lead to deeper divisions in society and the atomization of individuals.

Number two: Localism and self help

In large part influenced by the growing environmental movement since the 1990s (if not before) and concerns about the damaging costs to the climate of economic globalization, many in the development field argued that only localism was consistent with a sustainable development approach. We were encouraged to think global, but to act local. Do it locally, source locally, be self-sufficient, etc. Development programs should be local programs, whether social, economic, or environmental. The emphasis was “*small is beautiful*”. The very word community, it was asserted, implied local and small. The earlier, larger-scale area-based community development programs during the War on Poverty in the 1960s in the United States, later reflected in many other “developed” countries, such as the United Kingdom (UK), had been huge multi-million-dollar, multi-disciplinary investments led by municipalities and central/federal governments, with NGOs as supportive partners. Community development strategies entailed targeting particular underprivileged localities and groups but were city/region-wide in their ambition and fiscal investment.

As neo-liberal and neo-conservative governments reduced the budgets of municipalities, these programs were significantly reduced in scale or cut completely. But rather than lamenting the withdrawal of state investment and the greater support, it had provided for poor cities and communities, a new self-help localism emerged – lauding a virtue out of necessity. This is advocated in particular by the proponents of ABCD (Asset-Based Community Development) as a vociferous critique of the former large-scale positive discrimination programs, together with an almost evangelistic assertion that only by rediscovering a community’s muscular self-help can authentic empowerment be released. Not surprisingly, ABCD approaches received support among more conservative policymakers from the neo-liberal World Bank, to charities and governments, justifying why the investment of public monies from a redistributive taxation system was actually bad for the poor. ABCD scholars and practitioners undoubtedly contributed creative approaches to the development toolbox, but we believe, naively they have colluded with an anti-

redistribution, anti-state world view. A localist/self-help paradigm can only further disadvantage poor localities by negating the need for redistributive fiscal policies that transfer wealth and investment from richer localities to poorer ones across cities, regions, countries, and globally.

Failure to leverage assistance or support from multiple scales, be it regional, state, federal, or international, can also contribute to the anti-expert approach described above with local actors cutoff from considering wider ideas for problem-solving that may contribute to local innovations. A type of local relativism can result and, at its extreme, can manifest to excess through cultural, moral, or ethnic relativism that in turn reveals itself through nimbyism, racism, overt censorship, or denial of objective truth. Examples include choosing to censor books that local communities find controversial, extreme anti-immigrant local ordinances, or violence from homophobic beliefs and acts, to name but a few.

Localism is often thought to offer a wide range of benefits, including hyper engagement and participation, through a “positive disposition to the decentralization of political power” (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013, p. 10). However, Fitzpatrick et al. (2020) found that localist policymaking has an intrinsic tendency to disadvantage socially marginalized groups. They conclude that “localism cannot be viewed as a taken-for-granted progressive model, with centralism (that is, the consistent implementation of a policy across the whole country) also perfectly defensible on progressive grounds in relevant circumstances” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020, p. 541). No longer is the mantra, “think global, act local” apropos, but rather an amalgam to think and act “glocal” better describes the need to consider and weigh both global and local forces and interests and to take action at all levels becoming a much-needed broader community development paradigm.

Number three: An overemphasis upon social capital

From the publication in 2001 of Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone*, the term social capital entered the community development lexicon and wider public policy in many Western countries. In summary, Putnam (2001) argued that communities that “worked” contained high levels of social capital, notably neighborly support networks. But what was insidious about this idea was that it assumed that poor and disadvantaged people lived in problematic communities because they lacked social capital. Putnam’s research in fact studied “middle America” rather than poor working class white or black communities or those of identity such as the LGBTQ community, where mutual support born of struggle was far stronger than the more affluent middle-class suburbs. Policy advisers and funders of development programs, however, latched onto the idea that what the poor really needed was a good dose of social capital, good neighbors and volunteering programs. What was really missing was financial capital, i.e. money, access to credit, and investment in physical (e.g. affordable housing) and economic infrastructure (e.g. job creation). Social capital ideas fed a school of thinking within community development academia and especially among government policy advisers and NGOs, avoiding deeper and more accurate structural and systemic analysis of the causes of poverty and discrimination and thus a need for major redistribution and investment by governments to address those problems. However, damage had been done, and there has remained a tendency in thinking around social capital almost to blame victims for their poverty because they

stayed at home watching TV rather than going out regularly to community meetings. The complete failure within social capital thinking was to address manipulative external forces at play here, creating what Freire (1972) called the “culture of silence” or what the Romans 2000 years ago called bread and circuses.

For disadvantaged and vulnerable communities, a major requirement in enabling people to become more empowered is access to money and what money can do in reducing income poverty, in building schools, health care, and affordable housing, and in creating employment. A central competence required of community development practitioners is to be able to support such communities to source money from governmental, foundational and other sources. This is not to doubt that other types of capital, including strong social and cultural capital play a vital role in community development, but it is to question the assumptions behind and the overemphasis placed upon social capital.

Number four: An over-righteous NGO sector

Non-governmental organizations, or as they used to be known, charities, are big business in the development world. Many are religiously inspired such as CAFOD (Catholics) or OXFAM (Quakers) and in their mission statements, necessary to ensure tax breaks, are generally committed to poverty reduction and educative work among the poor. Additionally, non-governmental philanthropic donors (Carnegie, Ford, Gates, etc.), not-for-profit social enterprises, and the non-governmental sector has in many countries overtaken national and local governments as the main funders of community development programs. In developing countries, the Gates Foundation alone has spent upward of \$60 billion upon global programs to improve health and reduce extreme poverty. Most NGOs do a great job. But many have also promoted the view that charities and not governments should be leading when it comes to managing community development strategies and projects.

The non-governmental sector likes to describe itself as civil society and as a champion of social justice ethics. In other words, as speaking for the people and especially for the poor and vulnerable. But, do they? They have no democratic mandate, in the way that elected politicians have. In the UK, for example, most are overseen by disproportionately white, middle-class, male trustee boards (Weakley, 2018). NGOs and foundation executives are also predominantly men and can be extremely well paid. In contrast, employees of NGO community development projects tend to be non-unionized, on short-term contracts and less well paid and less professionally trained than publicly funded employees.

Directly as employers of development projects, or indirectly as funders, charities, and philanthropic foundations have an enormous say over determining the agendas and priorities of development programs domestically and internationally. Larger non-governmental charities and foundations gain access to policymakers and do shape social and environmental legislations. Philanthropic foundations can also be found among the main funders of conservative and populist radio, TV, newspapers, and social media, as well as of public service broadcasting in countries like the USA. And there is no doubt that many perform a vital investigative think tank mirror to power role within countries like Russia and China. But we should be under no illusion that NGOs are politically neutral nor that the sector as a whole is committed to social justice and democracy building.

We are not arguing here that state funded community development programs are intrinsically preferable to non-governmental ones, rather for a plurality of investment and most certainly for a more transparent process of governance. In countries that are not democratic, non-governmental charities and foundations can be the only source of development investment. But, this sector has also pursued its self-interest, colluding with the privatization of state health and social services, many of which they now run.

There is decreasing public confidence in the sector, due in large part to a mistrust of governance, transparency, and accountability practices within non-governmental organizations. As reported by Webber (2022) in the United States, the public's trust in non-governmental organizations declined from 59% in 2020 to 56% in 2022. This is not to say that public confidence in state-run organizations or in the behavior of private companies and multi-national corporations is higher. But it is an indication that public trust in the non-governmental sector appears to be declining, just as trust in politicians and experts generally has declined across the liberal democracies.

For the disadvantaged and vulnerable communities that are the focus of support by community development agencies, it is probably irrelevant whether those agencies and their staff are run and managed by governmental or non-governmental agencies. The key to their success is that they are underpinned by clear social justice values and professional ethics and that they operate in such a way that sees such communities as co-creators and evaluators of problem-solving. There appears to be no evidence that non-governmental organizations are more or less effective and ethical in this regard than governmental agencies. What we can conclude is that the growing structural and systemic problems and challenges faced by vulnerable communities require state investment at local, national, and international level, with non-governmental organizations and socially responsible companies as partners. If Covid has taught us anything, it is that it required a partnership between governments, non-governmental organizations, pharma, and science to seriously tackle it.

Number five: An overemphasis upon collectivism

When the Berlin Wall was breached in 1989, the first author climbed it and in the years that followed met many community activists and development practitioners across Central and Eastern Europe. After decades of communism, some had apprehensions about adopting the prefix "community" before their development projects. It rang of collectivism and what one colleague from the Hungarian Association for Community Development called compulsory volunteering! And yet much of the Western literature and scholarship around community development does indeed talk about it leading to collective empowerment, collective action, and collective outcomes. It is generally not also seen as an individual empowering process. Why in community development writing is there such an emphasis upon the group and so little reference to the individual?

The wisdom of the crowd or groupthink has advantages as noted by Surowiecki (2005) who presents many examples when large groups of people can be better at solving problems. Yet, crowds tend to work best when there is a distinct and simple answer to a question being posed, but when there is not a precise answer, crowds can come to

arbitrary conclusions (Ball, 2014). This is often the case in communities where precise solutions to complicated issues are illusory; instead, communities are places where values often conflict and there is disagreement on cause-and-effect relationships, which are by definition wicked problems. For Rittel and Webber (1973), a wicked problem is difficult to define because the proposed solutions are worse than the symptoms and inherently unsolvable without a societal shift. As such, novel ideas and innovative solutions to complex community problems can perhaps best result from individuals who are able to “think outside the box” and concoct and promote new responses to pressing problems.

Surely, the success of any community education and organizing, indeed any community development project, depends upon the involvement of individuals who benefit from collaboration with others and from developing a shared problem-solving approach to shared situations. Community action groups are not some inert mess, but are formed of individuals creatively working together. And for each individual, there is a different route to personal empowerment which must be equally valued. Community development scholarship and practice are not therefore just about group empowerment but also about the empowerment of individuals as each plays their part in the development process both relating to themselves and their community.

This applies particularly to the concept of leadership, where there has been a tendency in community development scholarship and practice to feel uncomfortable about such notions. Leadership is somehow seen as being in opposition to democracy. Saul Alinsky, the “father” of post-war community organizing always highlighted the importance of training individual leaders within any community (Alinsky, 1971). He also presciently said that effective community action depends upon the long-term investment of effort by a small number of people, with mass involvement only occurring irregularly. What community development practice has positively prioritized however is the need to open up leadership roles to women, young people, and those members of any community traditionally with little voice and of the importance of sharing leadership roles. Successful community development programs require an emphasis upon the empowerment of individuals to take on leadership roles, as well as giving support to wider members of any community. We need to recognize and value the role of both collective and individual empowerment within community development project planning, learning, and evaluation.

Number six: Discipline capture

Since the 1960s, the terms community work and community development have been used synonymously in many countries, with community workers claiming community development as being what it is they do. In Europe, Asia, and Africa, social work discipline has also claimed community development. This is highly confusing and misleading, not least in helping people development practitioners support, together with policymakers and funders, to understand what community development is all about. The words “community work” in popular understanding almost certainly equate with volunteering in the community. Staff called community workers are employed to help more people to get more involved within their community. Community workers and social workers can contribute hugely toward community development, but they are by no means their

totality. Claiming that community work or social work equates with community development practice has been a self-imposed straight jacket, from which we need to break out.

Community development is a much broader concept and practice. It is one that involves and requires a far wider range of disciplines than community workers or social workers. This can also include health workers, cultural workers, environmental workers, architects, agriculturalists, educators, and local economic development practitioners. For decades, this confused equation between community work or social work and community development has sold the latter short and led to a narrowing of graduate and postgraduate training opportunities available to a broader group of expert disciplines. It is vital that as a multi-disciplinary field, we work to ensure that as many professional occupations as possible are not simply concerned with the social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political development of communities but are also competent community development practitioners.

If we look at the UN Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030, we see challenges requiring development assistance from a wide range of social, economic, and environmental disciplines. Each of these will gain enormously in their specialist practice, if they also harness community development competences (skills, knowledge, and values). The argument that community development practice and scholarship owe much to a range of disciplines and require multi-disciplinary technical assistance is central to the recent book titled *International Community Development Practice*, published by Routledge in partnership with the International Association for Community Development (McConnell et al., 2022).

An IACD 2014 web review of higher education undergraduate programs that claimed to be teaching community development found a clear predominance in faculties teaching social work and community work. We need to ask why this has been the case, when clearly disciplines such as architects, urban planners, agricultural development, and health professionals, and indeed cultural workers have been keen to use participatory development approaches. There are enormous opportunities to be had in higher education institutes and other training providers in adding participatory community development competencies within the education and training of a wide range of disciplines concerned with sustainable development. Higher education institutions follow the employment market and over the coming years, as state and non-governmental employers, hopefully, invest to deliver on a sustainable development future, not least for vulnerable communities, there will be a huge labor market shortfall of professionals skilled in participatory community development approaches. We require a far more serious debate within international and national community development associations and with governments, employers, and higher education institutions, about the urgent need for labor market forecasting and the upskilling of a wide range of disciplines to be competent in participatory community development practice.

Number seven: Self-effacement

It is not helpful to over-claim but neither is it to downplay the contribution community development practitioners and programs can provide. We are a field that seeks, according to much of the academic/polemic literature, to change the world. This is echoed in IACD's statement on community development (IACD,

2018), as promoting ... *"participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality, and social justice."* Likewise, the Community Development Society's Principles of Good Practice claim *"to promote active and representative participation with a diversity of interests, to engage community members in a process stressing learning and understanding ..."* (Lamie, 2016). If self-effacement is the act of not claiming attention or credit for oneself or one's work, then community developers can be guilty of keeping our intentions or actions modest and inconspicuous.

But does it help practitioners and policymakers, let alone the communities we work with, to have such lofty, public aims? We believe it does, by being explicit about the values and the changes we are advocating and supporting as professionals. These aspirations are balanced in the latter half of the IACD (2018) statement ... *"through the organization, education and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity, or interest, in urban and rural settings."* And in the CDS Principles through highlighting – *"to enhance leadership capacity, and to focus on the long-term sustainability and wellbeing of the community."* In other words, community development practice does not claim it can redistribute wealth or secure the UN Sustainable Development Goals, but it can make a huge contribution by providing technical expertise, organizational, educational, and resource support for disadvantaged and vulnerable communities in order to give them more power within a highly inequitable pluralist marketplace. As Karl Popper notes, all life is problem-solving (Popper, 1999). We can help such communities to become more resilient to the impacts of climate change, pandemics, or indeed conflict. Community development programs can contribute significant social, economic, and environmental improvements in people's lives by providing technical expertise, co-created with the communities with which practitioners work, working, and learning together to solve problems.

It is not that we are a field suffering from *"High Hopes and Small Realities"*, but that we are pretty poor at marketing what it is that we can do and that we do not share the lessons of practice effectively. An additional challenge for the community development field is that we also have poor institutional memories. Programs are expected to deliver annual reports and to evaluate whether outcomes were achieved. Yet too much of this learning is ephemeral and lost to a wider readership. Government and foundation financed development program reports linger in the files. The churn of foundation executives and public officials means that the files are not opened, the wheels need to be reinvented, money thus wasted. Far too many academic journals and books in our field are not clearly written and thus able to bridge the gap between research and practice and to provide helpful findings for future programs. Policymakers and foundation donors rarely read our academic journals. And largely because of a legacy of *"expertise angst,"* we tend as professionals to remain in the dark shadows, preferring to publicize *"people power."*

Our profile as a field of practice across the UN and its agencies, bodies such as the EU and OECD, and far too many national governments is not as high as it was 40 years ago. The internet presents huge opportunities not only for sharing our learning but also for engaging more people in that learning and profile raising. For example, the 2022 virtual World Community Development Conference engaged participants from 60 countries. Social media can also help us explain to a wider audience what investment in community

development programs can deliver. We have been poor at engaging and re-engaging with those who hold the necessary investment and decision-making power – governments, NGOs, foundations, HIEs, and socially responsible companies. We have been looking down, when we also need to look up, to focus more attention upon, and to engage far more effectively with the power and resource holders.

Conclusions

Our aim has not been to rubbish some of the shibboleths within far too much community development writing and practice, but certainly to challenge them and to ask readers to look at them again. All seven of the sins are the result of lazy groupthink. They are the result of a self-inflicted angst at the notion of expertise. They are the result of one or two social development-oriented disciplines claiming the whole of community development, when it is and has always been far wider and thus more effective in its impact. They are the result of far too many writers (scholars and practitioners) in our field being unable to communicate in plain English (or whichever language).

Our hope is for sustained dialog, continued introspection, and ongoing evolution of the field. We act in good faith and with no intent of malice or to offend. Both authors have experienced situations in which our verbal comments and written scholarships have been suppressed or censored, simply because a small but vocal group of colleagues found the ideas disagreeable. Censorship within the community development field is not a new phenomenon. The challenges of cancel culture pose a growing and distinct danger to community developers for fear of criticism and with suggestions for improvement or refinement. Without critical thinking and reflection, our field will stagnate and deteriorate. We welcome responses to these ideas and look forward to future opportunities, in scholarship and in person, to continue this essential debate as we hope others will as well.

Disclosure statement

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