

Critical Appreciative Inquiry – Social Justice and Appreciative Inquiry

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Bios:

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Conference Paper:

As leaders we come to our work in higher education with strong hearts that beat to the rhythm of positive change. Power, privilege and difference are powerful rhythms inside organizations and impact leaders' abilities to transform, include, and ignite change. Critical Appreciative Inquiry (CAI) is an expansion of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) that melds social justice, critical theory and appreciative inquiry and offers a new model for leaders to consider in their application of AI processes and principles.

Before exploring Critical Appreciative Inquiry, it is useful to define Appreciative Inquiry (AI) for those educators not already familiar with the use of AI in higher education. Appreciative Inquiry is a paradigm shift in approaches to human system change that moves away from problem-solving and a focus on the deficits in the system (what is wrong about or lacking and the root causes of the problem). A problem-solving paradigm works well when dealing with non-human systems, for example, when fixing a computer. However, when people are primarily viewed as problems to be fixed, they get demoralized. Rather than focusing on deficits, AI begins by examining the strengths and successes. The key question to examine is “what is working well in the organization?” In this appreciative paradigm, people focus on the root causes of success, and then build on these to create future successes. The organization is viewed as “a mystery that should be embraced as a human center of infinite imagination, infinite capacity, and potential” (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). Appreciative Inquiry has been used in higher education in all aspects of our work from planning, team development, facing complex issues, evaluation and in personal development.

The creation of the Critical Appreciative Inquiry model developed out of our years of working in higher education and always asking the question of who was included and excluded in the conversations of the workplace and of the classroom. It is an evolving concept and we hope that other educators add to the conversation about Critical Appreciative Inquiry as they use it as part of their AI practice.

Appreciative Inquiry by its very nature is an inclusive process and through its story-telling methodology creates space for multiple voices and multiple social constructions. And, as we worked more and more with Appreciative Inquiry in highly complex situations where power, privilege, social justice issues and difference had a profound influence on the participants and/or

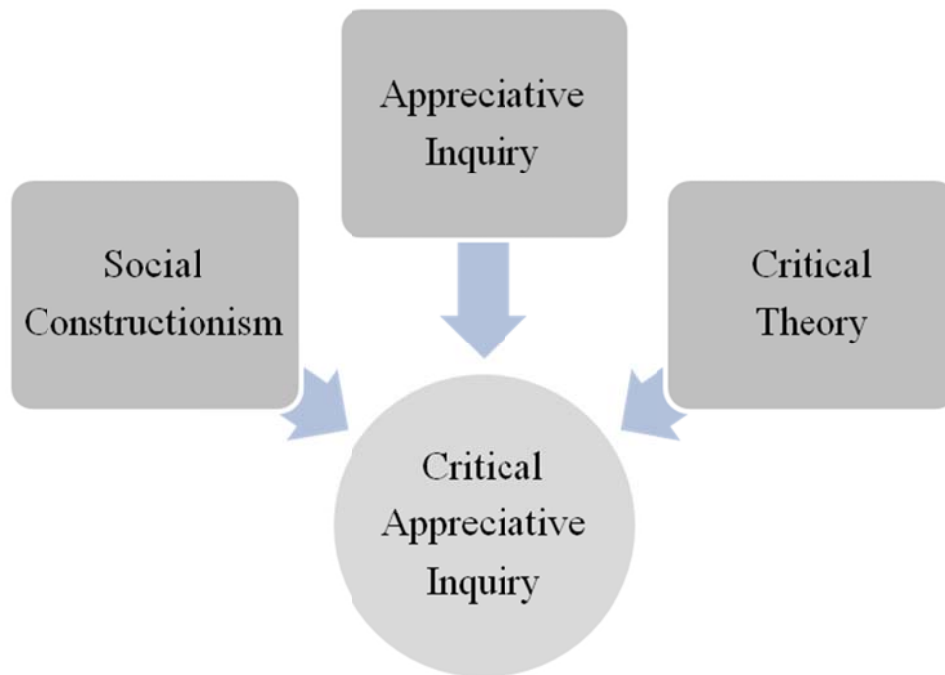
organization we began to recognize that weaving into the work of AI an additional set of lenses that sharpened the focus on power, privilege and difference was useful for AI practitioners. We recognize that social structural differences impact people's ability to participate and be included and this requires intentional focus.

As authors, business partners and life partners we bring a very particular lens to this conversation. As Joan has said:

I remember the first time I fell in love with a woman; I was nineteen years of age. On that day I stepped into the world of difference. I knew long before that day that I was not like other girls, but it never impacted me until I fell in love with someone of the same sex. On that day a journey began, of exploring me but also exploring the desire of society to exclude and how I might use my influence to include within the academy and within the community. In the early days I hid, not because I was afraid but because I was wise. I wanted to be able to rent apartments, find work, be welcomed in my parents' home, but as the years passed people committed to inclusion changed my life, allowing me to step out and use my voice in the classroom and as a leader to create safer places for others. However, it is not a peaceful world: as humans we seem to be very willing to hate, to kill, and to exclude each other for reasons of sex, gender, education, age, race, sexual orientation, ability, ethnicity, religion and the perception of difference. As I close on the age of 60, I am cheered by how far we have come and saddened by how far we have to go. (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012, p 51)

Critical Appreciative Inquiry brings together social constructionism, critical theory and appreciative inquiry. Kenneth Gergen in the book *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* (2011), notes that one of the orienting principles of social constructionism is “We live in worlds of meaning. We understand and value the world and ourselves in ways that emerge from our personal history and shared culture” (Watkins, Mohr & Kelly, 2011, p. 39). This process of socially constructing our organizations requires a strong focus on inclusion and asking ourselves whose stories are told and what meaning is given to the stories that an organization shares. Critical theory is a huge field of study but for the purposes of this article it is useful to turn to Stephen Brookfield, who describes critical theory as being grounded in a “desire to fight oppression, injustice, and bigotry and create a fairer, more compassionate world” (2005, p. 10). This grounding is useful because it aligns so powerfully with the aims of higher education and the underlying purposes of the work that educators do. Grant and Humphries (2006) state that when practitioners begin to meld critical theory into their work in appreciative inquiry the stage is set for inclusive dialogues: a concept referred to as a “productive tension” between critical theory and Appreciative Inquiry (Grant & Humphries, 2006).

The figure below depicts the interplay between these three concepts.



The influences of Appreciative Inquiry practice and theory offer to CAI the power of focusing on the best of what is in order to build a positive future state. In practical terms, CAI fosters positive movement within highly complex issues where it is very clear what the issue or the problem is, but less clear what a future state might be. Social constructionism and critical theory provide deep understanding of how we construct our worlds and of how important social justice and emancipatory work is in the higher education context (*Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012, p 53*).

Building out of this melding of social constructionism, critical theory and appreciative inquiry, we began to reflect upon the ways in which CAI can be practically applied. As stated earlier, this is an evolving concept so this is not an exhaustive list but a beginning conversation about the kinds of things practitioners may want to consider.

1. **Inclusive Practitioner:** In the application of Critical Appreciative Inquiry it is useful to reflect upon our own biases and world views. As we use appreciative inquiry to frame out a desired state, how is it that our own socially constructed world is impacting the ways in which we design questions, processes and the inquiry itself? What practices do we use to deeply reflect on who we are in the world and how our biases impact our practice of appreciative inquiry?
2. **From Issue Focus to Inquiry Focus:** One of the powerful outcomes of emancipatory work has been bringing issues such as discrimination, violence, abuse, into the forefront and advocating for change. In appreciative inquiry the focus is on a desired future state. CAI creates a bridge between these two seemingly different states by deeply recognizing the need to voice what is current before beginning to build toward a preferred future state. This can be done through development of a CAI topic (see below) or through creating facilitated space for voices to be heard. How do we move from issue to an affirmative topic without trivializing the profound work done by the men and women who have fought for change?
3. **Topic Development:** Critical Appreciative Inquiry topics are slightly different than other AI topics in that they seek to recognize that a future desired state may not be attainable in the larger societal forum even if it is attainable within an organization. For example, a CAI topic might be: “using our influence living and working everyday with the issues of alcohol, gambling, violence and drug abuse.” This topic recognizes that these issues will continue and that influence can be used to create change. How do you design a topic that is workable and inclusive of the organization and/or participants?

4. Seeking a Desirable Future State: Appreciative Inquiry asks the question: “What do you want?” This is a positive future state not an absence of something but a statement of what could be. In Critical Appreciative Inquiry, it is sometimes useful to use reframing to define this desirable future state by listing the issues and then reframing them into what it is that people really want. Doing this in the development of the topic(s) for Critical Appreciative Inquiry can honor all that has come before as the group reaches for their preferred future.

Critical Appreciative Inquiry seeks to elevate the appreciative inquiry practice through a strong focus on social justice and the notions of emancipatory practice. CAI is a deepening of AI practices and creates space for intentional inclusive practices that recognize that members of an organization suffer under the biases and issues of society and that they bring with them to a discussion of a desired future state a voice that calls out to the wind for justice and change.

We hope that you begin in your appreciative inquiry practice to use some of the concepts of Critical Appreciative Inquiry and that through that use the depth and possibilities of AI are deepened. More information on CAI can be found in *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education a Transformative Force*.

References

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