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*Action Research* 2006; 4; 401
DOI: 10.1177/1476750306070103

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://arj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/4/4/401
Critical evaluation of appreciative inquiry

Bridging an apparent paradox

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ABSTRACT

Despite increased applications and scholarship, appreciative inquiry remains a research method with little self-reflection or critique to evaluate the process as an action research method. Perhaps counter-intuitively, we propose that critical theory provides one useful lens through which to develop an appreciative evaluation of the process. We begin this article with a brief introduction to appreciative inquiry (Ai) as it is presented in the literature. Calls for evaluation of the process are acknowledged, as are the few evaluations/critiques of Ai we have found in literature. We discuss how critical theory may be applied to an evaluation of appreciative inquiry bridging an apparent paradox between the negativity associated with the former and the positive focus of the latter. An initial application of Critical Appreciative Process (CAP) is described to illustrate how the integrated use of appreciative inquiry and critical theory deepens insight and recognition of the complexity in human endeavours.

KEY WORDS
- appreciative inquiry
- critical theory
- emancipation
- transformation
Introduction

Appreciative inquiry (Ai) is a research method with a focus on positive organizational attributes that may fuel change. Its visibility has dramatically increased in recent years (Dick, 2004). Applications of Ai as an action research method range from small localized inquiries such as change management within a school (van Buskirk, 2002) or community (Ryan, Soven, Smither, Sullivan & van Buskirk, 1999) to Gibbs and Mahé’s (2003) account of the much larger project of establishing the United Religions Initiative, a global interfaith organization. Yet despite increased applications and scholarship, appreciative inquiry remains an action research process with little self-reflection or critique. Few evaluations of appreciative inquiry as a research method have been documented in literature (Bushe & Khamisa, 2004; Rogers & Fraser, 2003; van der Haar & Hosking, 2004), although little indication has been given as to why this paucity exists.

Among the reflections that have arisen, however, the mantra of a determined positive orientation within an inquiry process has been called into question. Rogers and Fraser (2003) provide an interesting analogy. They ask whether appreciative inquiry focused entirely on the positive risks distortion by its emphasis of the positive, in the way a plant may grow lopsided as it reaches for the light. Voicing similar concerns, Gergen and Gergen (2003) ask: ‘What happens to us – for good or for ill – as we honour one as opposed to another account?’

The focus of this article is on critique as a dimension of evaluation – and of appreciation! Outlining the need for an evaluation of appreciative inquiry as an action research method, we propose that critical theory provides one useful contribution to the evaluation process. Application of a critical perspective to the paradigm of appreciative inquiry may appear paradoxical. Indeed our initial impression was that the two approaches were almost contradictory. Ai seems almost evangelically focussed on ‘the positive’ (Dick, 2004). Critical theorists, however, seek out power imbalances, exploitation and violation – occurrences which sometimes seem debilitating in their negativity. As our reading and reflection on the relevant theoretical foundations and applications matured, we began to identify similarities and to value more the apparent contradictions. Treating the apparent contradictions as a paradox, we are exploring the general potential of perceived theoretical tensions rather than allowing ourselves to be constrained by them. We are finding fruitful synergy in their combination.

We begin this article with a brief introduction to appreciative inquiry as it is presented in literature. We then suggest an elaboration of its definition for consideration. Calls for evaluation are acknowledged, as are the several evaluations/critiques of Ai we have found in literature. We identify the contributors to our own critical thinking and then turn our discussion to how this approach was applied in a research investigation which incorporated an evaluation of appreciative inquiry, thus bridging an apparent paradox between the two approaches. The
integrated use of appreciative inquiry and critical theory contributes to deeper insight and recognition of the complexity in human endeavours. We contribute here to the enhancement of human flourishing through strengthening the connection between critical theory and appreciative inquiry into processes (Critical Appreciative Processes – CAPs) of action research explicitly focussing researchers and participants on emancipatory ideals of both.

**Appreciative inquiry**

Appreciative inquiry (Ai) challenges the problem-oriented approach often applied by action researchers. Ai scholars (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Ludema, 2001; Ludema, Wilmot & Srivastva, 1997) highlight how deficit discourses and the traditional problem solving approach typical of action research may lead to an exaggerated focus on the weaknesses of the organization – an approach which Cooperrider and Whitney (2000) suggest may become a degenerative spiral. As a tool for organization change, development and inquiry ‘appreciative inquiry provides a positive rather than a problem oriented lens on the organization, focusing members’ attention on what is possible rather than what is wrong’ (van Buskirk, 2002, p. 67). Appreciative inquiry has its foundations in the conceptual/ontological positions of social constructionists, who work from the premise that language, knowledge and action are inextricably linked. Organizations are considered as the outcomes of their members’ interactions with historical, cultural, social, economic and political occurrences.

Various typologies of the appreciative inquiry process are outlined in literature. For example, Cooperrider and Whitney (2000) provide the 4D cycle: discovery, dream, design and destiny. Mohr and Jacobsgaard, cited in Watkins and Mohr (2001) provide the 4I model: initiate, inquire, imagine and innovate. All follow the basic second dimension of action research proposed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987). Rather than seeking a problem to be solved, organizations are a mystery to be embraced.

The process advocated for is as follows:

i) Appreciating – valuing the best of what there is;
ii) Envisioning – what might be?;
iii) Dialoguing – what should be?; and
iv) Innovating – what will be? (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987)

Research participants are encouraged to tell stories that help identify what is good in the organization, providing a platform from which to move toward new action. We suggest the focus on what is ‘good’ be extended, through consideration of a further definition of appreciation. Appreciation may also mean to know, to be conscious of, to take full or sufficient account of. Through their post-
structuralist view of management practice, Barge and Oliver (2003) begin to take a similar stance. Their call for managers to consider ‘that appreciation requires connecting with what others value in the moment’ (Barge & Oliver, 2003, p. 130) encourages managers to develop reflexive abilities. Our further extension of appreciation to all facets of organizational development promotes deeper understanding. The appreciation of contributing influences such as social, cultural, political and economic issues, is a precursor to realising the emancipatory intent of many action research investigations.

Appreciative inquiry as a form of action research has been applied to individuals, families, organizations and even entire countries (Rogers & Fraser, 2003). Applications include organizational development (Mantel & Ludema, 2000), change management (Bushe, 1998; Ryan, Soven, Smither, Sullivan & van Buskirk, 1999), and evaluation (Jacobsgaard, 2003). In their review of the literature, van der Haar and Hosking (2004) suggest that there is little published research examining the appreciative inquiry process. They identify three quantitative empirical studies: Bushe and Coetzer (1995), Head (2000), and Jones (1998). All three of these studies consider situations prior to and after an appreciative inquiry, comparing the changes induced by Ai with changes influenced by alternative change methodologies. For example, Bushe and Khamisa (2004) focus on evaluating the ‘effectiveness’ of Ai as judged by their definition of specific social change. The authors’ examined 20 cases of published appreciative inquiries which sought to achieve change in social systems. Of the cases studied, 35 percent resulted in what the authors deemed to be ‘transformational change’.

While critique of appreciative inquiry is rare, it can be found (Dick, 2004). A common critique of this style of action research method is that it is ‘too Pollyanna-ish’ or excessively focused on ‘warm, fuzzy group hugs’ (Fitzgerald, Murrell & Newman, 2001). Pratt (2002, p. 119) calls our attention to ‘the need to honour the multiple and undivided realities of human experience in organizations’, while Reason (2000) questions the ‘danger of ignoring the shadow’. Rogers and Fraser (2003, p. 77) question whether Ai encourages ‘unrealistic and dysfunctional perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour’. Golembiewski (2000) purports that Ai is currently under-evaluated and discourages analysis. As our interest in this action research method grew, so too did our own questions. Was the growing body of Ai literature and ‘increased popularity’ (Dick, 2004) support for an innovative approach to change management or was it evidence of a ‘management fad’ such as those considered by Collins (2000, 2003)?

Van der Haar (2002) begins to address some of the concerns raised in literature. She argues that appreciative inquiry and its evaluation should not be understood as two separate and independent activities. Rather, we might think of them as an interwoven and ongoing process. Van der Haar (2002) suggests focusing on discourses of evaluation that incorporate the performative nature of language and dialogue, reflection and opening up towards multiple possibilities,
the co-existence of multiple social realities, ethics and power. This work is extended in van der Haar and Hosking (2004) where a responsive evaluation is presented. Consistent with their identified relational constructionist view, the authors ‘recognize and give space to multiple local realities (as ontologies), emergent ongoing processes, and reflexivity’ (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004, p. 1032).

Rogers and Fraser (2003) set out to ‘appreciate appreciative inquiry’ with an aim to ‘developing an understanding of its strengths and limitations from different perspectives and to increase its value to evaluators’ (p. 75). The authors focus primarily on Ai as a means of evaluation, acknowledging that the approach is better suited to certain situations; such as long standing programmes which may require an infusion of positive energy, or when the purpose of the evaluation is not to identify unknown problems but to identify strengths and build courage (Rogers & Fraser, 2003). Thus a focus on process implementation and the extent to which key principles are adhered to are identified as significant contributors to perceptions of a successful appreciative inquiry.

Although brief, the foregoing review illustrates that while evaluation efforts may have started on a small scale, there is still a tendency for the focus of such evaluations to be on outputs, rather the appreciative inquiry process itself.

**Evaluation**

Through the work of Guba and Lincoln (1989), evaluation has moved from a measurement, description and judgement oriented activity to a recognition that all engagements are processes of social construction. Stakeholders in an evaluation have a choice about how the engagement may be characterized; for example, as a judgement or a developmental opportunity. We approach evaluation, the process of considering how useful something is, as incorporating both critique and reflection.

Evaluation always takes place within a framework of values (Kemmis, 1993). Thus, while we find many of the points raised by van der Haar (2002) and van der Haar and Hosking (2004) pertinent, they do not all fit with our own values and/or action research experiences. We perceive a danger of being caught with no ground/platform to stand on if multiple representations of reality are identified without also recognizing their foundations and interpretations. The predominance of social constructionism applied in appreciative inquiries often implicitly support the functional enhancement of organizations, without a critical contextualization of the organization within the wider social, economic and political landscape. This has its own limitations and risks. The risks are in part associated with the contribution such an approach may make to the domesticating effects of organizational disciplines (Humphries, 1998). In these cases, transformation may be limited to the enhancement of organizational practices which
may not necessarily be contributing to human emancipation or justice. Reflection on this possibility will add a new dimension to the emancipatory work of appreciative inquirers. There are signs that this is beginning to occur.

Van der Haar and Hosking (2004, p. 1027) suggest Ai premises may facilitate ‘critical’ processes – ‘where critical means being sensitive to multiple constructions of identities and relations (including power), and action to open up possibilities’. Consistent with the above, we suggest adoption of a critical, reflexive approach to the evaluation of appreciative inquiry. We thus call on the insights of critical theorists to provide one of many possible ways to frame a critique of Ai, as it has been reported and evaluated to date.

Critical theory

The focus of this article is on critique as a dimension of evaluation. Critique not only expands the possibilities of construction, it also forms a significant origin for transformation (Gergen, 1994). The critical impulse extends across a broad spectrum (Gergen, 1994). While literature has tended to at times ‘lump together’ a range of concepts under this label (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000), typically the term ‘critical theory’ has a ‘two-fold’ meaning (Carr, 2000). Primarily, it is used to refer to the work of scholars such as Horkheimer, Ardonio, Fromm, Marcuse and Habermas associated with the Frankfurt School (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Carr, 2000). Founded at the end of the 1920s, much of the early work of this Institute sought to address the social and political challenges faced by Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. Although the geographic location of the members varied during and after the Second World War, efforts to challenge the social theories of the time continued. While each of these scholars had their own focus, their collective work is recognized for its interpretative approach combined with a pronounced interest in critically challenging social realities (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000).

In line with and incorporating the focus associated with the Frankfurt School is a second, more general, interpretation of ‘critical theory’ – namely a process that aims to produce a particular kind of knowledge that seeks to realize an emancipatory interest, specifically through critique of consciousness and ideology (Carr, 2000). As such, critical theory draws attention to the political dimension in research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). This broader definition allows the work of such scholars as Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard to be included under the critical theory umbrella, with human emancipation and transformation as a common theme.

It is this second approach to critical theory that we believe can contribute towards an evaluation of appreciative inquiry as an emancipatory action research method. Critical theory assists in drawing insights into the everyday, practical
manner in which power is deployed and potential conflicts are suppressed (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003). Application of this intent can be found in the work of Freire (1972; 1994) who promotes the concept of *conscientizacao*, encouraging members of the everyday community to develop new ways of seeing and thinking as well as new contexts of action in which they may express themselves and act (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000).

**Bridging an apparent paradox**

Application of a critical perspective with its attendant reputation for negativity to the paradigm of appreciative inquiry may appear paradoxical. Indeed our initial reaction was that the two approaches were almost contradictory. However, as our reading and reflection on the relevant theoretical foundations and applications matured, we began to both identify similarities and value apparent differences. We treated the apparent contradiction as a paradox.

A paradox might be seen as an interesting and thought provoking contradiction (Poole & van de Ven, 1989). Poole and van de Ven (1989) encourage researchers to value perceived theoretical tensions. The energy generated from working with/through the paradox may manifest alternative insights that one would not have reached by ignoring the paradox, or even working with just one dimension of it. The idea that seemingly contradictory or opposing concepts may spring from a common source differentiates paradox from conflict (Smith & Berg, 1987) and in doing so may provide life giving and/or emancipatory opportunities. For example, although they appear to reside in opposing paradigms, both appreciative inquiry and critical theory share a common research objective. Through their commitment to change, researchers in both paradigms seek to encourage and facilitate ‘human flourishing’ (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Appreciative inquiry and critical theory also share an epistemological base in the premises of social constructionist theories. Both deem language to be central to all action. Meaning is negotiated between participants. Just as ‘breaking up established ways of using language is a vital task for critical research’ (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 55), appreciative inquiry challenges researchers and participants to move beyond the normalized discourse of ‘problems to be solved’ often associated with the action research process. Building on, and recognizing how power may be mediated through specific use of language, both approaches highlight the importance of reflection in the action research process, opening doors to new possibilities (Carr, 2000).

‘Appreciation is not just looking at the good stuff’ (Rogers & Fraser, 2003, p. 75). Rogers and Fraser (2003) encourage a rounded understanding of Ai, developed through considering different perspectives. Patton (2003) observes how ‘dreams and wishes’ (such as those generated in the dream phase of the 4D
appreciative inquiry cycle) often identify existing weaknesses from the perspective of the participating dreamers, while Barge and Oliver (2003) encourage managers to appreciate what others value ‘in the moment’. In a similar vein, we have already observed that in addition to signifying value, appreciation may also mean ‘to know, to be conscious of’. Engaging with critical theory may help draw attention to important but unnoticed dimensions, such as, for example ‘hidden’ sources of power, and thus gain a deeper appreciation of the situation and processes under investigation.

As part of their efforts to look beyond and challenge what appears to be ‘familiar’ and thus ‘accepted’, critical theorists may employ a range of approaches such as dissensus, resistance reading, and the application of negative dialect; all of which appear in direct contrast to the approaches promoted by traditional appreciative inquiry scholarship. The risks associated with the uncritical engagement with this self-acknowledged negativity are observed by Alvesson and Deetz (2000). They note the need for critical research to guard against ‘the fallacy of hyper-critique, the one sided and intolerant approach in which only what are seen as the imperfections of the world are highlighted’ (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 182).

Critique, however, need not equate with criticism and negativity (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). As researchers we influence the research process. ‘Critical theory does not have to be based on a fundamentally negative view of society, but perhaps on a recognition that certain social phenomena warrant scrutiny based on an emancipatory cognitive interest’ (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 127). We propose that appreciative inquiry and critical theory have the potential to provide balance to their respective applications. With this in mind, we turn our attention to potential applications of critical theory that we suggest may assist us in our evaluation of appreciative inquiry.

**Critical Appreciative Processes (CAPs)**

Gergen (1994) suggests that the work of Foucault provides links between social and critical analysis, especially through close relationships between language and social processes (conceived in terms of power relations). Foucault proposed that power and knowledge are parallel concepts, focusing attention on ‘the power in rather than the power of [what is, at a given moment, accepted as] knowledge’ (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 227, emphasis in the original). Foucault’s concept of subjugated knowledge and the processes through which sets of knowledge are disqualified as inadequate (McHoul & Grace, 1998), are of relevance to our evaluation of appreciative inquiry. Do the problem-oriented approaches typically applied by action researchers subjugate the insights gained through appreciative inquiry processes? Does the intentional application of a positive orientation...
as encouraged within the appreciative inquiry process merely amplify a form of
[subjugated] knowledge/power and bias?

Kemmis (1993) observes strong negativity in the work of Foucault, which when applied to the evaluation process may, he suggests, leave us disheartened. Alvesson & Deetz (2000) take a similar view suggesting ‘A highly committed Foucauldian is inclined to see prison like arrangements, operations of power and disciplinary power everywhere – everything is, if not inherently bad, at least danger-ous’. Such a stance overlooks the celebration of liberatory/emancipatory opportunities, which may be identified through any exercise of exposure, leading to an appreciation of both the difficulty of the analysis and the hope and achievement of emancipation through moments of liberatory action. In response, Kemmis (1993) proposes the work of Habermas may provide a useful framework for critical evaluation.

Habermas’s theory of communicative action is proposed as a useful approach for the critical analysis of fieldwork in general (Forester, 2003) and action research specifically (Kemmis, 2001). The participative and positive environment encouraged by the appreciative inquiry approach creates a communicative space with the potential for a variety of forms of participation. Focusing on the communicative practices, the actions of both speakers and listeners, may assist with establishing what differences these practices can and do make (Innes, 1995, cited in Forester, 2003). Kemmis (2001) explores the relevance of critical theory to action research practices, noting the compatibility of the emancipatory and critical focus of Habermas (particularly his theory of communicative action) to those action research practices which seek to connect with personal and political influences.

Habermas’s conception of the lifeworld, the everyday sphere where social interaction takes place amid cultural, social and personal influences, sits well with an action research environment such as that which may be the location of an appreciative inquiry. Indeed, Habermas’s positing of an ideal lifeworld – a state of free and equal, undistorted communication (Swingewood, 2000) complements the dream phase of the 4D appreciative inquiry cycle (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). It is the influence of system imperatives such as power, perceived status, and/or money which complicate interactions. Continuing our example of the 4D cycle of appreciative inquiry, the potential tension between lifeworld and system spheres identified by Habermas must be taken into account as an appreciative inquiry enters the design and destiny phases.

Two further characteristics of Habermas’s work fit well with our proposed enrichment of appreciative inquiry theory through its association with a critical paradigm. A Habermasian approach to fieldwork does not presume that ideal conditions and/or discourse will eventuate in the field (Forester, 2003) – a premise well suited to the challenges of participant driven action research practices such as appreciative inquiry. Ideals are aspirational. They are ideas to strive
towards. Relief from the burden of achieving the ideal allows the researcher to investigate the actual communicative practices which shape relationships (Forester, 2003). Further, the critical approach portrayed by Habermas appears consistent with the ideals of appreciative inquiry. Alvesson and Deetz (2000) acknowledge the ‘affirmative agenda’ of the theory of communicative action, while Kemmis (1993, 2001) suggests the same offers ‘humane, convivial and rational resources’ (Kemmis, 2001, p. 93) for evaluation.

Transformative redefinition illustrates a third potential bridge in our association of critical theory in the evaluation of appreciative inquiry. Transformative redefinition is the term applied by Alvesson and Deetz (2000) to the task which demonstrates the more pragmatic aspects of critical thought, recognizing that insight and critique without support for social action leaves research detached and sterile (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Thus, positive action becomes a key component of critical pragmatism. The authors liken the term to Freire’s (1972) concept of *conscientzacao*, where subjects are encouraged to reinterpret their situation with a view to realizing their desired future.

Alvesson and Deetz (2000) note how transformative redefinition must in some way connect to the ideas, opinions and orientations expressed by the people involved in the research. As such, the scene is well set for an action research approach, of which appreciative inquiry is but one form. Transformative redefinition calls for alternative ways of imagining and relating to what is perceived to exist (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). By providing a refocused lens, researchers using appreciative inquiry may be able to assist with the exploration of alternative routes of engagement. While still critically focused, Freire’s (1994) subsequent work, *Pedagogy of hope – Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*, can be interpreted as beginning to take this direction towards activities of emancipatory living.

An emancipatory intent is common to both critical theory and appreciative inquiry. Both approaches encourage researchers and participants to look beyond and to challenge accepted ‘norms’ to encourage and facilitate human flourishing (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). ‘Laying out the driving interests and mechanisms of knowledge production and defence is central to understanding how they work’ (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 47). Hence, through applications of critical theory we may begin to better understand not just how an appreciative inquiry develops, but to consider also the knowledge and power influences which might be negotiated as the process unfolds and on what basis such negotiation might be used to contribute to the emancipation and flourishing of humanity.

**Critical Appreciative Processes in action**

An appreciative inquiry was undertaken with several school Boards of Trustees in a medium sized city in New Zealand. Our explicit commitment to include the
social and political context in our analysis led us to consider implications associated with unpaid volunteers taking responsibility for delivery of services previously administered by the State. In doing so, we began to address the emancipatory intent of action research identified earlier (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Freire, 1972, 1994). This research took place in the context of the purported decentralization of government involvement in the administration of schools, a process where responsibility for school governance is allocated to Boards of Trustees elected from local communities (Lange, 1988). Such Boards vary tremendously in their expertise, skills, time, and attitude to the tasks at hand. The rather demanding and exacting policy guidelines emanating from government assume Board competency and adequate resourcing. Our experience leading up to this research was generated from a personal knowledge of frustration among such Boards, and the needs of school principals to be guided by good governance. Seeking to contribute to enhanced school governance, we were also interested to consider what influence the deliberate encouragement of ‘vocabularies of hope’ (Ludema, 2001) may have on the research process generally and governance specifically.

Cooperrider and Whitney’s (2000) 4D cycle of appreciative inquiry provided a framework within which research questions were applied, encouraging participants to engage in storytelling and subsequent discussion. While each Board of Trustees adopted a unique form of participation, the discussion was framed by the following questions:

**Discovery**: Can you describe a time when this Board was governing well? What was happening? What contributed to this success?

**Dream**: Imagine you were to return to this school in five years time. How would you hope to see the Board governing? What would be their ideal situation?

**Design**: What should be the ideal? Can you identify ideas from the earlier discussion (e.g. discovery) which may contribute to this dream?

**Destiny**: What can we begin to put in place to achieve these dreams?

The discussions typically took place over several sessions, although each case discussion developed in a manner which participants perceived best suited the needs of their particular group of Trustees. For example the Board of one school chose to include their participation as a regular agenda item at monthly meetings. The Board of a second school chose to hold several special meetings as a means of self review/strategic planning. Through inclusion of targeted questions, their research participation was woven into these strategic discussions.

None of the four case studies completed the 4D appreciative inquiry cycle, and in some instances despite obvious encouragement, ‘vocabularies of hope’ were not always achieved. Implications from these outcomes are far reaching and discussed elsewhere (Grant, 2006). What is of importance to this paper is how our initial (albeit premature) perceptions of an ‘unsuccessful’ appreciative inquiry motivated us to critically reflect on the process. What had/had not happened? Did
these outcomes surprise us? Why were we surprised? Why had these outcomes occurred? What influence did certain events have of the various outcomes? The understandings reached could not have been attained through transcript analysis alone. For example, for one Board in particular, a difficult, unresolved issue provided a troublesome background for current Board processes and influenced most discussion during their time of research participation. Critically reflecting on why/how the anticipated research outcomes did not eventuate in this instance, and associated relational influences assisted our understanding of the overall research context.

Consideration of the influence of statements and questions posed during the research process provides a further example of critical appreciative processes. The types of questions asked, and intentions of subsequent analysis will influence how social reality is portrayed and understood (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Alvesson and Deetz (2000) focus on how different modes of analysis seek to consider different phenomena for different reasons. They do not consider the creative potential of these questions. Through the shaping and answering of questions we create something new. Thus, the types of questions posed and manner in which they are presented may alert a researcher to how participants perceive a given question, as well as potential influences on their response. Reflecting on the 4D cycle of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000), we now have concerns about the use of verbs such as ‘should’ which may imply a sense of obligation. For example: ‘what should be the ideal?’ is suggested as a starting question within the design phase (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). The extent to which people are, or feel obligated, to be motivated by expectations of another person’s ‘should’ (for example in this case the researcher) needs to be considered. Well meaning, emancipatory, intentions not withstanding; there is an unquestioned acceptance of legitimacy around the assumption that there might need to be ‘more’. Is this an inadvertent form of control? If so, is the control initiated by the researcher, or is it reminiscent of the impersonal systems of control, power and hegemony identified by Foucault and Gramsci (Swingewood, 2000)?

We engaged a Habermasian approach to fieldwork by reflecting on the communicative practices which shaped relationships within the action research process (Forester, 2003). To paraphrase Bachrach and Baratz (1970, cited in Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001) we became aware that what gets left out is just as important as what is included! Foucault’s concept of subjugated knowledge and the processes through which sets of knowledge are disqualified as inadequate (McHoul & Grace, 1998) appeared imminently relevant.

Reflection during the analysis and write up stages of this research raised the question whether the proactive encouragement of positive discourse that characterized the process might also have been a process by which participants’ local and grounded knowledge was being disqualified. Through the evocation of ‘the positives’ that which might have been perceived as negative may have been
‘dismissed’, ‘overlooked’, or ‘suppressed’ in the discussion. During a particularly slow moving session, frequent attempts were made to move the conversation from what we perceived as ‘deficit discourse’ to discussion of more positive aspects of the organisation, so as to invoke ‘vocabularies of hope’. Participants seemed aware of the negative focus with one remarking ‘Sorry to get bogged down in this negativity but . . . .’ Such awareness did not facilitate a change in focus however. The degenerative spiral identified by Cooperrider and Whitney (2000) was beginning to build! Reflecting on the notes of this session we wondered to what extent this attempt to steer the group away from their expressions of concern might have generated (undisclosed) anger or frustration. In deflecting attention away from the seeming negative issues shared by participants, we may have lost valuable opportunities: to learn something unexpected; to demonstrate our commitment to participant directed research; and to deepen trust! Opportunities to examine and expose some of the potential institutional constraints associated with the governance of schools may have deflected attention from any liberatory opportunities within the discussion. Any exercise of exposure, be it positively or negatively portrayed, can contribute towards an appreciation of a situation, encouraging the hope and achievement of human flourishing through action. During a review of the research process undertaken with one Board, a participant declared his belief that ‘not enough problems came out’. With an identifiable researcher predisposition to emphasize the positive in the shaping of the research conversations, participants may have perceived invalidation and/or non-affirmation of the less positive perspectives they contributed to the discussion. Unwittingly, the researcher bias could have exacerbated participant perceptions of a relative power imbalance within the research group and the de-valuing of local knowledge within the action research process. This process may not even be particularly apparent to either researcher or participants, but may diminish the sense of trust within the group and therefore the depth of openness and disclosure likely to be granted.

In many respects the application of critical appreciative processes incorporates first person action research practices. Potential for transformation comes not only through new applications, but through understanding and changing ourselves and our practice. Transformational change may be reflected in our subsequent revised iterations of research practice. In this instance, a critical review of the research process also required self review of the contribution and influence of the researchers. We found self reflective questions such as why did this outcome surprise us? particularly enlightening as we challenged preconceived ideas we may have subconsciously brought to the research process.

Similar to Barge and Oliver’s (2003) call for researchers to be able to ‘appreciate’ within a relational context, application of a Critical Appreciative Process (CAP) in this instance drew attention to the limited interpretation we, as researchers, risk, should we overlook discourse we perceived to be negative and
hence, contrary to the positive/appreciative process we hoped to achieve. By ‘appreciating’, that is, being conscious of and taking sufficient account of, all modes of interaction within the context(s) it is set, those involved with appreciative inquiry are less likely to succumb to such risks. Reaching beyond the functional, into the social, economic and political context of organizational situations, would be one way to demonstrate a willingness to hear about external stressors and thus prepare for a conversation of resistance or transformation that may be difficult or even painful. What might be appreciated in such a scenario, would be the courage and the fortitude of those working for justice.

Conclusion

This article endorses calls for the need for an evaluation of appreciative inquiry. Evaluation comprises reflection and critique. In this article we have explored the potential of associating critique based on the emancipatory aspirations of critical theorists to the processes of appreciative inquiry. We propose critical theory provides a useful framework to assist with evaluation, noting that such a focus need not be characterized by the negativity often associated with the paradigm. Critical theorists are not only committed to the exposure of domestication and exploitation. Their primary purpose is to work towards emancipatory transformation. It is through our focus on this often overlooked commitment of critical theorists that we find the bridge to appreciative inquiry. By emphasizing the emancipatory aspirations of critical theorists, with a deep appreciation for the complexities to be encountered in the processes of social investigations such as appreciative inquiry, embedded influences such as power may be highlighted, better understood, and where desired, transformed to serve the emancipatory aspirations of participants. Applications such as Foucault’s focus on power and knowledge, Habermas’s theory of communicative action, and Alvesson and Deetz’s (2000) concept of transformative redefinition have been introduced as possible starting points for such evaluation. Beyond these formal concepts, the reflective approach and emancipatory intent of all critical theory suggests there are many more processes which could be applied. This article has highlighted how appreciative inquiry need not deflect attention from engagement with complex ideas, particularly those that might express/manifest ‘the shadow’ of human consciousness; while critical theory might welcome alternative perspectives which challenge the status quo.

The potentially productive tension between the intentions of critical theory (such as scepticism and exposure to abusive power) and appreciative inquiry (such as inspiration) can contribute to the development of new research and practitioner activities (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) endorsing the mutual aspiration of enhancing human flourishing. The counter balance provided by such tension may
reduce the risk of distortion which may occur should one approach dominate indiscriminately.

Evaluation is a process with an action orientation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Hence any evaluation of appreciative inquiry is but a starting point for further research. For example, adoption of appreciative inquiry within an action research context may identify potential for alternative approaches to the issue under investigation, but our concern does not stop here. The ability of participants to continue to implement means for empowerment beyond the action research environment must also be considered. Are participants able to openly choose the discourse/vocabulary with which they construct their realities and negotiate meanings, or are these discourses/vocabularies ‘chosen’/imposed on them in a manner reminiscent of the vast impersonal systems of control/power identified by Foucault? Or, in the case of an overt commitment to ‘the positive’ by a zealous appreciative inquirer, a silencing of potentially emancipatory critique.

The application of Critical Appreciative Processes (CAPs), the approach suggested in this article, is still a work in progress, as we seek to evaluate appreciative inquiry processes in our various action research endeavours. However, the benefits of such an approach to our work are already apparent, as illustrated through the initial application shared in this article. Our understanding of appreciative inquiry as an action research process has been enhanced as we delve further into the theoretical basis and implications of this form of inquiry. By paying close attention to the paradoxes that arise in the association of appreciative inquiry and critical theory, not only might new applications to each approach and their subsequent evaluations unfold, but the potential exists to introduce critical theory to a new audience who might not have otherwise engaged with this area of scholarship. The combination of appreciative inquiry and critical theory approaches into Critical Appreciative Processes (CAPs) of research explicitly focusing researchers and participants on emancipatory ideals will provide a fruitful contribution to action research processes intended to enhance human flourishing.

References


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