

Back to Basics: Appreciating Appreciative Inquiry as Not 'Normal' Science

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There are many varieties of social constructionism. Which one researchers are using in regard to Appreciative Inquiry is not always obvious. Traditional science or research perspectives assume a singular reality, an objective knowledge about this reality, and a fact-finding methodology which aims to produce objective and universal knowledge about the assumed reality. Given these assumptions, AI appears to be un-scientific. Constructionist philosophy is central to AI. In this article we shall sketch some key themes of what we call a critical constructionist philosophical stance. It is this stance which informs social action referred to as Appreciative Inquiry. Good questions are viewed as those that help to enlarge possible worlds and possible ways of being in relationship. Careful attention to listening constructs an ongoing form of life that is open and appreciative.

Introduction

Appreciative Inquiry is widely regarded as a methodology that reflects a social constructionist philosophy (McNamee, 2002). However, there are many varieties of social constructionism, and discourses of AI do not always make their assumptions explicit. If people come to AI with a traditional science or research perspective, for example, their assumptions will be inappropriate since these centre on the notion of a singular reality, an objective knowledge 'about' this reality, and a 'fact-finding' methodology which aims to produce objective and universal knowledge about the assumed reality. With these traditional assumptions, the research practices of AI will appear to be un-scientific. In our view, the constructionist philosophy of AI is vital for its proper appreciation. Without it, AI loses much of what it has to offer: it is reduced to another technique, and can only appear seriously deficient when judged in relation to common constructions of inquiry: facts, rationality, science, right and wrong.

A critical relational constructionist discourse

In outline, a critical constructionist stance centres on the following assumptions: First is the assumption that constructions of persons and worlds and their relations – including constructions of knowledge, truth and ethics, and constructions of science – are local, relational realitiesⁱ. By this we mean something similar to what Wittgenstein spoke of as 'language games' which he saw as 'part of an activity, or a form of life' (Wittgenstein, 1953). Such activities involve their own local forms and interests and their own rules; these 'games' are neither true nor false and, indeed may create their own facts (Chan, 2000; Falzon, 1998).

Second, the critical relational constructionist discourse is open-minded about any and all claims to know what is and what is best for other. So this stance is not used in order to

pursue what some communities of science call 'scientific knowledge' and it is not grounded in an interest in liberating what some communities regard as 'oppressed' groups. This 'critical' discourse of relational constructionism does not rest on the claim of knowing how things 'really are' and does not set out to challenge some presumed state of affairs (Hosking, in press).

Critical relational constructionism centres on relational processes as ongoing processes of constructing local realities and relations – processes that (re)construct something Foucault (1979) called the knowledge/power nexus – where knowledge and power come to be viewed as local, communal, relational realities in ongoing construction.ⁱⁱ Another way to say this is that it is 'the how' of construction that is the focus – 'the what' is viewed as local, emergent and contingent. Processes are explored as the ever-moving construction site in which the relational realities of persons and worlds are continuously (re)produced.

Researchers/participants use terms such as 'story telling,' 'performance,' or 'text-con-text' in their attempts to talk about what is related with what (Hosking, Dachler, & Gergen, 1995). Latour (1987) writes of relations between 'actants' – where actants include people, objects, statements, facts, events. Whatever term is used, critical constructionism can go beyond the usual focus on written and spoken languageⁱⁱⁱ to include the body – as both a 'tool' of construction (e.g., Foucault stresses that action requires embodiment), and as a 'result.'^{iv}

Narrating self and other as 'work in progress', so to speak, centres on an 'ontology of becoming'^v rather than the 'ontology of being' (Chia, 1995) that characterises the traditional view of science, objectivism and empiricism. This allows us to locate self-other differentiation in the course of ongoing relational processes. This critical move opens up radically changed possibilities for self, other and relations by allowing that hard differentiation as a construction.^{vi} This adds the possibility of soft or minimal differentiation.^{vii}

Relational realities can only be multiple and softly differentiated when 'power over' does not dominate. As we have noted, our critical constructionist view sees power as constructed in ongoing relations between texts or actants. This means that power is a quality of intertextuality, of relational processes, rather than inherent in entities and individual acts. Power is critical to the production and re-construction of local realities and relations between them. 'Power to' can be theorised as the power to act (Foucault, 1977, 1980) and 'power with' can be theorised as practices that allow the construction of different but equal forms of life (Gergen, 1995; Hosking, 1995). Appreciation of – and openness to – other possible selves and relations, and other forms of life enables, supports and re-constructs soft differentiation.^{viii}

...openness is key to a genuine encounter with other...other possible selves, other humans...the world... and dialogue is crucial for this^{ix} (Falzon, 1998).

A changed aesthetic for inquiry and intervention

Traditional views of inquiry as an activity that is separate from intervention make sense in relation to what some have called a subject-object construction of relations. For example, scientific inquiry requires separation of self (e.g. as scientist) from other (as the object to be known) for the proper production of objective knowledge. And intervention would simply be an act of dominance without the legitimising discourse of it being 'rationally' grounded in

scientific observation, neutrality and facts.

The distinction between inquiry and intervention is no longer quite so plausible when all actions have the potential for influencing the realities that are made. In addition, a critical sensitivity to power and to construction means that any claim to have observed that this is how things really or probably are now must be viewed (a) as a claim that reflects a particular local 'form of life' and (b) as a claim that has the potential to influence how others define reality. We have seen that a critical constructionist orientation directs attention to inter-acts, the forms of life they invite and suppress and how they do so – this includes the conduct of inquiry. This has some major implications for the interests centred both by a critical relational orientation and by Appreciative Inquiry.

In the present view, these interests include (a) opening up rather than closing down possibilities and (b) transformation within self-other differentiation rather than intervention through distancing, scientific objectivity. When all processes are viewed as ongoing, multiple and simultaneous joinings of texts (actants) it becomes possible to view all relational processes as both inquiry and intervention, to view both 'inquiry' and 'intervention' as relational processes, and reflexively to study them in that way (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004).

Returning to our interest in ways of relating that only softly differentiate self and other, we can imagine and view as legitimate, forms of inquiry and forms of organisational and community intervention that would be unimaginable or just plain wrong when viewed in relation to the traditional view of science. Furthermore, practices such as Participative Action Research can take on a new significance (Hosking, 2004). The following constitute some core themes of relevant critical practices.

Processes of knowing and influencing

Recognition and significance is given to the potential influence of all acts – asking questions, voice tone, words used, posture... including 'artefacts' – interview findings, percentage summaries, diagnostic classifications... Any and all of these have the potential to contribute to the social construction of reality.^x All acts now are theorised as having the potential to change^{xi} how processes go on. In other words, the 'power' to create change is located in ongoing processes for example, of Appreciative Inquiry and not in some individual 'change agent' or 'scientist.'

Making space for multiple local realities

Attempts are made to give space to and work with multiplicity rather than suppressing or homogenising it through the application of statistical procedures or drives toward 'consensus.' In general terms, polyphony may be constructed in non-hierarchical ways that recognise and support difference and that construct 'power to' rather than what we earlier called 'power over.' In principle, this means creating space for voices from all local forms of life in inter-textual relation with some issue. However, the point of such participation is neither to increase the acceptance of someone else's decision^{xii} nor is it to increase the quality of a consensus solution. Rather it is a way of including and enabling multiple local realities in different but equal relation – as in Appreciative Inquiry.

Centring possibilities and appreciation

The view that relational processes construct realities has major implications for all inquiry and change work. For many, it means working with possibilities rather than with closed recipes, and working 'appreciatively' (e.g., Cooperrider & Shrivastva, 1987) rather than constructing problems and critiques grounded in a particular form of life. The shift to possibilities can invite change-work that helps participants learn how better to improvise and to how imagine new ways of going on together (see Hosking, 2004). The shift to appreciation recognises the participation of multiple forms of life and their differing constructions of knowledge. It is a way of working that might facilitate 'power to' and 'power with;' it is a way of recognising that we are always already in the middle of relational realities and therefore without secure grounds either for claiming superiority or for critique.

Both inquiry and intervention

Since relational processes construct realities there is no requirement to narrate activities as either inquiry or intervention; rather a 'both-and' approach is enabled (see McNamee, 1986, 1988, 1992, 1994). Change work shifts from intervention (suggestive of 'power over') to 'transformation' (suggestive of ways of relating that (re)construct 'power with' and 'power to'). Large-scale change methodologies such as Future Search are (re)constructed as future-making in the 'here and now;' Appreciative Inquiry becomes a way of making self-other relations – in an ongoing present.

Questioning and listening form relations and realities

Interest in self-other constructions gives a changed role and significance to asking questions, to how they are asked, why and by whom. For example, questioning rather than finding out about some pre-existing reality is now understood as formative of relational realities. Good questions are viewed as those that help to enlarge possible worlds and possible ways of being in relationship (see Harding, 1998). Careful attention to listening to Other is centred but the importance of listening now lies in its relational role – in constructing an ongoing form of life that is open and appreciative, constructing 'power with' and 'power to.'

Constructing in conceptual and non-conceptual performances

Practitioners might work with and through performances such as acting, dance and other kinds of body work, collective sculpture making, singing, and so forth. Learning how to learn, getting 'unstuck,' constructing 'power to' are central to such approaches. Performance-based change-work, whatever its form, achieves a radically changed significance in the context of a critical relational constructionist discourse that collapses hard distinctions such as those between mind and body, knowing and action, rational and irrational. Indeed, non-conceptual forms of relating may be especially helpful in avoiding the subject-object constructions built in to most current, natural languages and may be especially important in the construction of appreciative relational processes.

Footnotes

ⁱ i.e. We do not centre the assumption of one trans-historical and trans-contextual reality.

ⁱⁱ And not individual knowledge and power, not the acts of some bounded and independently existing individual.

- iii Centred in the received view of science, objectivism, empiricism and rationalism... as a means for re-presenting some independently existing reality.
- iv The language of 'tool and result' is taken from Newman and Holzman (1997) who draw on Vygotsky (1978).
- v This view is very different from most other (some might say 'modernist') conceptions that treat persons and worlds as ontologically prior to processes and theorise the latter as inputs from persons and from the world.
- vi and not an ontological condition – as in the received view of science, objectivism, empiricism and rationalism.
- vii and invites exploration of *how* differentiation – whether hard or soft – may be constructed.
- viii The possible meanings of appreciation and openness are seriously limited by assumptions of one real world and knowledge of the same.
- ix Even though we actively 'organise' Other in relation to our own discourses – just as Other organises us.
- x This is very different from mainstream approaches that differentiate data gathering, analysis, intervention design and implementation. In the latter case, activities are understood as finding out / seeking to know about *or* attempting to influence Other.
- xi Only the 'potential' as it depends on how they are supplemented and whether or not they get warranted as 'real and good'
- xii As in participative management and common forms of industrial democracy and worker participation.

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