

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry

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The cover artwork is a vibrant painting with a yellow background. It features several stylized, vertical, red and orange shapes that resemble human figures or abstract forms, arranged in a row. The shapes are drawn with thick, expressive brushstrokes.

# AI Practitioner

## Inclusive Spaces: Using Appreciative Processes to Transform Social Structures

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# Inclusive Spaces: Using Appreciative Processes to Transform Social Structures

**ABSTRACT**

Can AI deepen its focus on creating inclusive spaces by drawing theories of transformative education and critical theory into the practice? In this issue of *AI Practitioner*, writers from all over the world have offered their perspective of how this happens in their areas of practice and life.

**Broadening the lens**

Appreciative Inquiry is, by its practice and principles, an inclusive undertaking. Over the last years we have become intrigued with how AI can deepen its focus on creating inclusive spaces by drawing theories of transformative education and critical theory into the practice. In this issue writers from all over the world have offered their perspective of how this happens in their areas of practice and life.

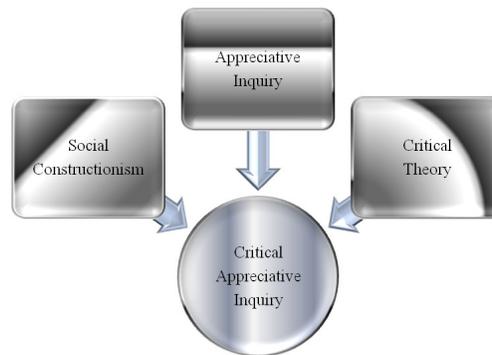
This evolving concept arose from the findings of Jeanie Cockell's doctoral dissertation, as critical appreciative processes brought into focus the critical element that recognizes and challenges oppressive social structures; and the appreciative element as the means for dialogue to transform those structures (Cockell, 2005). As we worked with the concept over the following years, we renamed it Critical Appreciative Inquiry (CAI) to more clearly focus on the power of inquiry. CAI attempts to blend the powerful work of AI with a deep understanding of the issues of power, privilege and diversity.

**Critical Appreciative Inquiry**

Critical Appreciative Inquiry (Cockell and McArthur-Blair, 2012) is steeped in the principles, theory and practice of AI and draws upon critical theory which adds the recognition that in some inquiries attention must be paid to whether the experience "aims to help bring about a society of freedom and justice" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 8). In particular, this model is useful when approaching inquiries that have audiences, issues and/or circumstances where social justice is a critical aspect. By deeply attending to bringing a focus on inclusive and emancipatory practices into the forefront, the practice of Appreciative Inquiry broadens its lens to consider how people are included in the experience and how the issues of power, privilege and difference intersect with the creation of the topic, the experience itself and the intended outcomes.



Critical Appreciative Theory:  
how the components interact



Dominant cultures are the established ways of doing things: beliefs and norms that are often based on gender, race, ethnicity, age, ability, religion, class. Members of the dominant culture often do not see that they are excluding those from other cultures from fully participating. As a result, people from non-dominant cultures may not have been included in the dominant conversations about the preferred future. This can be due to historical systemic discrimination, socioeconomic status, privilege and power: these conditions create all kinds of challenges.

AI provides a framework for people to socially construct stories that have common themes and future images; and practitioners must recognize the socially constructed inequities that impact those who come together in an appreciative inquiry. A strong focus on CAI opens the door to generative experiences that create inclusive spaces.



Beth Rahr in her new L'Arche home.  
Read the article on page 18

### Inviting the world to write

When we put out the call for articles related to creating more inclusive spaces, we offered up the notion of CAI and invited people to play with it in their own way. Some authors brought the idea of melding AI with critical theory into the forefront; some focused on the ideas of social constructionism; others wrote more specifically about creating inclusive spaces; and some wrote deeply personal accounts of inclusion and what that truly means.

Whether in the foreground or background, each article brings into focus how the issues of power, privilege and difference intersect with Appreciative Inquiry. We hope through this issue that dialogues regarding power, privilege and difference will be generated as people develop appreciative inquiries in their organizations.

### Introducing the authors

This issue opens with a deeply personal account of a mother and her daughter as the daughter moves into a L'Arche House, a family-like home for people with intellectual disabilities and those who choose to share life with them. "Welcome Home Beth" by Maria Desjardins brings into strong relief the nature of inclusion and how appreciative structures, words and experiences influence the lives of those seeking to be included in the world. This article touches on the work of Jean Vanier, a great humanitarian who sought to create places of belonging.

Suzanne Grant, in her article "Enhancing Policing through Critical Appreciative Processes", begins by delving more deeply into the notion of critical appreciative processes, an outcome of her doctoral dissertation (2006), and then demonstrates her ideas through a case study of her work in policing.

A strong focus on Critical Appreciative Inquiry opens the door to generative experiences that create inclusive spaces.

Marge Schiller and Ashley Cooper, in “Learning Together Across Generations: Because Everyone Matters”, focus on creating generative intergenerational spaces that cultivate purposeful inclusion. Their ideas are a powerful call to ask who is at the table and how we foster mutual respect across generations. In the article they posit a simple and elegant maxim “Don’t do anything about me without me.”

In “Disability as a Narrative Construction: Applying the Theory of Appreciative Inquiry”, Rama Cousik presents two narratives on disability focusing on the social construction of language and its impact on individuals and their participation in education and communities.

Franklin Olson writes about the loss of connection in community and how a group of congregations came together to use AI to empower people to be part of the decisions affecting their lives. “Fostering Decision-Making and Action Among Immigrant Parents and Local Agencies” follows the 4D process to envision a culture of embracing and valuing the “other.”

Bea Mah Holland and Mary Jo Greil, in their contribution “Giving Voice, Uniting Vision for Continuing Excellence in Catholic Education,” relate an AI experience of working within the traditional power structures of the church to address profound demographic and financial challenges in the school system. The AI Summit fuelled collaboration to establish the Federation of Catholic schools.

“Creating Inclusive Spaces for Transforming Social Structures Using Appreciative Inquiry: The Experience of Two Scarborough Priority Neighbourhoods in Toronto, Canada” focuses on a case study of two marginalized neighborhoods where authors Rosemary Bell and Mike Dodds worked to create a partnered future with the residents. They write about introducing AI into a process that resulted in their work focusing on “What would a more socially inclusive Scarborough look like?”



Read about creating a socially-inclusive community in Toronto on page 45

Roger Ritvo, in “Developing an Open, Democratic and Civil Society: Exemplary NGOs in the Post Soviet Republic of Georgia,” links appreciative leadership (Whitney, 2007) to the successes of the work of two NGOs, illustrating how the principles of AI can enhance the complex work of navigating the course between communities, government organizations, NGOs and political influences.

Anne-Mette Korczynski, in “The Importance of Performance in Learning a Second Language” offers an insight into the classroom as a particular context where adults who have left their native soil gather to undertake learning the language of a new home. This article draws into focus the power of social constructionism as it relates to language acquisition.

Each of these articles brings a unique lens to the intersection of AI and creating inclusive spaces. This issue is, we hope, the beginning of larger and more in-depth dialogues in the AI community about Critical Appreciative Inquiry and the ways in which emancipatory theories and practices intersect with AI.

### Exploring the landscape

There are many aspects to bringing these divergent theories together and we want to close with three that might prompt practitioners to explore their own landscape.



Developing inclusive, appreciative leadership in NGOs in post-Soviet Georgia, page 50

In undertaking to first know ourselves, and the ways in which we include and exclude, we open the door to creating more inclusive spaces.

A generative topic builds a bridge between what is and what the community is creating.

### Reflecting on ourselves as AI practitioners

One aspect of CAI is deeply reflecting on ourselves as AI practitioners, the ways in which we increase our understanding of what we are asking in the AI process, and how it is that people “show up” to participate. As Brookfield reflects, “learning liberation in adulthood requires a deep-seated change in the ways we experience the world...” (Brookfield, 2005). In undertaking to first know ourselves, and the ways in which we include and exclude, we open the door to creating more inclusive spaces and to the practices of AI being emancipatory for the participants, and for the communities and organizations of which they are a part.

### Who gets to participate?

A second aspect is examining who gets to participate in the creation of the AI experience from development to the inquiry itself. Inclusion is experienced when those who will be affected have the opportunity to be part of the solution. This requires a deep understanding of the cultural issues that have built the experiences of communities. In several of the stories included in this issue, the authors touch upon the intersection between traditional power structures and new realities that communities must face together. How is it that these deeply-seated power structures can open the doors to beginning the use of AI by standing with the people in communities that they have had power over, those who are differentiated, excluded and ignored?

### The bridge between issue and the preferred future

A third aspect is “topic development”. In CAI, the development of the topic can build a bridge between the issues in a community and the vision of a preferred future by including some of the issues into the topic. For example, in a community that is gathering to generate peace in a neighborhood with a history of violence, the topic “creating our peaceful neighborhood” could draw into focus the issues the community is facing by broadening the topic to: “creating our peaceful neighborhood as we live and work in a community where violence impacts us all.” A generative topic such as this builds a bridge between what is and what the community is creating.

Critical Appreciative Inquiry has the power to bridge people from exclusion and isolation to inclusion by opening the door to deep dialogue about gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, race, culture and religion, and fostering a possible future state that is inclusive and deeply honoring of all the participants.

As co-editors we want to thank every author who contributed their story of how their work is creating more inclusive spaces and as a consequence transforming social structures. The power of AI to transform is felt in all these stories, as realities of social structures, power and difference are faced. It is in the facing of the complex issues created by power, privilege and difference that the power of AI to lift us up and transform can be so profoundly felt.

As Jean Vanier wrote, “But let us not put our sights too high. We do not have to be saviours of the world! We are simply human beings, enfolded in weakness and in hope, called together to change our world one heart at a time” (Becoming Human).

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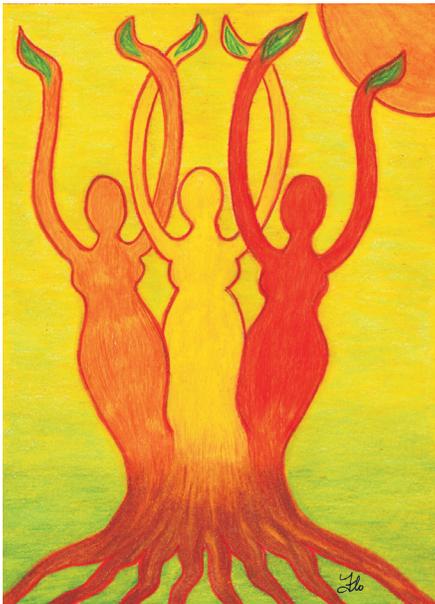
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### The International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry

February 2012

"The lessons we've learned from the stories provide blueprints and frameworks for us all," write editors Jan Reed, Marianne Tracy and Lena Holmberg in [Learning is the Spark of Transformation](#)

May 2012

"Each of the cases, models and essays illustrate in their own way that sustainable, transformative change occurs when we take the positive to the hilt" says Lindsey Godwin, editor together with David Cooperrider, Brodie Boland and Michel Avital of

[The Appreciative Inquiry Summit: Explorations into the Magic of Macro-Management and Crowdsourcing](#)

August 2012

[2012 Inclusive Spaces: Using Appreciative Processes to Transform Social Structures](#)

Editors: Joan McArthur-Blair and Jeanie Cockell introduce us to the concept of Critical Appreciative Inquiry (CAI) blending the deep understanding of the issues of power, privilege and diversity with the powerful work of AI.

And coming up: November 2012

[Embracing the Shadow Through Appreciative Inquiry](#)

Editors Stephen P. Fitzgerald and Christine Oliver encourage a deeper understanding of AI through exploring the potential of the provocative metaphor of the "shadow" in relation to appreciation and AI practice.

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# About the November 2012 Issue

## Embracing the Shadow Through Appreciative Inquiry



In the November issue of the *AI Practitioner*, we offer a holistic and complex approach to the conceptualisation and practice of appreciation in which our understanding of AI is deepened through exploring the potential of the provocative metaphor of the “Shadow” in relation to AI practice.

The notion of Shadow is rooted in Jungian psychology, but reframed in our work and defined as “censored feeling and cognition, where the term censored refers to any conscious or unconscious regulation of cognition and/or emotion by self and/or others where their experience and/or expression is judged to not fit with accepted cultural or group norms” (Fitzgerald and Oliver, 2006). Shadow is promoted, in part, through polarized norms that generate dichotomies. In order to avoid dichotomizing appreciation and critique, we position reflexivity as central to discernment in choice and decision making in designing and sustaining our AI conversations.

In advocating a reflexive dimension for AI, we are highlighting the contribution of an individual or group to the pattern of connections of norms, emotions, cognitions and behaviors of which he, she or they are a part (Cunliffe, 2002). We propose that organizational members experience greater congruence between values and organizational outcomes when inquiry facilitates conscious connection between values, norms, and emotional, cognitive and behavioral responses to organizational life, including organizational Shadow.

An exploration of links between AI and Shadow brings dilemmas and complexities alive, enabling liberating conversations to take place. This issue of AIP will share stories that illustrate these links, where: (1) AI is purposefully designed as an intervention into Shadow; (2) AI inadvertently creates Shadow (e.g. through the censoring impact of polarized norms); (3) AI process is experienced itself as reflecting a cultural shadow of discomfort with difficult conversations; (4) AI may inadvertently reinforce Shadow that already exists.

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## Purpose of AI Practitioner

This publication is for people interested in making the world a better place using positive relational approaches to change such as Appreciative Inquiry.

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## AI Practitioner Editor/Publisher

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