

# III. KNOWLEDGE FOUNDATIONS OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

**The Structure of Appreciative Inquiry  
Paradigms**

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The world we have made as a result of the level of thinking we have done thus far creates problems we cannot solve at the same level of thinking at which we created them."

*Albert Einstein*

"Change is not what it used to be. The status quo will no longer be the best way forward...we are entering an Age of Unreason, when the future, in so many areas, is there to be shaped, by us and for us; a time when the only prediction that will hold true is that no predictions will hold true; a time, therefore, for bold imaginings in private life as well as public, for thinking the unlikely and doing the unreasonable."

*Charles Handy*

"There are three basic conclusions about the affirmative basis of organizing: (1) organizations are products of the affirmative mind; (2) When beset with repetitive difficulties or problems, organizations need less fixing, less problem solving, and more reaffirmation - or more precisely, more appreciation; (3) the primary executive vocation in a post-bureaucratic era is to nourish the appreciative soil from which new and better guiding images grow on a collective and dynamic basis."

*David Cooperrider,*

*Positive Image; Positive Action*

# THE STRUCTURE OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

## **The “Practice” of AI**

The many activities, steps and applications of AI that are uniquely different in each situation

## **The “DNA” of AI**

### **The set of 5 core principles**

- a) Constructionist
- b) Simultaneity
- c) Anticipatory
- d) Poetic
- e) Positive Inquiry

### **The 5 core generic processes**

- a) Focus on the Positive as a core value
- b) Inquire into stories of life-giving forces
- c) Locate themes from the stories & select topics from the themes for further inquiry
- d) Create shared images for a preferred future
- e) Innovate ways to create the preferred future

## **The “Soil” of AI**

- a) Research on the Power of Image and,
- b) Sociology of Knowledge (Social Constructionism) and
- c) New Sciences (Chaos Theory, Complexity Theory of Self Organizing Systems and Quantum Physics)

## PARADIGMS

The recognition that we are living in a time of unprecedented and unpredictable change is global. Furthermore, the impact of this rapid pace of change on all of our organizations and systems – families, organizations, communities – are the focus of great interest and often of great concern.

One way to make sense of this kind of change is to realize that not only is the physical world changing with its new communication technology and ever expanding population; but also, we are actually experiencing a time when the very roots of our belief systems are being shaken and re-formed. In other words, we are living in a time when the **WAY** we **know** is up for discussion.

In 1970, a scientist named Thomas Kuhn wrote a book called: *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, University of Chicago Press, 1970. He was, perhaps, the first person to use the word “**Paradigm**” as it is used so often today. If we are, indeed, in the midst of a new emerging Paradigm, just what does that mean?

Kuhn defined it this way: “Paradigmatic Change is change in the way that problems are posed and solved; change in the unconscious beliefs about what is ‘real,’ change in the basic priorities and choices about what problems to pursue and what social ends to serve; change in those approaches and solutions which display the whole world view as a coherent whole.”

Later, Fritjof Capra defined Social Paradigm as: “a constellation of concepts, values perceptions, and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality that is the basis of the way the community organizes itself.”

Material in this section points out some of the major changes taking place in the realm of the physical sciences and in the arena of Social Science. This information provides a basis for understanding why Appreciative Inquiry is not just a method for changing organizations, but rather a process of thinking and being that helps organizations transform from the more rigid paradigm of the past centuries into a social system that embraces the more collaborative and emerging nature that we are seeing in the organizations of today.

## THE EMERGENT PARADIGM: ENLARGING THE WAY WE SEE THE WORLD

<b>THE CURRENT PARADIGM</b> <b>World of Newtonian Mechanics;</b>	<b>THE EMERGENT PARADIGM</b> <b>World of Quantum Physics/New Sciences: Self-organizing systems; chaos theory; complexity theory; morphic fields</b>
We search for a model or method of objectively perceiving the world.	We accept the complexity and subjectivity of the world
We believe that change in human systems occurs as a direct result of force exerted from one person to another – cause and effect	We understand that change in human systems occurs at so many places and times at once that direct cause and effect linearity have limited explanation power
We engage in complex planning for a world expected to be predictable.	Planning is understood to be a process of constant re-evaluation
We believe in reductionism – that things can be best understood when they are broken into parts.	We seek to understand wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things.
We engage in dichotomous thinking.	We search for harmony in our dialogue.
We live in a linear and hierarchical world.	We live in a circular world of relationships and cooperation.
We believe that there is only One Truth for which we must search.	We understand truth to be dependent upon the context and the current reality.
We see information as power.	We see information as a primal creative force.
We understand language as the Descriptor of Reality. <i>“I’ll believe it when I see it.”</i>	We understand language as the Creator of Reality <i>“I’ll see it when I believe it.”</i>

# THE NEW SCIENCE<sup>1</sup>

## About the New Science:

Scientists in many different disciplines are questioning whether we can adequately explain how the world works by using the machine imagery created in the seventeenth century, most notably by Sir Isaac Newton. In the machine model, one must understand parts. Things can be taken apart, dissected literally or representationally (as we have done with business functions and academic disciplines), and then put back together without any significant loss. The assumption is that by comprehending the workings of each piece, the whole can be understood. The Newtonian model of the world is characterized by materialism and reductionism – focus on things rather than relationships and a search, in physics, for the basic building blocks of matter.

In New Science, the underlying currents are a movement toward holism, toward understanding the system as a system and giving primary value to the relationships that exist among seemingly discrete parts... When we view systems from this perspective we enter an entirely new landscape of connections, of phenomena that cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect, and of the constant flux of dynamic processes.

## About Organizational Change:

Each of us lives and works in organizations designed from Newtonian images of the universe. We manage by separating things into parts, we believe that influence occurs as a direct result of force exerted from one person to another, we engage in complex planning for a world that we keep expecting to be predictable, and we search continually for better methods of objectively perceiving the world. These assumptions come to us from seventeenth-century physics, from Newtonian mechanics. They are the base from which we design and manage organizations and from which we do research in all of the social sciences. Intentionally or not, we work from a worldview that has been derived from the natural sciences. **I no longer believe that organizations can be changed by imposing a model developed elsewhere.** So little transfers to, or even inspires, those trying to work at change in their own organizations. The new physics cogently explains that there is no objective reality out there waiting to reveal its secrets. There are no recipes or formulae, no checklists or advice that describe “reality.” There is only what we create through our engagement with others and with events. Nothing really transfers; everything is always new and different and unique to each of us. We inhabit a world that is always subjective and shaped by our interactions with it. Our world is impossible to pin down, constantly changing and infinitely more interesting than we ever imagined.”

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<sup>1</sup>Wheatley, Margaret J., *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992.

## NEW PARADIGM THINKING ABOUT “PROBLEMS”

In the early days of working with Appreciative Inquiry, we compared Problem Solving and Appreciative Inquiry as if the two were parallel processes with one being superior to the other. If AI is seen as just one more Organization Development methodology, it might usefully be compared to another method such as our traditional way of doing Problem Solving. If, however, we shift into New Paradigm thinking, AI becomes not a methodology, but a way of seeing and being in the world. In other words, when we are in the AI frame, we do not see Problems and Solutions as separate, but rather a coherent whole made up of our wishes for the future and our path toward that future. The commitment to our current paradigm of is our “default setting,” as it were. That paradigm places high value on the machine metaphor of the world believing that we can take things apart, fix what is broken, and that will bring us back to some ideal state. It takes a great deal of “re-training” of our thought processes to shift our metaphors, our view of the world, to a more organic and holistic image such as a stream. Margaret Wheatley writes:

“For months, I have been studying process structures – things that maintain form over time yet have no rigidity of structure. This stream that swirls around my feet is the most beautiful one I’ve encountered. ... What is it that streams can teach me about organizations? I am attracted to the diversity I see, to these swirling combinations of mud, silt, grass, water, rocks. This stream has an impressive ability to adapt, to shift the configurations, to let the power balance move, to create new structures. But driving this adaptability, making it all happen, I think, is the water’s need to flow. Water answers to gravity, to downhill, to the call of the ocean. The forms change, but the mission remains clear. Structures emerge, but only as temporary solutions that facilitate rather than interfere. There is none of the rigid reliance on single forms, on true answers, on past practices that I have learned in business. Streams have more than one response to rocks; otherwise, there’d be no Grand Canyon. Or else Grand Canyons everywhere The Colorado (River) realized that there were ways to get ahead other than by staying broad and expansive.” (*Wheatley, Margaret J., Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organizations from an Orderly Universe, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992*)

If we follow the organic metaphor, we begin to value and embrace the unlimited diversity of nature. In such a frame of mind, it becomes easy to believe that finding one truth, or one right way to do anything is not the goal. Rather the goal is to engage the organization in dialogue that creates multiple positive possibilities and, in the dialogue, moves the organization in the direction of the most desired future. What becomes important is creating the most generative and effective way to move forward. This is best done by seeking out and valuing “the best of what is,” in order to create a positive path forward.

## TWO DIFFERENT PROCESSES FOR ORGANIZATION CHANGE

In the worldview of the current (and dominant) paradigm, we once described Appreciative Inquiry dichotomously, as a substitute for Problem Solving. As we live into the holistic emerging paradigm, we now see that there is no need to construct the dichotomy. In fact, we can frame Appreciative Inquiry as a way of doing Action Research that chooses to focus on information that locates and highlights generative and creative forces in the organization rather than choosing to focus on the deficits. By focusing on what has worked well and on peak experiences, the organization moves toward its most desired future while along the way addressing the things that need to change so that the image of the future can be realized. AI does not deny problems. It redefines them.

For example, in the current paradigm, a problem is something that does not measure up to an ideal or to our image of how a thing or situation ought to be. We believe that there is a “best” way to be, some concrete ideal that can be realized if only we could describe it and then achieve it. In the current paradigm as described in social constructionism, we think of a problem as any situation that needs to be changed in order for an organization, group or person to reach their emerging image of the situation as they would like it to be. The difference may sound subtle, but it is the forward motion of moving toward an image rather than the backward look at what is wrong that enables organizations to be agile and able to embrace the rapid change that is the water in which we swim! The following chart compares the two processes for resolving “problems.”

## TWO PROCESSES FOR ORGANIZATION CHANGE

<b>Paradigm 1: Deficit Based Research</b>	<b>Paradigm 2 (AI): Strength Based Research</b>
<b>Identification of Problems “Felt Needs”</b>	<b>Appreciating the Best of What Is</b>
<b>Analysis of Causes</b>	<b>Envisioning What Might Be</b>
<b>Analysis of Possible Solutions</b>	<b>Dialoging What Should Be</b>
<b>Plan of Action (Treatment)</b>	<b>Innovating What Will Be</b>
<b>Organizations are Problems to be Solved</b>	<b>Organizations are Mysteries to be Embraced</b>

## SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

"As I considered the importance of language and how human beings interact with the world, it struck me that in many ways the development of language was like the discovery of fire-- it was such an incredible primordial force. I had always thought that we used language to describe the world-- now I was seeing that this is not the case. To the contrary, it is through language that we create the world, because it's nothing until we describe it. And when we describe it, we create distinctions that govern our actions. To put it another way, we do not describe the world we see, but we see the world we describe."

-- Joseph Jaworski,

*Synchronicity: the Inner Path of Leadership*

"Human civilization is driven forward by notions too general for its existing language." -- Alfred North Whitehead

The Universe is made of stories, not of atoms." -- Muriel Rukeyser

"The most important thing we do as consultants is inquiry. We try to read situations, we do ...organizational analysis and diagnosis. It all starts with inquiry. The key point is that the way we know is fateful. The questions we ask, the things that we choose to focus on, the topics that we choose determine what we find. What we find becomes the data and the story out of which we dialogue about and envision the future. And so, the seeds of change are implicit in the very first questions we ask" -- David Cooperrider

## **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST THEORY**

1. The social order, at any given point, is viewed as the product of broad social agreement (tacit or explicit).
2. Patterns of social-organizational action are not fixed by nature in any direct biological or physical way; the vast share of social conduct is virtually stimulus free, capable of infinite conceptual variation.
3. From an observational point of view, all social action is open to multiple interpretations, no one of which is superior in any objectified sense. The interpretations favored in one historical setting may be replaced in the next.
4. Historical narratives and theories govern what is taken to be true or valid, and to a large extent determine what we, as scientists and lay-persons, are able to see. All observation, therefore, is filtered through conventional stories, belief systems, and theoretical lenses.
5. To the extent that action is predicated on the stories, ideas, beliefs, meanings, and theories embedded in language, people are free to seek transformations in conventional conduct by changing patterns of narration.
6. The most powerful vehicle communities have for making changes in the social order is through the act of dialogue made possible by language. Alterations in linguistic practices, therefore, hold profound implications for changes in social practice.
7. Social theory can be viewed as a highly refined narrative account with a specialized grammar all its own. Because of this, all narrative accounts (including social theory) are morally relevant -- they have the potential to affect the way people live their ordinary lives in relation to one another.
8. Valid knowledge or social theory is therefore a narrative creation. Social knowledge is not "out there" in nature to be discovered through detached, value free, observational methods (logical empiricism); nor can it be relegated to the subjective minds of isolated individuals (cognitivism). Social knowledge, from this perspective, resides in the stories of the collectivity; it is created, maintained, and put to use by the human group. Dialogue, free from constraint of distortion, is necessary to determine the "nature of things" (social constructionism).

# FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST THEORY

From: *An Introduction To Social Constructionism*, Vivian Burr (1995)

Vivian Burr suggests that there is no single definition of Social Constructionism, no single description. Rather several descriptive ideas are linked together in a kind of “family resemblance” – prototypes of fuzzy sets (Rosch, 1973). There is no one feature that identifies a social constructionist position. It is possible to loosely group as social constructionist any approach that has at its foundation one or more of the following key assumptions. Or, as Ken Gergen, (1985), puts it, “things you would absolutely have to believe in order to be a social constructionist.”<sup>1</sup> The four beliefs are:

## 1. A critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge:

### Social Constructionism

- challenges the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world. It challenges traditional positivist/empiricist ideas that the world, ourselves included, can be known as it really is through objective, unbiased observation; that what we perceive is what is real.
- cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be - a radical agnosticism.
- suggests that categories we use to “know” the world – men and women, classical and pop music, etc. – don’t necessarily reflect real divisions “out there.”

## 2. Historical and cultural specificity:

- The ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific. Our categories depend upon where and when in the world we live.
- All ideas and categories for understanding the world are products of our own histories and cultures. Ways of knowing depend upon the social and economic arrangements of time and place and are best seen as “cultural artifacts.”
- Our ways of understanding are not necessarily closer to the truth than other ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Burr, Vivian. *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. London and New York:Routledge, 1995, p.2  
AI for Organization Change: A Workshop Resource Book by Jane Magruder Watkins & Bernard Mohr

### **3. Knowledge is sustained by social processes:**

- Our currently accepted ways of understanding the world arise not from the world “as it really is” but from our own shared constructions of the world,
- Our daily social interactions and relationships are the source of what is “true” for us.
- Language is the essential tool of creating the world as we know it, and we construct it between us in the social processes and interactions through which we are constantly engaged with each other.

### **4. Knowledge and social action go together:**

- There are many possible social constructions of the world, and each one invites or impels a different kind of human action and excludes other kinds of actions.
- Our descriptions or constructions of the world sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others.
- The patterns and arrangements of power in human life are reflected and sustained by the language we use.