

Merging micro- to macro-practices for a sustainable world



BY PROFESSOR RENÉ BOUWEN

Professor René Bouwen makes his retrospective reflections on the World Appreciative Inquiry Conference 2012

The wide variety of inputs during the conference by keynotes and all other presentations, is a clear illustration of the broad 'foundational' and 'methodological' implications for Appreciative Inquiry to take up the challenge of upgrading its generative power towards a 'new economy' of strengths.

The workshops, symposia and paper presentations mostly document the wide variety of creative work forms in designing AI interventions in a wide variety of contexts. The challenge for creative designs, looking for inspiration in all domains of human expression and also immigrating in always new territory of training, coaching, helping and facilitation, is picked up very well. People from very different disciplines and areas share the common inspiration offered by the AI principles.

The challenge remains to deepen and to broaden the AI practices, from micro-practices over a wide continuum of organisational practices towards macro practices.

A first element of the deepening of the AI practice process may be for each practitioner and scholar to nurture the personal appreciative stance in your own private life and practice. A most remarkable moment during the conference for me was when the first question, after our symposium presentation on the mutual enrichment of process consultation and AI, pointed towards 'What do you do to maintain your personal appreciative stance throughout the daily course of events?'

The foundation of AI does not lie only in a scientific and pragmatic stance, but encompasses the personal life attitude needed to enact AI practices in an authentic way. Time

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for silence, personal space and a meditative stance was rather scarce during the conference busy sometimes noisy practices. The keynote of Klaas Van Egmond was certainly an intellectual underpinning of this personal integrating stance by 'balancing the opposites'. I vividly remember a sentence of dialogue partner: 'If you see pain as part of the cycle of life, it does not need to become suffering...'

Another element of deepening is the challenge to '...go beyond the positivity, towards the generativity of AI'. That positivity is yet a goal itself must have been expressed somehow during the conference practices as they were reported out in the local newspapers. The papers spoke of 'a new movement' or belief system to push aside all problems by focusing only on the bright sides of life. The strong connection to positive psychology may also be tributary to this one sided perception of AI by a novel audience. Therefore the keynote of Ron Fry and Gervase Bushe on 'Beyond positivity' was perceived by most people as a very welcome and necessary specification of the AI philosophy and methods to come to maturity in a our challenging society, aspiring towards sustainability, social inclusion and personal integrity.

Ron Fry especially was inviting further thought on 'a new positive theory of change'. He stresses the need to develop a new language to phrase the process of energy exchange and mutual trust that is co-created in a truly appreciative dialogue between conversational partners. The creative and energizing 'change moment' is an enactment of wholeness – maybe holiness – beyond diversities but based on the existing differences, encompassing them in a new co-creative outcome. The enactment quality makes the differences between stagnation and change. It is the act of inquiry that has the impact as expressed in the 'Gergen-Heisenberg effect' as Ron said. The active observer-participant creates the 'measurement' or realization of the new social reality.

It was Kenneth Gergen in a 1978 article ("Towards generative theory") who introduced 'generativity' as a quality of any social research act. Here the quality of all micro and meso practices comes in as a distinctive characteristic of all relational practices, as was illustrated and even enacted on stage by Kenneth Gergen and Danielle Zandee. They documented how meaning is not a given – as is 'the illusion of the object' – but continuously co-created during the listening-responding double interacts in the micro moments of life. These micro practices are not 'words' as we are used to

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in so much change work, but every active exchange in play, art or work of any kind. The assemblages of micro practices constitute organisational meso-practices that can have the same high interactive qualities and thus also generative qualities or new possibilities.

The broadening of scope of AI on the macro or societal level may be the most important challenge in the scaling up process. Here very diverse stakeholders, different disciplines, opposite interests and competing competences are interacting with each other. Inventing new combinations is the task here, as Koen Van Mechelen was illustrating in his Cosmopolitan Chicken project, but is maybe even more explicit in Koen's Cosmogolem project. A radical transformation is evoked here in an artistic way, where the individual is invited to transcend differences and opposed forces into a balance of always new combinations.

A new sustainable world – balancing people, profit and planet – is in need of a whole new technology and a whole new way of working together (open source) as Mario Fleurinck from Melotte illustrated through direct digital manufacturing. In addition ecological constraint challenge the state of the art of our macro management practices that we could develop up to now, but which don't live up yet to the enormous sustainability challenges we are facing. They are yet too fragmented and isolated and new interacting platforms and wider and more organic issue definitions have to be created where the whole variety and richness of differences -stakeholders, resources, culture, cooperation strategies, sustainable products and services - are brought in for new combinations.

Here the merger of the qualities of micro practices into the quality of the macro practices -in global issues and with global stakeholders - is the necessary progress we have to search for into our Appreciative Inquiry practices.

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