

**What is critical appreciation? Insights from studying the critical turn in an appreciative inquiry**

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# **What is critical appreciation? Insights from studying the critical turn in an appreciative inquiry**

*Rory J Ridley-Duff and Graham Duncan*

## **Abstract**

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was developed in the late 1980s as a process to encourage social innovation by involving people in discovering the ‘best of what is’. Recent research has suggested that AI practitioners’ focus on positivity is now inhibiting AI’s focus on generative theory. This paper responds by asking the question “what is critical appreciation?”, then seeks answers by studying the critical turn in a Big Lottery Research project. By tracking the narratives of research assistants (RAs) as they describe the ‘life worlds’ and ‘systems’ in their community, we clarify the recursive processes that lead to deeper levels of appreciation. We contribute to the development of critical appreciative processes (CAPs) that start with a critical inquiry (CI) to deconstruct experience and then engage critical appreciative processes during the remainder of the AI cycle to construct new experiences. The initial CI establishes which system imperatives colonise the life world of participants whilst subsequent critical-appreciative processes build participants’ aspirations to design new social systems.

## **Keywords**

Appreciative inquiry, grounded theory, critical appreciation, critical turn, community development.

## **Introduction**

In this paper we examine how critical appreciative processes (CAPs) in an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) affect the conceptualisation of appreciation. This paper's starting point is the question "what forms of critical appreciation occur in the context of AI?" To investigate this, we track the use of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) by seven Pakistani research assistants throughout a 3-year Big Lottery funded study of community development in Sheffield (England). Using accounts of changes in their outlook, we develop a Grounded Theory of CAPs then outline how conceptualisations of appreciation changed over the AI cycle.

The need to improve understanding of community development processes was stimulated by one of the author's previous action research (Duncan, 2009) using springboard stories to inspire social entrepreneurship in the Pakistani community (based on Denning, 2001). After observing the numerous cultural and linguistic barriers that Pakistani *women* face when engaging in enterprise in the UK, Duncan organised a new 3-year study to investigate the impact of social and community relations on the women's worldview (see Anand and Cochrane, 2005; Platt, 2007; Gater et al., 2010).

We took a twin track approach. The first was externally facing with research assistants collecting information from participants to make sense of their community (Duncan and Ridley-Duff, 2014). In this paper, we focus on a second track with an internal orientation, investigating how the narratives of seven research assistants recruited to run AI workshops and Open Space events in the Pakistani community underwent a 'critical turn' during the research (Johnson and Duberley, 2000, 2003). These changes helped us to clarify a methodology for critical appreciation that contributes to AI practice by blending:

- *Critical Inquiry* (CI) to deconstruct narratives that are meaningful to participants;
- *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI) to construct narratives that reshape community life;
- *Grounded Theory* (GT) to code and review participants' narratives of their system and life world using open, axial and selective coding.

The paper has four sections. In the first, we review approaches to appreciation by unpacking tensions between AI and CI. To help this, we allude to divergences in the philosophies of Hegel and Marx to understand debates now taking place amongst AI scholars. In doing so, we consider the 'shadow side' that AI's practitioner community has identified as a by-product of practice and establish the case for combining CI with AI to increase the generativity of AI projects. In the second section, we set out our research context and explore the methodology and methods deployed. The third section tracks the critical turn of research assistants by exploring the recursive processes that develop critical appreciation over time. In our conclusions, we summarise our findings and outline how the integration of critical appreciative processes can advance AI as a research practice.

### **The critical turn in appreciative inquiry**

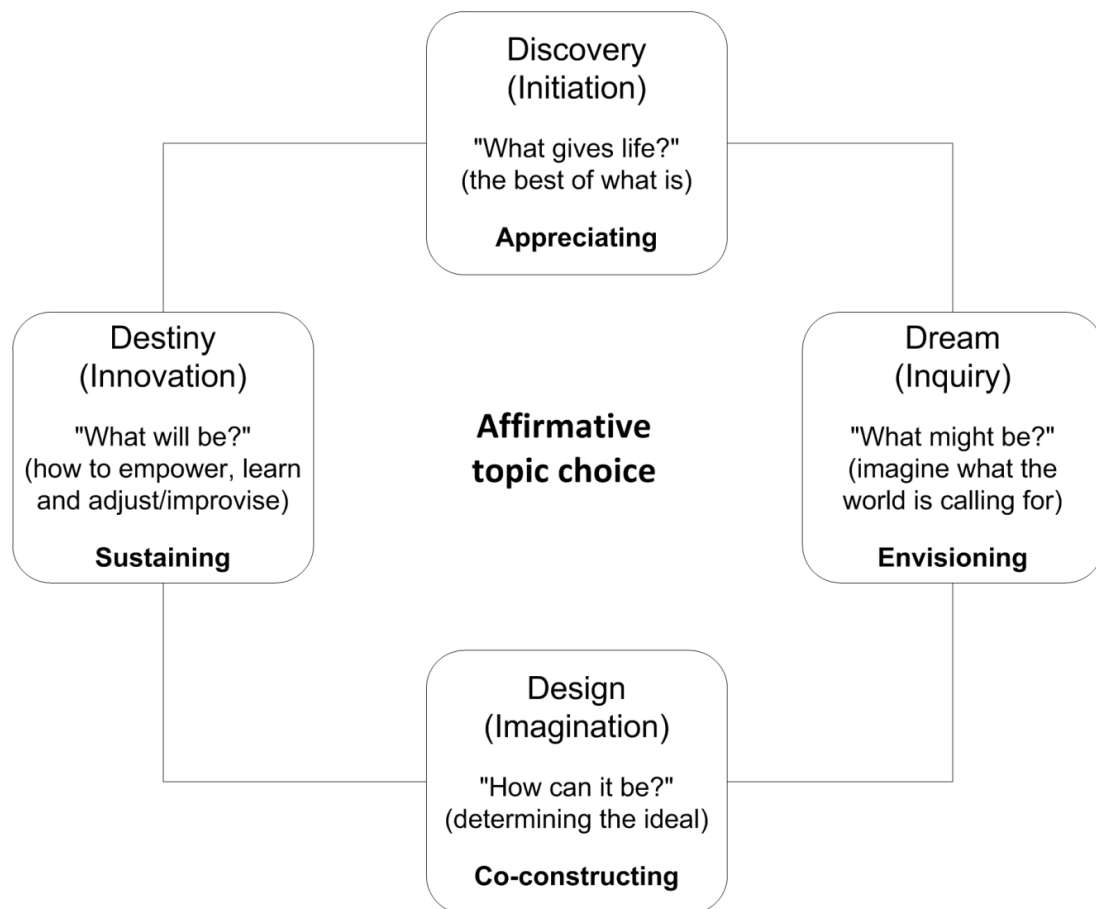
Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was established by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) as a generative learning process that uncovers narratives of success and builds upon them. Early practice involved appreciating, envisioning, co-constructing and sustaining social change by eliciting positive stories (see Figure 1). It has been popularised through a 4I model (initiation, inquiry, imagination and innovation) and a 4D model (discovery, dream, design and destiny) that describe phases of inquiry (Watkins and Mohr, 2001; Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008).

There is a noticeable shift in emphasis following Cooperrider and Srivastva's initial focus on generative theory. By the late 1990s, talk of generativity is replaced by positivity

(compare Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987 with Cooperrider, 1999; see Bushe, 2007).

Cooperrider advanced an upbeat view of AI's potential using findings from medical research that people improved health outcomes through positive psychology.

**Figure 1 – Early framing of appreciative inquiry**



The constructionist commitments at the heart of AI are evident in the contention that “we human beings create our own realities through symbolic and mental processes” and that these processes can change both biological and organisational destinies (Cooperrider, 1999, p. 92). The recent return in the AI literature to generative theory has not shaken key advocates’ assumptions about “the socially constructed nature of reality” (Cooperrider, 2014, p.22).

Based on these assumptions, AI has expanded beyond Organizational Development (OD) to projects in schools, community organisations and development bodies (Grant, 2006, 2007; Grant and Humphries, 2006). AI is framed as ‘affirmative’ (rather than ‘deficit-based’) and ‘appreciative’ (rather than ‘critical’) in its approach (van der Haar and Hosking, 2004; Grant, 2007; Lewis et al., 2008). Backed by questions and processes that elicit strengths and competencies, AI researchers and consultants embraced a positive lens to stimulate change (Vital, Boland and Cooperrider, 2008).

Grant and Humphries (2006), however, highlight the dearth of studies evaluating AI and suggest it is over-optimistic about human agency. They argue that AI neglects the influence of social systems that reproduce hegemonic systems of power over group members’ consciousness (see Lukes, 2005 [1974]). Arguments for a critical turn have also surfaced in exchanges about AI’s shadow side – a term used to articulate the “conscious or unconscious regulation of cognition and/or emotion by self and/or others” when someone strays from cultural norms (Fitzgerald, Oliver and Hoxsey, 2010, p. 221).

Fitzgerald *et al.* advance three arguments: a) when AI techniques illuminate a topic, they generate knowledge of a shadow side; b) AI can intervene into the shadow side by eliciting accounts of its effects, and; c) AI can itself cast a shadow that hides or obscures organising processes. Bushe (2010) responded by maintaining the affirmative view of AI whilst adding an insightful account of its shadow side. He contended that it contains both negativity and positivity: negativity comes from fear of reprisals whereas positivity comes from aspirations and desires that cannot find expression in a cultural setting. While Bushe maintains Cooperriders’ view of AI as an intervention into the social construction of *reality*, he came to see generativity as more important than positivity (Bushe, 2007, 2010, 2013). However, Boje’s (2010) critique of Fitzgerald *et al.* is more overtly realist in its assumptions. He

cautions that “happy desires” should not displace “unhappy actualities” (p. 240) because it increases the risk of colluding with the status quo and inhibits social change.

Sustained arguments for a critical turn in AI started with Grant’s (2006) importation of critical theory concepts into her work. Grant uses Habermasian concepts to distinguish the narratives of the ‘life world’ from the imperatives of a governing ‘system’ in schools (see Habermas, 1987). Her findings demonstrated how system imperatives colonised the life worlds of school trustees to such an extent that AI sessions got deferred because there was no process for discussing externally imposed system imperatives within AI. Participants criticised AI for its inability to engage with ‘problems’ not of their choosing.

On both sides of the debate there is a shared epistemology that human knowledge is socially constructed through the interactions of people with their environment and each other. But their *ontological* positions are different. Bushe (2010) aligns himself with Cooperrider and Gergen by pursuing a Hegelian perspective (Hegel, 1977 [1807]). He retains Gergen’s commitment to affirmative postmodernism rooted in Heraclitus’s assumption that social reality is unstable and a product of impermanent processes of exchange rather than objective structures (Gergen, 2014). This places a higher priority on constructing relationships for co-operative *organizing* than dialogue to deconstruct the processes that sustain existing forms of *organization* (see Cooperrider, 2014, p. 4).

Grant (2006) is more aligned with Fitzgerald et al. (2010) and Boje (2010) in seeking modes of inquiry that acknowledge the structural inequalities that trigger alienation (Marx, 1959 [1844]). Boje (2010) - like Grant – takes a Habermasian critical turn when he distinguishes “happy desires” in the life world from the “unhappy actualities” created by control systems. Grant outlines a new approach to AI practice in which CI establishes a “deeper appreciation of the situation and process under investigation” (Grant, 2006, p. 286)

that prevents participants from devaluing AI as a research process. It does so by satisfying their need to manage system imperatives that intrude into the AI.

The critical turn involves a shift from a Hegelian to a Marxian view of dialectics through an acceptance that knowledge generating capacities are intimately linked to the social system in which they occur. Furthermore, it acknowledges that a person who develops knowledge of their social system will have a variable ability to act depending on their place within it. At the same time, CI and AI both actively pursue emancipatory goals through a shared Kantian commitment to dialogue that examines the concepts and relationships that regulate reasoning and action in a social system.

Cooperrider is particularly articulate in echoing the sentiments of critical inquirers (Arendt, Habermas, Friere, Meizow and Benhabid) when he argues for:

a totally different kind of rationality, one that acknowledges that everything we take to be good, or beautiful, or 'true' is the result of the *socius* or the social relationships of which we are part. To be rational - in its highest form - would be to create spaces for all voices, free and open...

(Cooperrider and Srivastva, 2014, p. 14)

If the above holds, it must also be the case that everything we take to be bad, ugly and 'untrue' is also the result of the *socius*. Bushe's (2013) description of refugees recounting their harrowing experiences of war suggests that CI is also generative. This gives credence to Grant's (2006) and Boje's (2010) contention that describing acts of resistance creates a positive narrative about survival. Examining 'what is?' and 'what might have been?' (deconstruction) before considering 'what is yet to come?' (construction) represents a fuller



discovery process. In addition to asking ‘what gives life?’ (i.e. what to do), researchers can ask ‘what depletes life?’ (i.e. what to avoid).

In summary, Grant’s identification of CAPs, and Boje’s (2010) intervention into the debate about AI as a shadow process adds to Bushe’s (2013) call for *generative* rather than positive topic choices. Whereas Gergen (2014) continues to see AI as prioritising ‘telling it as it may become’ over ‘telling it like it is’, we envisage CAPs that start with CI workshops that first ask ‘how is it?’ and ‘how might it have been?’ before engaging AI techniques to ‘tell it as it may become’.

Switching to an appreciative lens, however, does not have to mean the wholesale abandonment of critical theory. CAPs requires a process that supports ‘critical acts’ (Arendt, 1958; Benhabib, 1990) to penetrate the shadow side and reveal hidden stories of experience (see Friere, 1968; Mezirow, 1978, 1981; Myer, Donovan and Fitzgerald, 2007; Cranton and Taylor, 2012). As Taylor (2009, p. 11) points out, this type of process needs to avoid “analytical, point-counterpoint dialogue” and replace it with “relational and trustful communications that are highly personal and self-disclosing”. Moreover, Taylor is clear that transformations in understanding are not abstract or solitary exercises. Without the formation of relationships the process is “impotent and hollow, lacking the genuine discourse necessary for thoughtful and in-depth reflection” (p.13).

This focus on the *socius* as a locus of knowledge means paying particular attention to the ‘deference-emotion system’ of a community. Scheff (1990) found that individuals monitor the deference extended to them during social interactions. Low levels or loss of deference triggers negative (self-) evaluations resulting in feelings of shame. However, Goss (2005) is also confident that the way the deference-emotion system modulates human interaction is open to change. As a result, actions that change patterns of deference can help to stimulate

critical acts (Arendt, 1958; Benhabib, 1990). While a deference-emotion system might sustain a shadow, generative research strategies will illuminate and change it.

With this in mind, we evolved a methodology that starts by building on Arendt's (1958, p. 126) concept of creating power by "weaving of a web of narratives" to find out "who one is". An initial phase of CI is then set aside to pursue AI phases that cultivate a critical sensitivity towards the way participants (re)frame who they want to be. By recognising and valuing narratives differently, we can seek an answer to the question "what forms of critical appreciation occur in the context of AI?" by identifying the recursive processes linked to different types of appreciation that impact the deference-emotion system of a community over time.

### **Research context and methodology**

For 10 years, St Mary's Community Centre has worked with Pakistani women providing English language education, vocational qualifications and employment opportunities (Duncan, 2009). This work involves bi-lingual community workers who engage families suspicious of adult learning. As diversity in St Mary's classes has increased, the impact of culture on learning has become a focus of interest. Pakistani women languished for years in St Mary's English classes without making progress while women from other communities thrived. So, St Mary's formed a partnership with Sheffield Hallam University to research factors that influence learning amongst local Pakistani women.

Initially, six female Pakistani research assistants (RAs) were recruited to gather data and liaise with the community. Later, a male Pakistani RA was recruited to conduct interviews with men.

- A was an organiser of an Asian People's Project who became a part-time female RA fluent in Urdu, Punjabi and English. She was involved in AI pilot projects before joining this project's steering group, running AI workshops and organising Open Space events.
- K was a female RA paid on a sessional basis. She came to the UK to get married in the 1980s. Her fluent Urdu and Punjabi helped in running AI workshops. She also participated in learning sets and conducted interviews.
- N was recruited as a full-time female RA. Fluent in Urdu and English, she joined this project's steering group, provided full-time administrative support, ran AI workshops, organised Open Space events, participated in learning sets and conducted interviews.
- S was a part-time female RA fluent in Urdu, Punjabi and English. After migrating to the UK, she became an English language tutor at St Mary's. She participated in AI pilot projects, then joined this project's steering group, ran AI workshops, organised Open Space events, participated in learning sets and conducted interviews.
- SH was a female RA paid on a sessional basis. Fluent in Urdu and English through work at a medical centre, she contributed to AI workshops, participated in learning sets and conducted interviews.
- SO was recruited as a female RA paid on a sessional basis. She taught English at St Mary's while holding another job in a 'skills for life' programme. She contributed to AI workshops, participated in learning sets and conducted interviews.
- Z was a male research student at Sheffield Hallam University recruited to interview men attending English language courses at St Mary's. He participated in three Open Space events in which men and women discussed research findings.

To these seven, we add the PI (Principal Investigator) who managed the project and CoI (Co-Investigator) who interviewed the research team after each AI cycle.

The female RAs underwent 4 days of intensive training on research philosophy, qualitative methods and AI so they could make field notes, conduct appreciative interviews and run Open Space events. Research assistant Z undertook research training as part of his PhD programme. Collectively, the RAs bridged two communities - the PI and CoI spoke only English while Pakistani participants spoke only Urdu and Punjabi. The RAs ran four AI cycles during which they made field notes in English about their interactions in group settings (Kitzinger, 1994). Learning sets and interviews with RAs were recorded and transcribed after each cycle.

Table 1 shows the CI and AI methods deployed by the RAs to elicit narratives: the CI methods focussed on discovery by deconstructing narratives of experience while AI methods focussed on constructing new narratives:

**Table 1 – Critical Inquiry (CI) and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) interventions to generate narratives**

<b>Technique</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Family Tree (CI)	(Cycle 1) Participants were asked to draw, write or use magazines to describe family context.
Timeline (CI)	(Cycle 1) Participants were asked to tell the story of their upbringing and move to England. After giving an account, listeners asked three clarifying questions each. RAs participated.

- Four Circles of Life (CI) (Cycle 2 onwards) The Family Tree and Timeline were amalgamated into a single activity called 'The Four Circles of Life' (Marriage, Journey to England, Arrival in England, Life Now). RAs participated.
- Arshi's Story (AI) (All Cycles) Participants were presented with a story about Arshi who arrives in England, becomes stuck at home, and wants to learn English. Participants were asked to give advice to Arshi.
- Three Wishes (AI) (Cycle 2 onwards) Participants were asked to describe and take questions on three wishes for the future.
- Appreciative Interviews (AI) (All Cycles) In the middle of each cycle, RAs recorded 1-to-1 appreciative interviews. RAs transcribed these into English.
- Social Network Map (CI / AI)(Cycle 3) RAs asked participants 10 questions to elicit information about the levels (and role) of trust in their family and community.

The dataset for this paper includes all interviews with the RAs, transcripts of learning sets, and field notes and memos made directly by the RAs (in English). It excludes the interviews conducted by the RAs with research participants. The dataset was coded using a Grounded Theory (GT) approach to generate a theoretical understanding of the impact of the research processes on the RAs.

A Grounded Theory (GT) approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) as modified by Strauss and Corbin develops concepts through three rigorous phases of coding - open, axial and selective (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Locke, 2001). GT is appropriate for this study because it seeks to develop a conceptual understanding from multiple subjective accounts of a

phenomenon. The goal of GT is not a multiplicity of understandings - it is an inductively derived theory that offers a coherent account of a social process.

*Open coding* took place throughout the project by the PI and N (St Mary's) and the CoI (Sheffield Hallam University). As the study progressed, 'category saturation' occurred: open codes were grouped into *axial codes* to capture emerging concepts and the inter-relationships between them (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Suddaby, 2006). The CoI reviewed the final stages of coding to reflect on conceptualisations of appreciation that emerged during GT development.

GT's approach is generative in that it "requires that a detailed literature review comes after the data has been collected when tentative theories or concepts have started to form" (Goulding, 2001:23). This encourages concept development based on data categories derived from empirical data, delaying significant engagement with academic literature until the process of coding has advanced to the axial coding stage (Locke, 2001; Walker and Myrick, 2006). In our study, conceptual development drove the literature review with the result that the PI and CoI engaged the literature on critical studies of AI during field work (Grant, 2006, 2007; Grant and Humphries, 2006) and progressed to transformative learning after their field work (Mezirow, 2009; Cranton and Taylor, 2012). Consciousness became the *selective code* of their GT.

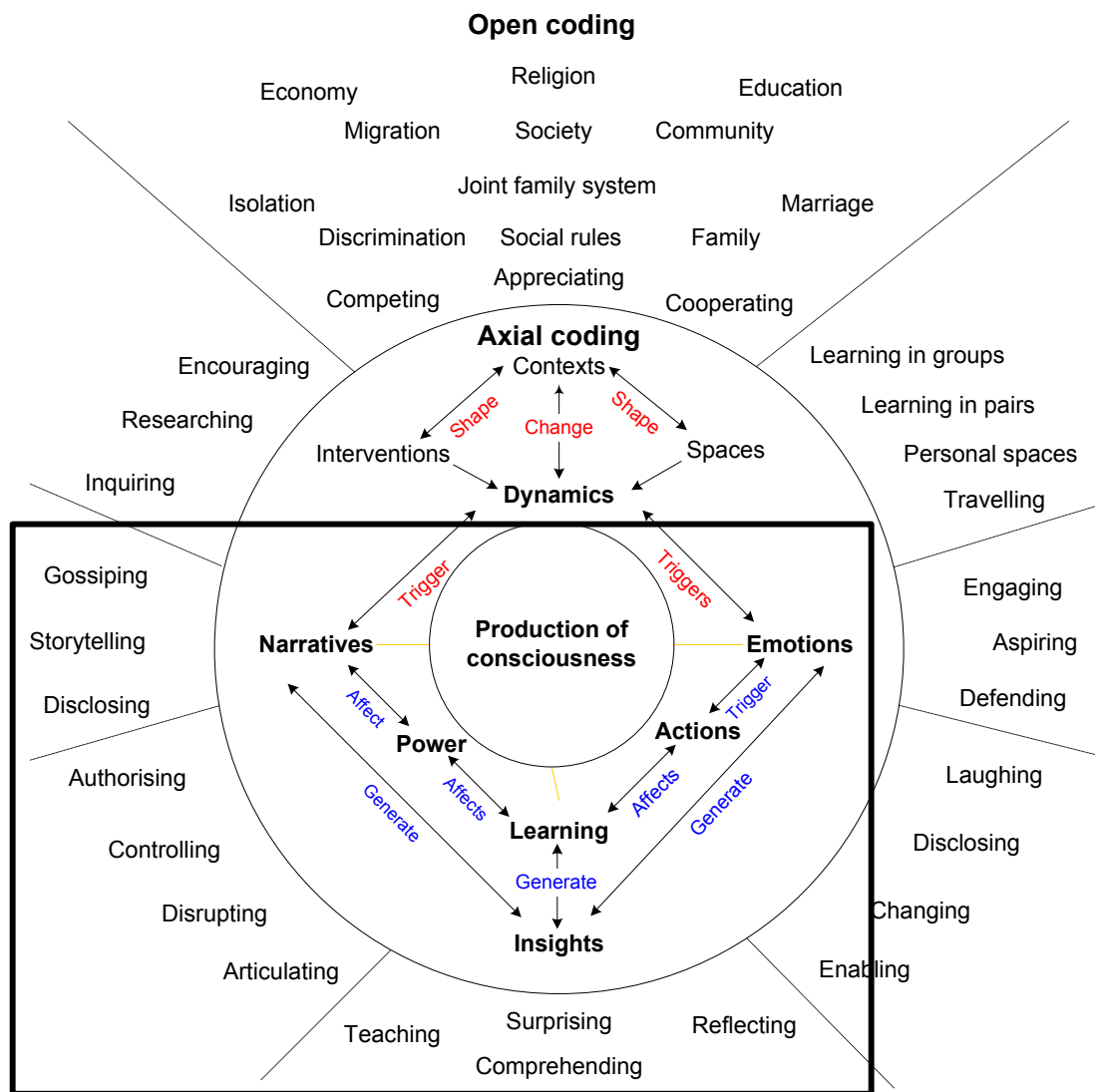
GT's accommodation phase was handled through other techniques consistent with a constructionist outlook: learning sets were conducted in English to test concepts within the research team (Revans, 1998); presentations at three academic conferences and one practitioner event tested concepts with professionals; Open Space events conducted in Urdu / Punjabi tested concepts with research participants and their families (Owen, 2008). This accommodation process enabled the research team to clarify conceptual categories and refine their GT.

## Findings

In this section, we present findings from RAs' field notes, interviews and learning sets. For space reasons, we restrict ourselves to four themes that emerged during the axial coding phase (narratives, insights, learning and power). In the first section on *generating narratives* we review how negative self-images amongst Pakistani women impacted on the RAs. As the RAs learnt the stories behind the negative self-images, they began to question pre-conceptions about women in their community. This is followed by a section on *learning from insights*. In this section, we highlight how learning occurs when there is an accumulation of insights and surprises during an investigation of the 'shadow-side'. This underpins the RAs evolving knowledge of the *socius* that shapes rationality within the community. Lastly, we present a section on *discovering power* in which we report how the RAs acted to change the *socius* by influencing patterns of participation in Open Space workshops.

Throughout this section, we take care to outline the recursive nature of processes that lead to different types of appreciation, and also how appreciation deepens over time. To this end, Figure 2 shows the two-way relationships between axial codes, how they relate to each other and the rest of our GT. Our findings section explores the data that produced these axial codes and elucidates how our theoretical understanding of critical appreciation developed.

**Figure 2 – The part of the Grounded Theory presented as findings**



*Generating narratives*

During the Discovery phase, religious and cultural traditions quickly emerged as important, together with economic and family relationships that affect new migrants. The RAs – like participants – reported that their childhood and adolescence were framed by their upbringing in Pakistan, particularly the complexities of preparing for marriage. The cultural traditions of the joint family system - living in extended families, deferring to the rules of parents and



grand-parents - produce patterns of authority that are (still) passed down to sons and daughters-in-law.

The Timeline activity in Cycle 1 (see Table 1) was designed to encourage storytelling, and this produced narratives that were generative without being positive.

A: Then another woman came... (Pause). She had tears in her eyes after me. She burst into tears when she said her mother left her. She was raised by her father. The questions for her were more comforting... (Pause) supportive of her. I think this triggered the other people off. It triggered a spiral downwards.

CoI: They all started sharing?

A: The negatives, the tragedies. I had to allow it.

Interview 27/04/2010.

The dissonance between professional training in AI to focus on positivity and listening to ‘tragedies’ triggered reflection amongst the RAs. By asking participants to articulate their life stories, participants taught the RAs about the continued existence of community relationships they thought had been eradicated. In this extract, K identifies system injunctions in the extended family:

K: When they came, they were treated as slaves. Their husbands were seeing somebody else. The way their in-laws... (Pause). The girls were not allowed to speak to anybody, not allowed to have friends, were not allowed to go out.

Interview, 28/10/2010.

In light of such accounts, the RAs discussed their discomfort at steering participants towards positive imagery before their upbringing and situation were understood. These discussions reshaped their attitude to AI practice and reaffirmed the value of CI. They were, in effect, challenging system imperatives in the professional training of AI at the same time as identifying imperatives that exist in the family structures of the Pakistani community.

RAs narrated stories of the life worlds of participants by communicating their distress, their experience of arranged marriages in which they had little or no choice over whether (and who) to marry. They recounted stories from women and men who moved to Sheffield at short notice into families where they did not feel wanted, were left to feel 'like dead people', were isolated with no-one to speak to and unable to learn English. RAs gave accounts of disinterested or absent husbands, of in-laws who expected migrants to do all domestic work, and of bored, lonely participants dislocated from all that was familiar to them.

RAs had never heard such extreme stories before, even though they were embedded in the same community. By narrating these stories in English they began to appreciate the situation and process under investigation and to value the process of listening. CI techniques revealed and penetrated the shadow side and triggered the first stage of the RAs' critical turn. By learning to suspend judgement, they appreciated the need to understand the system injunctions that shape the life worlds of the participants. As SH commented:

SH: That stuff kept coming back to me. I kept thinking 'don't assume, you haven't spoken to these people yet'. It's so easy to assume... (Pause) without the facts, without the figures or whatever... (Pause) not until you've had a conversation... (Pause) until you have the positives and negatives of the whole [...] you can't just assume... (Pause). It opened my eyes. I didn't realise...

Interview 27/04/2010

Not all activities for understanding the systems and life worlds of the participants produced a sad response. The Family Tree activity (see Table 1) produced an acerbic form of humour:

A: I found it fascinating. Their mother- and father-in-laws were all grumpy old men and women, while their girls, daughters and sons were all fashionable. One girl...  
(Pause) [...] cut from the magazine a pair of trousers advertising at £9.99 – from Matalan [showing] a whole man. She stuck it there with the label. She turned around and said ‘my husband’s for sale’.

Interview 27/10/2010

After CI activities had elicited accounts of day-to-day life, the Dream and Design stages of AI were pursued through Arshi’s Story (see Appendix A). This elicited narratives of change in a non-threatening way. Arshi’s story was particularly potent as it gave the women a chance to project changes they wanted to see without being asked to confront family members. As N later commented:

N: None of them said that Arshi could be in the wrong. They all relate to Arshi...  
(Pause) [...] see themselves as Arshi. For people like [D] whose children are older, of marriage age, her views were different... (Pause) she thought you have to go to the mother-in-law. I liked that session: very enjoyable, very fun.

CoI: Sounds like you learnt a lot.

N: Yes, I learnt how family situations can change your views on other people's situations. What I learnt from the group was how these individuals think, and what their aspirations are, what they want.

Interview 26/04/2010.

There are two aspects to this interview extract. Firstly, it reports a new type of appreciation: valuing constructive forms of inquiry that expand the options in a person's life world. However, there is another form of appreciation here: appreciating how system imperatives communicated in a family setting penetrate the life worlds of family members. In identifying how family situations change views of other situations, the family is identified as a site for the reproduction of system imperatives.

### *Learning from insights*

The second stage of the critical turn, therefore, was the RAs emergent understanding that knowledge production is linked to the social contexts in which it is created and that this varies across the community. The AI process accelerated the accumulation of *surprises* that catalyse *learning*. The responses to Arshi's story can be regarded as critical acts because they initiated dialogue about alternatives to the status quo. Responses to Arshi's story included suggestions for transgressing the system injunctions of family life by rethinking the assumption that newly married Pakistani women should always submit to the wishes of their in-laws.

Research assistant A described what she learnt by comparing a 'happy desire' of the government (that their policies had ended forced marriages) with the 'unhappy realities' she discovered (marriages in which many young men and women had little choice about who they married). The learning for her was that cultural change requires community action over

several generations and does not occur simply because governments announce policies or pass laws.

She also commented on the *emotions* their discoveries triggered:

A: As people, **it does tear us apart when we hear it** one-to-one [...] (Pause). Taking it back out there... (Pause) we can't do that - we are bound by confidentiality. A lot of the experience has come out [...] **it felt so good for them to air things out, just to talk about it.** [Emphasis added]

Learning Set 22/06/2010.

At this point, the RAs were actively navigating the emotionality of the research process during discussion of research ethics. This is a new type of appreciation. In A's reports to the rest of the research team, she comments that participants 'felt so good' to be able to 'air things out' and give expression to alternative possibilities, but qualifies this with concerns that they may not fully understand the consent they have given. To resolve their concerns, the RAs organised information on GP counselling services for participants. They acted on their emotions while maintaining their commitment to confidentiality by providing information that enabled the participants to pursue new courses of action.

Arshi's Story became a safe mechanism for 'envisioning' and 'co-constructing' alternatives in the Design phase. In an interview three months later, N articulated her new world view:

N: Cycle 3 was more about getting to know them as individuals... (Pause) - I think it was getting to know how their identity has been formed by other people.

CoI: Ah... (Pause), that's quite a step.

N: That's what we've learnt... (Pause), because we've talked about how identity is... (Pause), how it can be formed by the people that are surrounding you... (Pause).

What we are thinking is formed by what is being talked about at home

[...]

CoI: Okay. You said something very interesting there... (Pause) - how identity is formed through relationships with other people. Is that, for you, a new view?

N: It is new in terms of coming to this job and learning from the two cycles, and listening to their stories... (Pause), the people... (Pause) - 80% is probably wholly from the environment they live in.

CoI: Is that something you've come to think, or something you thought [before]?

N: I've come to think it... (Pause), I never thought about it before.

Interview 31/01/2011

In this extract, N articulates her understanding of the *socius* – how our understanding of good and bad, positive and negative, is shaped by social relations and the power of discourse. Her critical turn has progressed because her understanding of the way life worlds are shaped is now informed by connecting system imperatives with the social identities they produce. In the next section, we draw this out further by examining the RAs appreciation of their power to act on their learning.

### *Discovering power*

Research assistant N transformed her perspective by developing her own generative theory of the way consciousness (identity) forms in the Pakistani community. This was not an isolated case. In the following interview extract, assistant A describes her own critical turn:

A: (Pause). I strongly value what AI has done to the women, and also to me as well. It has allowed me to change my understanding of my own community. I assumed a lot of things. My assumptions were challenged... (Pause), challenged in a positive way. It was more... (Pause) I've learnt to respect these women a lot more than I did because I don't take it for granted they've got it all there at home on a plate doing nothing. I say to myself, "come on, you know better now". You have this argument, this talk, to yourself.

Interview 31/01/2011

It this extract, assistant A not only provides evidence of a critical turn as a by-product of challenged assumptions, but also an increased capacity for appreciation. She 'learnt to respect' women she previously dismissed as having life 'on a plate' whilst 'doing nothing' at home. A's capacity for appreciation is a product of discovering her capacity for deference in CI and AI workshops. The PI noticed this new attitude in A and its effect on St Mary's:

PI: I've noticed a change in the way that we operate. I think we've become less prescriptive...(Pause). [Assistant] A in particular is less paternalistic in the way we approach what we are doing [...] and there is a genuine buy into that.

Interview, 18/02/2011

This is the final type of appreciation that we discovered - an appreciation for the power of action. While the PI notices the changing actions of A, an interview with SH shows that new actions were not confined to St Mary's:

SH: My work[place] has seen a difference in me...(Pause). I go back with a different stride. I've suggested we could do an AI at work for customer care...(Pause) bringing staff morale up. I've been talking about what it was, and what I've been doing so far...

Interview 27/04/2010

The capacity to authorise, control and disrupt narratives and choose a new course of action is something we coded as *power*. This capacity was not confined to individuals. Evidence of the collective adoption of a new system imperative comes from interviews about Open Space events in Cycle 4. At the outset of the research, RAs thought that it would be impossible for Pakistani men and women to discuss gender issues in Open Space events. By late 2011, they agreed to commission a man to interview male Pakistani migrants. In Cycle 4, they invited the male interviewees to Open Space events. As Z reports:

Z: In the first Open Space, there was a dedicated table for men only. In the second one... (Pause), they were rotated around.

CoI: Did they act of their own accord?

Z: No... (Pause) I would ask them their feedback - their own perspective was not coming out. One man who was older... (Pause) he talked a bit, but the other guys were quiet...

CoI: We can't say the men really interacted with the women.

Z: But the women did participate in the presence of men. When there were questions about Arshi's father-in-law, it was still answered by the women. The men stayed quiet [...] the women were talking very negatively about their husband's attitude



[...] they were critical about husband, father-in-law and mother-in-law attitudes [...]  
- there was a very thorough discussion...

Interview 09/03/2012

The above extract shows not only that the RAs took the action of introducing men into Open Space events, but that by the second one they were being actively mixed with the women. The RAs were now acting to produce a new system in which men and women could deliberate together about community development.

The RAs act of using Open Space directly influences the emotion-deference system of the community. Women were *authorising* and *controlling* discourse in the presence of men. Their narratives not only disrupted the status quo but evidenced the RAs' capacity to model a new social system. Pakistani men were now deferring to women during a discussion – a startlingly different narrative (and system) from the one discovered in the initial CI workshops.

Having reviewed the findings, we (as authors) can start to articulate the story of the critical turn in this AI and the role of CAPs in producing it:

- (1) CAPs enable RAs to solicit *narratives* that emerge through *gossiping*, *storytelling* and *disclosing*;
- (2) they share the *surprises* they are experiencing and this stimulates *reflection* and *comprehension* that leads to *insight*;
- (3) the accumulation of *insights* leads to *learning* that increases the RAs' capacity to *teach* how to exercise *power* by *articulating*, *controlling*, *disrupting* and *authorising actions*.

The activities of CI (Family Tree, Timeline, Four Circles of Life) mark the first stage by providing opportunities to ‘tell it like it is’ and ‘how it might have been’. Marriage, migration, joint family systems and religious beliefs all emerged as major features of the Pakistani social context. The activities of AI (Arshi’s Story, Three Wishes, Appreciative Interviewing) created opportunities to review the surprises, reflections and insights generated during the first phase to ‘tell it as it may become’. The insights derived from alternative narratives produced learning and – over time – helped the RAs (as well as participants) increase their power over discourse.

Whilst there is a temporal dimension to this process, a note of caution is required. Our GT identified *recursive* processes, rather than simple linear steps. Power affects narrative production and narrative production affects power. Power affects learning processes and the products of learning increase a person’s power. Narratives generate insights and insights change the content of narratives. Over time, however, these recursive effects accumulate and give rise to qualitative changes in appreciation that relate to stages of the AI cycle. In the final section of the paper we further clarify this temporal dimension and outline our substantive contribution to AI theory and practice.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

As Kitzinger (1994) identifies, the ideological work of participants is made public during group work. Conflicts between participants, examinations of the challenges participants put to each other and conversations that lead to a change of mind - these all clarify how the context influences the framing of experience. Indeed, van der Haar and Hoskins (2004) advise that:

Differences and conflicts between different voices should not be avoided but constructively dealt with. When viewed from our relational constructionist stance this does not mean that the process should result in a consensus of all voices. Consensus is not necessary for joint action and is undesirable if it means neglecting differences and excluding voices.

van der Haar and Hoskins (2004, p. 1028)

Mezirow (2009) argues that transformative learning starts when there is a dissonance created by unfulfilled expectations. The RAs' dissonance came from linking the system imperatives of Pakistani family life to the life worlds of their research participants (Habermas, 1987; Grant, 2006). Following Goss (2005), however, we argue that CAPs do *more* than generate knowledge. They also alter the deference-emotion system of the group through the experience of sharing critical acts (Scheff, 1990). As the RAs started to regard people in their communities differently, so their capacity for appreciation increased during each phase.

The decision of RAs to participate in CI and AI activities – to share their stories and allow themselves to be questioned - contributed to the creation of public spaces which reduced power differentials. Their actions provided new opportunities for 'narrative action' and 'ideal speech acts' in group activities, one-to-one interviews and the public spaces created by Open Space (Arendt, 1958; Habermas, 1987; Benhabib, 1990). After the Four Circles of Life enhanced participants' capacity to share hidden narratives of power (CI), Arshi's Story, Three Wishes and Appreciative Interviewing provided opportunities to envision and articulate positive images of change (AI).

Based on these findings, we reframed and extended our definition of appreciation. Like Bushe (2013), we found that creating spaces to share harrowing accounts was the first step in bringing participants to life by affirming the value of their stories. This supports the

contention that both CI and AI are generative processes. Both CI and AI contribute to AI's central aim which is "to find out and appreciate what gives life and energy to people, their work and their organisation" (Van der Haar and Hoskins, 2004, p. 1019)

We came to see appreciation as respect for narratives that are meaningful to participants (rather than the research team). The storytelling reported by RAs was not full of positive imagery of the type described by Cooperrider (1999), but it retained its generative power (Bushe, 2013). Notably, RAs capacity for appreciation developed as they reframed their attitude to others in their community. After attitudes changed, stories previously regarded as negative became "possibility-full" (van der Haar and Hosking, 2004, p. 1026). By framing appreciation as respect for meaningful narratives (and acknowledging the impact of those meanings on participants), CAPs has an enhanced potential to contribute to a 'science of possibilities' (Cooperrider, 2014).

We complete our paper by returning to the research question: "what forms of critical appreciation occur in the context of AI?" The substantive insight that we draw from this study is that critical appreciation has some core commitments that occur throughout the AI cycle, and other aspects that change over the cycle:

At the core, and influencing the whole CAP, are two key commitments:

- Valuing the meanings participants discover when talking about past experiences;
- Valuing the way participants resist the colonisation of their life worlds.

The former is necessary to respond to the 'shadow-side' issues raised by Fitzgerald *et al.* (2010). Only by valuing participants' narratives and inquiring into the links between the social systems that produce them and the life worlds they create can the shadow-side be understood well enough to change it. It is this critical sensitivity that responds to Boje's (2010) comment that multiple acts of resistance provide the pool of resources from which marginalized, oppressed groups can design social systems that eradicate disadvantage.

In our data, we also pinpoint four types of appreciation that come to the fore at different stages of a CAP. At the start (Discovery) there is *appreciation as respecting the value of deconstructive forms of inquiry* to understand how system imperatives colonise each individual's life world. Once this form of appreciation has helped participants clarify 'who one is', they can move into the Dream phase and engage in *appreciation that respects the value of constructive forms of inquiry*. As participants contend with new ideas, they expand the possibilities available and start to construct new narratives to define new courses of action. In the Design phase, participants engage in *appreciation as valuing 'critical acts' that map out possibilities*. Aspirations are given expression as alternative ways of being that challenge the status quo. In the final part of the cycle, critical acts become physical acts that establish new system imperatives. By the Destiny phase there is *appreciation of the power to act in a way that creates and embeds new narratives*. These acts demonstrate that new system injunctions can supersede old ones.

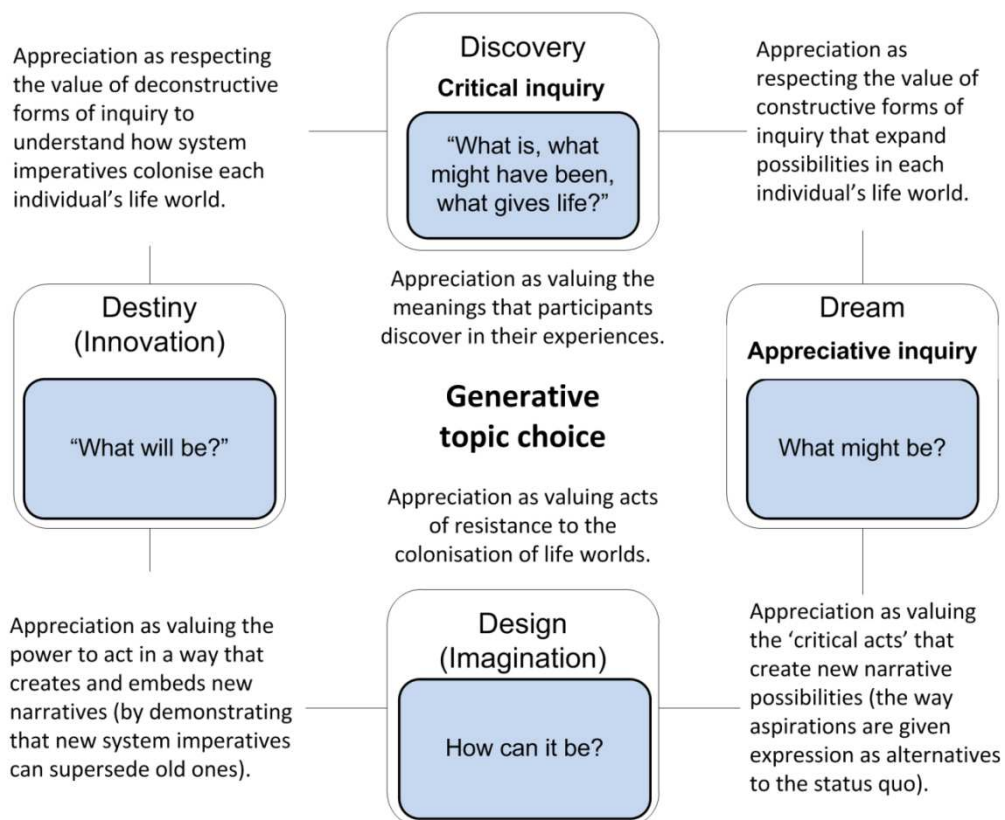
The first substantive theoretical contribution of this paper is to flesh out and extend our understanding of the way CAPs can be embedded in an AI project. CAPs can contribute to an AI methodology by designing interventions that produce a deeper appreciation of the systems and life worlds of study participants. By asking 'what is?' and 'what might have been?' before seeking the 'best of what is', system imperatives that intrude into the environment can be accommodated within the scope of AI. CAPs legitimise an inclusive research strategy in which scholarly practitioners and action researchers can manage the dissonances that occur when AI techniques are disrupted by the imperatives of a system over which participants do not have control.

The second substantive contribution is a comprehensive account of the types of appreciation that develop when a critical turn occurs in an AI project (see Figure 3). Firstly, affirmative topic choices are superseded by generative topic choices. The two core

commitments – appreciating narratives important to participants and how participants resist colonisation of their life world - lie at the heart of an AI that integrates CAPs. Secondly, we identified four other types of appreciation that develop during a critical turn:

- Respecting the value of deconstructive forms of inquiry
- Respecting the value of constructive forms of inquiry
- Valuing critical acts that create new possibilities
- Valuing the power to act in a way that creates and embeds new narratives

**Figure 3 – What is critical appreciation?**



Based on our conclusions, our new working hypothesis is that the dual mode of inquiry embraced by CAPs enhances the generative capacity of AI by encouraging a wider range of

appreciative processes. We also believe that CAPs impact positively on the deference-emotion system of a community and increases practitioners' capacity to investigate and learn from the shadow side. This being the case, the study opens up new opportunities for research on the application of CAPs in marginalised groups by highlighting the modes of appreciation that impact on the deference-emotion system of a community.

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## **Appendix A – Arshi’s Story**

### ***Version C1***

20 year-old Arshi got married and has come to England from Azad-Kashmir. She lived in a village and has not had much education. She is living with her in-laws (uncle and aunt).

You have gone to her house to meet her. You find that she is depressed and unhappy. She feels lonely and has not been out of the house since she arrived. She says she is frightened to go out in case she meets someone who speaks to her in English and she won’t understand.

You go back to see her in a few weeks and she has not been able to attend English classes. She says she doesn’t feel she can learn anything. When she tries to practice at home her husband and other family members laugh at her.

- How will you help her?
- What will you say to her?
- What would you advise her to do?
- Can you identify any problems she could face?
- Who would you talk to?
- Who would you introduce her to? And how?
- What would you tell her about your experience?

### ***Version C2***

You have completed an individual assessment of your own lives. You have been breaking things down in chunks and understood the difficulties and barriers you have overcome to be where you are today. Now you are confident, you know the way things work and you also are aware of what support is available. You have come a long way.

You are going to advise 20 year old Arshi who got married and has come to England from Azad Kashmir. She is living with her in-laws (Uncle and Aunt). You have gone to her house to meet her: a conversation starts on “she needs to learn English”

- What would you tell her about your life in UK?
- What advice would you give her to make her stay more pleasant?
- If the in-laws are nice and approachable, how would you say things to them?
- If the in-laws are “strict” and not friendly to you, what would you do?
- How much of your own story would you tell the in-laws and Arshi?
- How will they portray you? (What would they think about you?)

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