Appreciative Inquiry as a Transformative Learning Experience: a study with Pakistani women in Sheffield

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Introduction

This paper describes the development of Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 1981) in groups of Pakistani women in Sheffield. It outlines an innovative methodological approach which combined the development of story telling with critical reflection, resulting in substantial reframing of perspective and identity within the group. It suggests implications for future practice.

Transformative Learning may be defined as learning which results in a change in our frames of reference: the perspectives, assumptions and identities that guide the way we live in the world (Mezirow, 2009). It draws on Critical Theory and on Habermas’ (1987) notions of ‘communicative action’. In our study, the transformation occurred through participation in a series of Appreciative Inquiry sessions (Cooperider et al., 2008) with women in the local Pakistani community.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has its roots in Organisational Development, but has recently been used in a variety of contexts from schools to community organisations, and in international development (Grant and Humphries, 2006). AI is from the Action Research stable and has a strongly social constructivist approach emphasising the connection between speech, thought and action (Lewis et al., 2008). It seeks to discover the strengths and competences in a group of people, thus generating a positive and constructive discourse which leads to change.

Grant and Humphries (2006) and Bushe (2007) have recently commented on the lack of evaluation on AI. They argue that the optimistic belief in human agency at the core of Appreciative Inquiry makes it naïve about the way that power dynamics play out. They advocate the corrective of a more critical approach, something that Grant has described as a ‘critical appreciative process’.
Taylor (2009) contributes to this debate by developing the epistemological case for a holistic approach to critical reflection: one which is less reliant on rational and analytical discourse and which emphasises affective and relational ways of knowing. He asserts that critical reflection is “often prompted in response to an awareness of conflicting thoughts, feelings and actions [which] at times can lead to perspective transformation” (p. 9). He takes a similar approach to the development of dialogue which is a necessary criterion of both Critical Theory and Transformative Learning (Mezirow et al., 2009). For Taylor (2009) dialogue is “not so much analytical, point-counterpoint dialogue, but dialogue emphasising relational and trustful communication, often at times ‘highly personal and self-disclosing’” (p.11). Finally he is clear that the dialogue which leads to critical reflection is not an abstract exercise but one which is grounded in relationships: “Without the medium of relationships, critical reflection is impotent and hollow, lacking the genuine discourse necessary for thoughtful and in-depth reflection” (p.13).

This theme of relational knowing connects strongly with the writing of Benhabib (1996). Benhabib builds on Hannah Arendt’s (1958) concept of Narrative Action which occurs through the “telling of a story” and “the weaving of a web of narratives” (p.126), resulting in the emergence of “who one is”. The identity of a person becomes tangible only in the story of the actor’s and speaker’s life.” For Arendt (1958), not only does Narrative Action construct identity but also creates power, which she defines as “that potential which springs up between people when they act in concert…where words are not used to veil intentions but…to establish relations and create new realities” (p. 20).

Research Context

St Mary’s Community Centre is in one of the most culturally diverse areas of inner city Sheffield. It contains a large Pakistani community which receives a steady stream of women, mainly from remote areas of rural Pakistan as new brides to British born Pakistani men. They become part of a minority community which is struggling to thrive in the UK. Platt (2007) and Anandi and Platt (2011) have demonstrated that women from Pakistan and Bangladesh experience more deep rooted poverty than other communities, offering very few successful role models. Within the Pakistani community women consistently experience significantly higher
levels of mental illness and the prevalence of depression, self-harm and suicide than other ethnic groups (see Anand & Cochrane, 2005; Gater et al., 2010).

For the last 10 years St Mary’s has been working with Pakistani women, providing education in English language, vocational qualifications and opportunities for employment. Much of this work is done through a small team of bi-lingual female community workers of Pakistani origin who work hard to engage with families who are sometimes resistant and suspicious of adult learning.

As the cultural diversity of the area has increased, and more women from other cultures joined our classes, we could not help noticing that they were more motivated and able to learn than Pakistani women. The latter seemed to languish for years in English classes without making much progress. We wondered what factors in the Pakistani community might account for this disparity in their capacity for learning. There is little existing research on this subject so St Mary’s Church formed a partnership with Sheffield Hallam University to undertake a 3-year research project into the social and domestic influencers of learning.

**Research Methodology**

We chose AI because it fitted with the emancipatory objectives of the research as well as the desire to generate a new discourse about life in the Pakistani community. Ecclestone (2004) identifies a tendency towards a pessimistic therapeutic discourse in much of modern society. This emphasises the fragility and diminishment of the self and creates dependency. By contrast, AI operates from the optimistic premise that individuals and communities already contain the potential for positive growth.

We were concerned that our approach should empower rather than “pathologise” both the women involved and the local Pakistani Community, particularly given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the discrimination already experienced by the community (Anandi and Platt, 2011).

The study involved 4 groups of women (four AI cycles) over an 18 month period, with a total of 29 participants. The participants were women who had lived in Sheffield between 6 months and 23 years. All spoke no (or rudimentary) English. None were employed, all lived in low income households, and there was a mix of married and divorced women. The participants became highly engaged in AI, evidenced by
displays of strong emotions as the women told their stories and listened to the stories of others. Researchers made extensive field notes, and recorded one-to-one interviews in the middle of each AI cycle which were later transcribed. A grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was adopted to analyse and interpret the data collected.

The position of the researchers was critical in the development of meaningful theory. They needed to be close enough to the participants to interpret their voice with authenticity, but sufficiently distant to reflect critically on findings (Bohman, 2012). Therefore, we recruited researchers of Pakistani origin who were already asking critical questions of the community, and provided them with 4 days of intensive training on qualitative research methods and Appreciative Inquiry. Initial open coding occurred concurrently with the sessions, and axial coding took place as emergent themes developed. The process was iterative: early interpretation and discussion of the data led to adjustments in the methods during AI for eliciting stories. In retrospect, some inexperience and a desire to get “results” led to some over-hasty changes. It was comforting, therefore, to read Grant (2007) who highlighted her own experience of the complexities of AI research, and that these can only be understood after first-hand experience. Over time, changes came to be based on good quality reflection in Learning Sets (Revans, 1998) organised for the research team. These reflected on the dilemmas and problems that emerged through the research process.

The Emergence of Transformative Learning

The research succeeded in its aim of producing a new and fine grained understanding of the everyday lives of the women involved. Furthermore, it became clear that over a relatively short period of time (6 weeks) the Appreciative Inquiry sessions were having a transforming impact on both the participants and the researchers. The following discussion outlines the impact of AI on the participants and develops a theoretical contribution to Transformative Learning and the promotion of well-being through adult education. (A separate paper is being written about the impact on the researchers.)

A central tenet of AI is that the first question is fateful and sets the whole tone for the inquiry. At the beginning, the research team conscientiously followed Appreciative
Inquiry methodology, trying to create a ‘positive’ and emancipatory discourse in the facilitation of discussions and tone of the interviews. If the women's stories were tinged with hardship and ‘negativity’ researchers would gently steer them back to the ‘positive’ in their situation, or open up a conversations that might lead in a more ‘positive’ direction. The researchers found this difficult and unnatural. It was intrusive to intervene when stories recalled painful emotions, and this difficulty is consistent with the experience of other practitioners who describe similar problems in adopting a ‘positive’ approach to AI (Bushe, 2007; Grant and Humphries, 2006). The discomfort with ‘pure’ AI methodology came to a head during a review of stories emerging from the first group of women. It was clear that many were suffering considerable distress. Most had experienced arranged marriages which gave them very little choice about if, and who, they would marry. Some had moved to Sheffield to live with families who did not want them to be there. Women spoke of being completely isolated in households where no-one would speak to them, or where their family spoke English knowing that they could not understand. They gave accounts of disinterested or absent husbands, of in-laws who expected them to do all domestic work. They spoke of loneliness and boredom and a complete sense of dislocation from all that was familiar to them. These were stories that the researchers had never heard before, despite their familiarity with the community. Their eyes were opened to hidden powerlessness. It shocked everyone.

After the first AI cycle, the research team started to talk about oppression: it was felt that the women’s experience could not be described in any other way. Externally, the culture exerts power through the close observation of women who are expected to dress and behave in a respectful manner. Many were not allowed out of the house unaccompanied, and the presence of extended family relationships meant that the women were always aware of being supervised (cf. Foucault, 1975).

“Nadia seemed very tense & worried as her sister-in-law came with her and saw all of us getting into a van. Nadia had taken her to the training room and shown her where she learns English. Her sister-in-law wanted to have a private word with Aroose [Research leader]. Aroose explained to her that we are all going to another centre and will return at 2pm. The sister-in-law said it was ok.”
“I did not have permission to speak to my sister alone, because she had some problems in her marriage. My in-laws went with me everywhere. They wanted me to stay at home and care for them.”

Habermas (1987) and Friere (1968) identify the way that such external control is often internalised and becomes part of the identity of those who are oppressed. Habermas describes how ideology colonises the life-world of individuals whilst Friere (1968) identifies how oppression is internalised by the oppressed who in turn become the oppressors of others.

“We women do not trust ourselves: we don’t trust our own abilities. That’s the reason we do not move forwards. If we are strong then it is our confidence that lets us down. We are all like dead people.”

“An informal discussion began about why Pakistani women are the least likely to learn English. Sania stated that ‘there is nothing in our heads,’ Shanaz added ‘Pakistanis [are] always at the bottom’.

Such oppressive outcomes are often not intended, but are the concrete accretion of multiple tacit attitudes, positions and discourses that have evolved over time. This influence of power is pervasive, profound and must be acknowledged through critical reflection. Indeed, Thomas (1993) argues that only a critical approach can reveal the “process of domestication and critical social entrapment by which we are made content with our life conditions” (p.7). This critical reflection was missing in our initial pursuit of a ‘positive’ discourse.

**Story Telling as a Critical Act**

Furthermore, a fundamental freedom many women lacked was social permission to develop their own discourse about the whole of their lives. We agree with Grant and Humphries’ (2006) Foucauldian view that power is manifest through the privileging of some discourses and the marginalisation of others. Therefore, a rigid focus on ‘positivity’ may reinforce asymmetric power dynamics already experienced by the women. Enabling the participants to express their own stories became part of our attempt to generate an ‘appreciative’ discourse (from the participant’s perspective).
The following section describes the way in which subsequent work adopted a more critical approach to contribute to the notion of Critical Appreciative Processes (Grant and Humphries 2006) in AI practice.

Taylor, Benhabib and Arendt (discussed earlier) suggest that Critical Reflection, and subsequently Transformative Learning, may occur in conditions where there are:

- conflicting thoughts and feelings,
- authentic and honest story-telling,
- emotionally engaged communication and
- the development of relationships characterised by trust and openness.

Appreciative Inquiry is effective in creating the “conflicting thoughts, feelings and actions” which Taylor (2009) proposes are fundamental to Critical Reflection because AI’s underpinning assumptions challenge the identities that the women bring to the process. Whilst they consider themselves unable to think or act independently, AI encourages the articulation of their strengths and competencies. It focuses on those areas of their lives where they have agency. The exercises created some turmoil and resistance in the group as the limits of the women’s thinking were stretched. Therefore the process of social construction (or reconstruction) implicit in the act of participating in AI creates a disruption or conflict that a purely critical approach would not.

Secondly, the activities generated open and authentic communication through story-telling. Without exception, the women said that the most powerful aspect of the research was sharing and discussing their stories in an environment that felt safe and confidential. The atmosphere was emotionally charged and often accompanied by tears. As they realised that they were not alone, they started to examine, and in some cases to change, their perspective:

“I now know that slowly I can achieve what I want. By seeing others, their responses to problems, their mannerisms, their problems, their way of finding solutions - all this has helped me look at my life and encouraged me to do something positive about my issues.”

“I used to be very scared of everything and everybody before. But not anymore: I do not feel the same fear.”
The way that conflicting thoughts and emotions can lead to a changed perspective echoes the work done by Meyer (2009) with young women in East Harlem.

The relational component of Critical reflection was generated between participants as well as between participants and researchers. Arendt asserts that narrative action requires plurality: it cannot be carried out alone but needs others in “relations of equality but distinction”. This plurality was achieved in part by the positioning of the research team who participated in the story telling with the women, constructing and sharing their own narratives and allowing themselves to be questioned by the participants. In so doing they experienced their own Transformative Learning, strengthening the essential component of plurality which Arendt states is an essential part of narrative action.

Therefore we argue that Appreciative Inquiry can include a strong critical element if it is conducted in a context where the emotional and relational aspects of its practice promote authentic dialogue and reflection. This leads to the acknowledgement and analysis of power relationships within the community:

“She said that she has a friend whose husband does not like her to leave the house and neither does he let her speak much to anybody. He said a woman isn’t equal to a man and that she was about as equal as a shoe. He said there was no need to speak English, and her friend wanted somebody to make him understand that English is more important and she will need it in life”

- Researcher Field Note

The AI sessions conducted by Grant and Humphries (2006) seem to us to have less of a critical perspective because the context for their study (governors meetings of school boards) was - relatively speaking - emotionally “flat”. Their study lacked the affective “edge” and the relational closeness conducive to Critical Reflection.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Appreciative Inquiry is valuable in creating a context for discourse in which questions and assumptions are framed in a way that anticipates the autonomy and potential of
participants. As such, it is emancipatory in intent and distinct from group settings that have a more therapeutic underpinning (Ecclestone, 2004). The potential issue with AI is that the focus on the ‘positive’ eclipses the need for Critical Reflection on the interplays of culture and power which serve to disadvantage a group within a community (in this case Pakistani migrant women).

This issue can be mitigated by valuing (appreciating) the dialogue which emerges as people develop their own narratives and identities in an atmosphere that is trusting and supportive of affective and relational ways of knowing. This creates the conditions for a new approach to Critical Reflection that is less informed by rational discourse, and is more accessible to people who have developed a web of stories and relationships as conceived by Arendt (1958).

This study builds on Taylor’s (2009) work on Transformative Learning by suggesting that AI can be integral to the Critical Appreciative Processes advanced by Grant and Humphries (2006). Along with journaling and coaching approaches adopted by Meyer (2009) Appreciative Inquiry that involves the ‘appreciation’ of emotional pain as the first step in learning has a key role to play in the development of Transformative Learning in populations whose well-being has been compromised by deep-rooted marginalisation.

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References


