APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY

Of the
SOCIAL WORLD
(SOCIAL SYSTEMS/ORGANIZATIONS)

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Our way of thinking, feeling, and operating is always determined by what we explicitly or implicitly believe or assume about the social world (social systems/organizations).

INTRODUCTION

The Appreciative Paradigm, like every paradigm in the social sciences, has an explicit or implicit vision of what the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) is, which we call the Appreciative Ontology of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations). But what is that vision that the Appreciative Ontology of the Appreciative Paradigm has of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations)? Is there any publication where we can find the answer to this question? Based on what I know, the answer is no. That is why I will attempt in this essay to offer a first outline of what the Appreciative Ontology of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) is from the Appreciative Paradigm.

The objective of this essay, therefore, is to open a window to begin to see the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) from the Appreciative Paradigm. So, I invite you to join me in looking through this window to discover and deepen the identity of the Appreciative Ontology of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations): its origin and fundamental characteristics and thus be able to differentiate it from the ontologies of other paradigms in the social sciences. To do this, these are the topics I will present: First, I offer a very brief summary of the new theoretical framework of what the Appreciative Paradigm is that will allow us to understand in an organic way how the Appreciative Ontology is a component of the Appreciative Paradigm. Second, I define what the Appreciative Ontology is and its three components: 1) the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations), 2) the Organizational World, and 3) the Natural and Cosmic World. Third, I propose some reasons why I consider it important to discover and define what Appreciative Ontology is. Fourth, I present some of the theoretical and empirical bases of Appreciative Ontology. Fifth, I identify and develop very briefly what I consider to be the ten fundamental characteristics of the Appreciative Ontology of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations).

I. APPRECIATIVE PARADIGM AND ITS COMPONENTS

To understand what Appreciative Ontology is, in all its depth and in an organic way, we need to see it as one of the components of the Appreciative Paradigm. First, let's see what the Appreciative Paradigm is. "The Appreciative Paradigm is a new way of seeing and understanding (Ontology), studying (Epistemology/Research), transforming (Intervention/Inquiry/Praxis), valuing (Axiology), and speaking (Language) about the human being and their behavior in the organizational and natural world in which they operate; which has been adopted by a community of academics and practitioners globally because they find it more effective than other paradigms of

social change, as demonstrated by the development and success achieved, practically and theoretically, in the first 35 years of its existence" (Varona, 2023, p.15. 2024, p. 14). The fundamental characteristics of each of these components of the Appreciative Paradigm are developed in the essay: El Paradigma Apreciativo: de la Metodología al Paradigma (Varona, 2022). The Appreciative Paradigm. From Methodology to Paradigm (Varona 2023).

Figure 1
**Components of the Appreciative Paradigm**
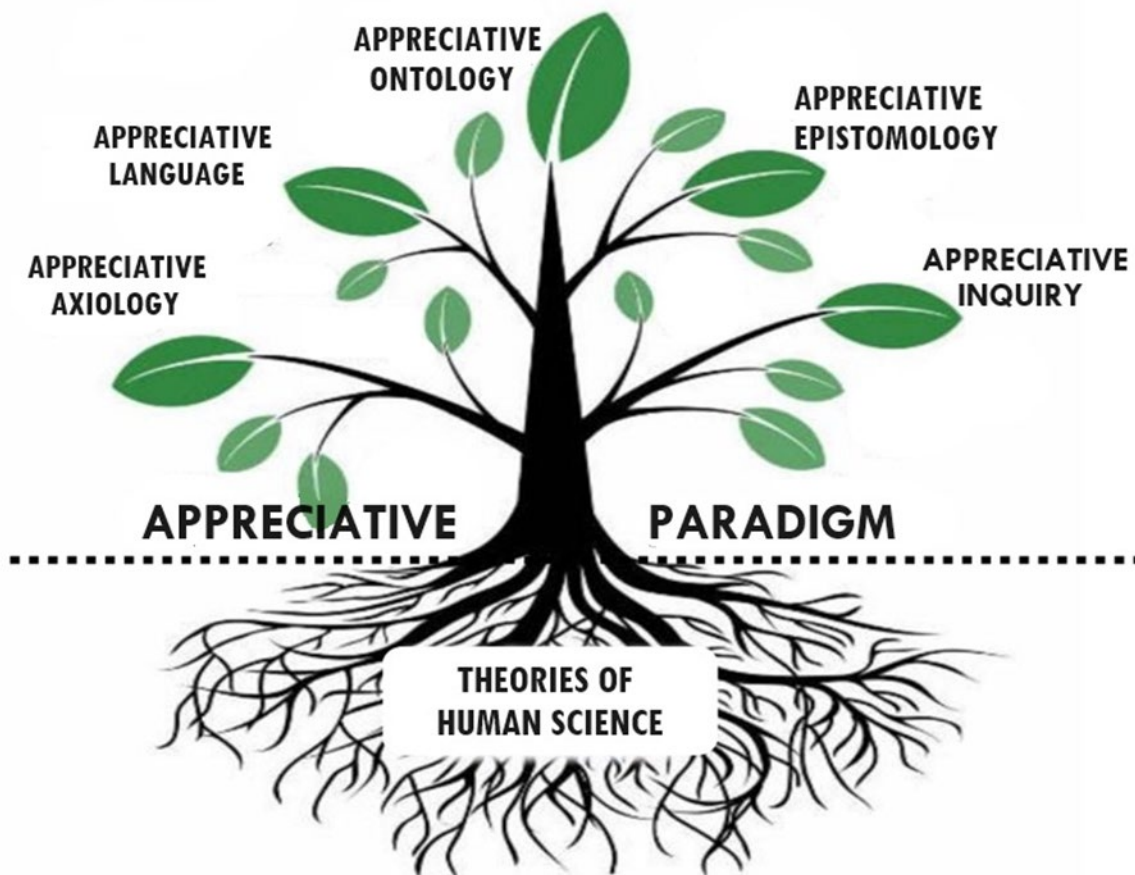
II. APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY AND ITS COMPONENTES

Ontology is the science that "deals with being in general and its transcendental properties." Some see it as part of metaphysics and others as part of philosophy. In the field of social sciences, we see ontology as a component of a paradigm, and it refers to the knowledge we have of humans, the social world, and the natural and cosmic world. This knowledge is created and formulated through the generation of theories that

explain the nature of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) and social phenomena, and how these relate to the natural and cosmic world. Specifically, within the Appreciative Paradigm, Appreciative Ontology refers to this new way of understanding the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations), the social world, and the natural and cosmic world. Therefore, the three components of Appreciative Ontology are: 1) the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations), 2) the Organizational World, and 3) the Natural and Cosmic World.

Figure 2

Components of Appreciative Ontology
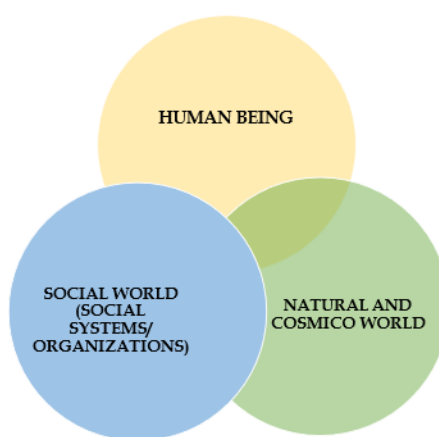
III. APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL WORLD (SOCIAL SYSTEMS /ORGANIZATIONS).

Now, let's define what the second component is, that is, what is the Ontology of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations)? This is a question we do not ask as often as we should because we assume we already know the answer. However, the truth is that if we review history, we see that this question has been answered in very different ways, and each of those answers offers us an important facet of what the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) is.

When we talk about the social world, we are first referring to the set of interactions and social relationships that are created among human beings and second, to the social systems in which these interactions are practiced, such as families, organizations, businesses, teams, social events, etc. The social world (social systems/organizations) is the object of study of different disciplines in the social

sciences, and each of them approaches it from different theoretical and paradigmatic perspectives, that is, from different ways of defining, investigating, making changes, valuing, and even talking about what the social world (social systems/organizations) is.

For example, Systems Theory views organizations as a set of interdependent units (Bertalanffy, 1969), Culture Theory (Deal and Kennedy, 1982) views organizations as cultures with their respective beliefs, values, and practices, and Critical Theory (Bronner, 2017) views organizations as places of oppression (abuse of power) where communication is manipulated to serve the interests of their leaders. From the Appreciative Paradigm, we see organizations as human creations integrated by a group of people committed to a mission whose main objectives are the well-being and fulfillment of its members and the excellence in the services and products it offers for the common good of society.

But we also highlight some characteristics that have been forgotten or ignored by other philosophies or paradigms in the social sciences. These characteristics are developed in the next section.

IV. FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL WORLD (SOCIAL SYSTEMS/ORGANIZATIONS)

Each of us who believes in the Appreciative Paradigm has our own definition of what the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) is, based on our personal experiences, academic training, and professional experience as practitioners of Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry and other appreciative modalities of social change. But I also believe that we can collaboratively construct an Appreciative Ontology of how we define the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) with which we all feel somehow identified. It is from this perspective that I propose in this section, very briefly, what I consider to be the 10 core characteristics of the identity of the Appreciative Ontology of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations).

First, social systems (organizations) are communities created by the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) where we seek our fulfillment as individuals and serve the common good of society.

The Appreciative Ontology views organizations as a human creation made up of a group of people committed to a mission whose main objectives are the well-being and happiness of its members, the realization of their abilities and talents, the excellence in the services and products it offers for the common good of society, and the best possible functioning and development of the organization. This deeply human vision of the

Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) is what defines the identity and originality of the Appreciative Ontology of the Social World.

By doing so, we affirm that organizations are much more than businesses or machines serving a production process where economic benefit is more important than the service to the common good of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) and the organizational, natural, and cosmic world. We also understand that organizations must co-create a fair system regarding the salaries and working conditions of all their members and a culture with values and practices where all members operate more from a "we" perspective rather than an "I" perspective.

Second, social systems (organizations) are communities composed of internal units (departments, teams) and external units (the organizational, natural, and cosmic world) that are interdependent.

Social systems (organizations, teams, businesses, etc.) are communities that, in order to operate efficiently, must be open systems where internal communication within the organization and external communication with the organizational world in which they are immersed are permanent, fluid, and above all, appreciative (Varona, 2020, pp. 146-58). When a social system is closed, it enters a state of entropy, meaning a degenerative state that leads to its disappearance, as Systems Theory states (Bertalanffy, 1969). The openness and interaction between internal and external units allow the organization to learn and constantly renew itself to better serve society.

The interdependence of the organizational world is economic, social, and environmental, and it reminds us that organizations need each other. Through economic interdependence, organizations benefit from the exchange of goods, services, and products at local, regional, national, and global levels. Through social interdependence, organizations build their identity and adapt their services and products to better serve the community. And through environmental interdependence, organizations must recognize that their actions and productive activities influence our environment positively or negatively and can affect climate change, biodiversity, and the scarcity of resources such as water, food, and housing.

The challenges of these forms of organizational interdependence include promoting cooperation and mutual support among different organizations and commitment to the well-being of our communities and the natural and cosmic world of which they are a part. These topics must be part of the agenda promoted by Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry and the Appreciative Paradigm.

Third, social systems (organizations) are communities that possess a positive potential that we must discover and develop collaboratively.

The positive potential that organizations possess includes the talents, values, energy, aspirations, and desire for improvement of each of their members, waiting to be discovered and cultivated to achieve their full development. This individual positive potential is even more powerful when integrated and developed collectively. This focus on the positive potential within organizations is undoubtedly the most original and revolutionary aspect of Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry and the Appreciative Paradigm.

The choice of what an organization focuses on is critical because it determines the future that will emerge. The option to focus on affirmative topics rather than negative ones—that is, focusing on the potential within the organization to build the better future that is waiting to emerge, rather than on what we want to eliminate (the problem) to return to the status quo, as other social change paradigms do—is the most radical and original difference of the Appreciative Paradigm. For example, choosing a topic for Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry such as "how to be more creative" within the organization is radically different from "how to avoid mistakes" that we make.

For the Appreciative Paradigm, organizations are communities with unlimited positive potential, not machines full of problems that we need to identify and eliminate to be more productive. The members of an organization have the ability to generate irresistible energy and desire to strive for a better future from the very moment they are invited to discover and collectively develop their positive core.

Fourth, social systems (organizations) are communities that possess a set of limitations that we must accept and overcome.

The limitations that organizations possess are diverse and originate from the fact that they are human creations, and therefore composed of imperfect and limited human beings, who are immersed in an organizational and natural world that is also imperfect and limited. For example, limitations related to the scarcity of human, material, and financial resources; but above all, related to the lack of motivation and commitment of all their members in building the ideal organization we want to be.

From the Appreciative Paradigm, we do not deny or ignore this set of limitations; instead, we accept them while believing that we have the power to overcome them with the core capabilities we have been endowed with to achieve our happiness, personal fulfillment, and the growth of our organization. Recognizing and accepting these limits is a very healthy appreciative act because it reminds us of who we

are and invites us to be more humble, understanding, and compassionate towards ourselves and others.

Fifth, social systems (organizations) are communities where we must find what gives us life in the ordinary, the extraordinary, and the difficult.

All members of an organization aspire to live a meaningful life where we can be happy and fulfilled. This happiness and fulfillment are found when we enjoy comfortable conditions in terms of salary and physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. When we feel valued and recognized for who we are and what we do at a personal and professional level. But most importantly, when we understand and practice that our ultimate mission is not only our happiness and personal fulfillment but also putting our work at the service of the well-being of our colleagues and the people we serve with our products and services.

Finding what gives us life in our daily work within organizations, both positive and negative, is something we must discover and cultivate. For example, when we can develop a talent, overcome a negative emotion, perform an act of understanding or collaboration, and receive recognition. But also when we fail in attempting something and do not achieve the economic results we desire because failures can be turned into opportunities to improve and create something new and better. From the Appreciative Paradigm, we believe that humans have the power to discover what gives us life in the ordinary, the extraordinary, and the difficult through Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry and other appreciative models of personal and social change.

Table 2

APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL WORLD (SOCIAL SYSTEMS/ORGANIZATIONS)

Social Systems (Organizations) are Communities:

Where we seek our fulfillment and service to the common good	Comprised of internal and external units that are interdependent	Possessing a positive potential that we have to discover and develop	Possessing a set of limitations that we have to accept and overcomey superar.
Where we find what gives us life in the ordinary, extraordinary and difficult	Possessing an individual and collective creative capacity that we have to discover and develop	Where everything we experience is momentary, cyclical, and ephemeral	Which we perceive in a subjective, socially constructed, and dynamic manner
	Which requires constant updating and renovation	That can always be improved with the commitment, effort, and perseverance of their managers and members	

Sixth, social systems (organizations) are communities that possess an individual and collective creative capacity that we must discover and develop.

The creative capacity of organizations is something we can observe daily in all fields of human activity since our appearance on earth. Just look at the creativity achieved in technology, medicine, architecture, agriculture, etc., and what is waiting to emerge. However, we must recognize that, at the level of large companies and organizations, creativity is mainly focused on creating new products and services with a lucrative purpose that ensures their survival, competition, and development. Nonetheless, this creative capacity is not as focused and developed in finding new forms of coexistence and work that are fairer and more humane. This last focus is precisely the fundamental focus of Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry and the Appreciative Paradigm.

On the other hand, the topic of creativity in small organizations that serve our communities could be said to be non-existent. Empirical evidence collected daily reveals that members of these organizations experience their daily work with a sense of monotony where they find no stimulus for creativity. Rarely are there meetings and spaces offered to dialogue and share on how we can improve our communication, working conditions, and services we offer to feel more fulfilled and happy. All decision-making power on these issues is in the hands of the owners and managers. The task ahead to overcome this reality is challenging for all of us as practitioners and theorists of Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry.

We must cultivate an organizational culture where creativity is stimulated both individually and collectively because creating and co-creating are two possible and necessary activities in an organization. The creativity we want to promote and emphasize from the Appreciative Paradigm and Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry focuses on how we can find meaning in our work, improve communication, improve working conditions, and better serve others. Organizations are blank, open books waiting to be written and designed with the creative and democratic participation of all their members (Barrett and Fry, 2005).

Seventh, social systems (organizations) are communities where everything we experience is timely, cyclical, and ephemeral.

When we say that everything we experience in our organizations is timely, we affirm that we must be open to embracing every moment as an opportunity we cannot fully control, but from which we can always learn something new. When we say that everything we experience in our organizations is cyclical, we acknowledge that both positive and negative experiences constantly repeat, and we must embrace this cyclical reality and continuously renew what gives meaning to the everyday life of the

organization. When we say that what we experience in our organizations is ephemeral, we affirm that we must embrace our human condition as limited and develop an attitude of understanding towards ourselves and others when we fail to maintain the motivation, commitment, and behavior we dream of, without forgetting that we have the power and resources to overcome these challenges.

This appreciative perspective helps us become "apprecialists" (a new word I just created), meaning appreciative realists who avoid generating unrealistic expectations about what we can achieve with our Appreciative Interventions/Inquiries.

Eighth, social systems (organizations) are communities that we perceive subjectively, are socially constructed, and dynamic.

The idea that each of us has about the organizations we are part of—how we conceive and value them—is very subjective and therefore different, to some extent, for each of its members. This perspective is also socially co-constructed in our relationships with other members of the organization and is therefore constantly changing. Social systems are continually evolving because the people who make them up, the context in which they operate, and their circumstances are constantly changing.

Consequently, each member has a different version of what the organization is, and the reality of the organization is the sum of all these different visions that we must discover, respect, and value. At the same time, from the Appreciative Paradigm, we believe we have the option to share these different visions to transform them and co-construct a shared vision of what we want the ideal organization to be. Organizations are human creations that are in a constant state of change and evolution, and their destiny is an option that lies in the hands of everyone when done collaboratively (Barrett and Fry, 2005).

For this, we have Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry and other appreciative models of change. Thus, creating a community where we all feel fulfilled, serving our clients better, and creating better products and services.

Ninth, social systems (organizations) are communities that require constant updating and renewal.

Members of organizations need constant updating and renewal because they are part of an organizational world that is constantly changing, are susceptible to deterioration, and always have the potential to improve.

For me, this is the most urgent yet most overlooked point in our organizations, especially the smaller ones. Very few organizations prioritize permanent and cyclical

programs of motivation, education, and training related to their mission, functioning, communication, etc. This is a dream I would like to see realized in the near future. The ongoing training and updating of organizational members should be included as one of the most important programs in the annual budget, but we are far from this reality, especially in the small organizations we are part of in daily life, like supermarkets, service offices, clinics, etc. We must combat the widespread belief that the economic factor, i.e., lack of resources, is what prevents this.

From the Appreciative Paradigm perspective on what the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) is, where we emphasize the human dimension, the topic of motivation, education, training, and development of organizational members must be the central point of an organization. It is precisely in the service of this cause that Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry first emerged, and from its practice, the Appreciative Paradigm.

Tenth, social systems (organizations) can build a better organization through the commitment, effort, and perseverance of their leaders and all their members.

Organizations can, with the commitment, effort, and perseverance of their leaders and all their members, build a better organization if they activate the innate powers possessed by all their members. There are many innate powers to activate, but I would like to highlight a few. The first is the power to be in a state of continuous improvement, creativity, and commitment to live a fuller life and build the organization we dream of. Above all, the power to generate motivation, that is, the desire to do so and put in all the necessary effort to achieve it and persevere in it. These powers can be discovered and developed with the practice of Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry and other appreciative modalities of social change. Thus, we can affirm that the "Achilles' heel" is not that we lack the powers and resources to do so, but that we do not activate the powers we are endowed with.

We must make organization members, especially leaders, aware that we can always improve how we work, communicate, think and feel, behave, and perform daily tasks. We must invite them to commit to concretizing this belief in specific actions included in the annual training and update programming. We are and build in proportion to the effort we are willing to put in until we achieve it. No excuses! We are talking about effort, perseverance, discipline, courage, and sacrifice—something we must emphasize more from the Appreciative Paradigm. We must recover the wisdom accumulated by the experience of our ancestors who left us messages like: "What is worthwhile costs," "We reap what we sow," and "The gardener must tend his garden if he wants to harvest its fruits."

To discover and develop each of these 10 characteristics of the Appreciative Ontology of the Organizational World, we have Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry and

other appreciative methodologies of social change. Additionally, these 10 characteristics of the Appreciative Ontology of the Organizational World are the pillars that underpin and guide the practice of Appreciative Intervention. I would like us to ask ourselves now, do we consider these characteristics when planning an Appreciative Intervention in the Organizational World? How would it affect how we carry it out and the impact on the change we want to achieve?

V. THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BASES OF THE APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL WORLD (SOCIAL SYSTEMS/ORGANIZATIONS)

5. 1. Theoretical Bases of Appreciative Ontology of Social World (Social Systems/Organizations).

The theoretical bases of Appreciative Ontology of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) from the Appreciative Paradigm, as I have indicated, have not yet been thoroughly researched and documented. However, this does not mean they do not exist. These theoretical bases are implicitly and unsystematically present in the numerous publications on what is known in the English-speaking world as Appreciative Inquiry, from its creation in 1986 by David Cooperrider and many other authors up to the present day (Cooperrider, 2021; Barrett and Fry, 2005; Subirana and Cooperrider, 2013; Isanta, 2023, 2018; Varona, 2020).

The fundamental, but not the only, theoretical bases of Appreciative Ontology of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) originate from Social Construction Theory and how this theory conceives the nature of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations). The fundamental principle of Social Construction Theory regarding the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) is that human beings construct our vision of reality through the language we use, that is, the words we use in our social and work relationships (Gergen and Gergen, 2004, pp.16-17). This theory also asserts that it is through language that we can generate different forms of dialogue, which can lead us to co-construct new and diverse visions of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) and the organizational, natural, and cosmic world.

5. 2. Empirical Bases of Appreciative Ontology of Social World (Social Systems/Organizations).

The power of Appreciative Ontology of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) is solidly and consistently confirmed by empirical evidence, based on personal, group, and community experiences, as well as from our global practice of Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry. Perhaps the most powerful empirical evidence we can present for now regarding the Appreciative Ontology of the Social

World (Social Systems/Organizations) is our own experience, through which we discover how the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) is a reality that we cannot fully understand or control and that simultaneously amazes and disappoints us.

This empirical evidence is further confirmed by the testimony of most people who have participated in the process of an Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry at a group or organizational level. Some of these testimonies are collected in numerous existing publications (books and published articles) and the shared testimony in appreciative summits and global meetings, such as the AI JAMS (Global Virtual Meetings held annually organized by the Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry: Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry and the publications in the IA Practitioner International Journal: IA Practitioner; and at a regional level, such as the Webinars promoted in the Ibero-American region by the Ibero-American Network of Practitioners and Academics of the Appreciative Paradigm (RIPAPA).

Regarding scientific evidence, that is, the one obtained using a scientific research method which generates an explanation or theory, there are also publications that confirm this (Mandal, 2022; Varona, 2021).

VI. WHY IS IMPORTANT TO DISCOVER AND DEFINE THE APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOFY OF THE SOCIAL WORLD (SOCIAL SYSTEMS/ORGANIZATIONS)

Every Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry and human activity aimed at personal and social change is inspired and grounded in an ontology—that is, a vision, whether conscious or not, explicit or implicit, of what the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) is. For example, the four core phases of the Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry methodology emerge when Cooperrider recognizes that in the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations): There is a positive core that we must discover (Discovery Phase). It has the capacity to anticipate, visualize, and imagine a better future (Dream Phase). It can realize its dreams when we concretize them into specific values and action commitments (Design Phase). It needs to keep its commitments alive by participating in motivation, education, and evaluation programs (Destiny Phase).

Consequently, the practice of Appreciative Intervention/Inquiry must be inspired, grounded, and guided by the Appreciative Ontology of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) from the Appreciative Paradigm. It is from this vision that we must decide what we do, why we do it, how we do it, what we need to change, and especially what we need to create to be more effective and coherent in our work as facilitators of personal and social change.

CONCLUSION

I hope that with this essay I have achieved the goal of opening a window to begin seeing the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations) from the Appreciative Ontology of the Appreciative Paradigm. And that the invitation to join me in discovering it through this window has been an enriching and inspiring experience. I am aware that what I present in this essay falls far short of what is possible. Delving into what Appreciative Ontology is, is a task that falls to all academics and practitioners of the Appreciative Paradigm.

Therefore, I want to conclude by inviting you to share your version and to walk together to build our vision of the Appreciative Ontology of the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations).

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