Constructing Ourselves Constructing the Other:
The Challenge of Reconciliation in South Africa

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Abstract

This article describes an ongoing Reconciliation Initiative undertaken in partnership between the Institute for Democracy in South Africa[1] (Idasa) and the Gauteng Council of Churches[2] (GCC). This Initiative was launched in May 2004 at a Convocation Event and one year down the line five regional dialogues are being launched at local level, each focusing on a different aspect of reconciliation. The project is grounded in social constructionist principles and merges the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Sustained Dialogue[3] (SD) methodologies. What this article will explore is how these theoretical groundings and merging of methodologies are working to tackle the question of reconciliation from a positive approach. The central hypothesis is that history can be a "positive possibility" (Cooperrider et al, 2003:21) and through a series of Sustained Dialogues our constructions of self and the other can be a process of re-membering ourselves into new ways of being.

The Ongoing Challenge of Reconciliation in South Africa

How can we capture on paper the nuances of this land that we love and the people that we share it with? How can we paint on this page the beauty and heartbreak that are part of our daily lives? The starkness of the contradictions that we live with and the depth of the paradox that is our story? South Africa the miracle, the beacon of hope for Africa, the alternative ending to what should have been a familiar story, is all this and more. We have been blessed with more than one prophet of this generation, calling us into new ways of being in the world. Calling us away from revenge and retribution, to love and forgiveness, to a sense of common humanity. We have been blessed with political leaders who have had the foresight and may we even say common sense to realise that there is only one way forward for us all – to live in love and peace with our neighbour. But how deep does this commitment to each other run? How do ordinary people, living ordinary lives, struggling with the daily grind of existence see each other? How do we take the symbolic strides made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission[4] (TRC) and make them the real, lived experience of ordinary South Africans? We ask this question because ten years into our freedom, our new democracy, we are faced with an even greater challenge than the ending of Apartheid. We are faced with the challenge of becoming a single people, embracing and making real the concept of a "rainbow nation[5]", of healing the divides of the past in a way that allows us to move into a common future.

This article seeks to share with you a process that is ongoing. With the closing of the TRC and its mandate, government requested the Churches to carry forth this project of

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[1] A democracy focused NGO (www.idasa.org.za)

[2] The provincial body of the South African Council of Churches

[3] SD is an approach to dialogue developed by Dr. Hal Saunders.

[4] The TRC was established by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 26 July, 1995.

[5] A term coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the early 1990's

national reconciliation. Idasa and the GCC have taken up this call from government and partnered in a Reconciliation Initiative.

The project has been conceptualised as a series of local "Sustained Dialogues", where ordinary church members will come together to explore the notion of reconciliation and in doing so begin to chart a way forward for their communities. This seemingly simple approach to the challenge of reconciliation is rooted in the belief that by encountering "the other" in intimate and regular spaces, the transformation of individuals, and therefore communities, is possible.

But what is this national project of reconciliation? Drawing on practices of AI and its underlying theoretical base of social constructionist theory we propose that the heart of this project is the creation of an ethical memory and common story which in turn allows for a common and desired future. A future where we move beyond living past each other in tolerance to living with each other in appreciation and dare we even propose love?

The challenge in finding this common story has its roots in the separationist policies of Apartheid and its legacy of how far apart we still are from each other. There is no common history, no common language for the road our races have travelled through the generations. No common ancestor to emulate or common heroes to worship. No common sense of destiny except for the recent sense of annihilation if we do not make this work. But even within that sense of urgency there is no consensus on how we measure progress or where we are trying to go- and for some people still the very real option of leaving.

The challenge to our project is the creation of a story where each person and group can locate themselves - have a sense that their voices are heard, and that their experiences are validated and in this their humanity is affirmed. This challenge is directly linked to the ability of our democracy to function as a socio-political and economic system which serves the needs of all citizens, where the difficult and complex prioritization of government and social resources can happen via consensus, or at very least an atmosphere of trust.

"We must forgive, but we must never forget" are the familiar sentiments of a people who are grappling with both the past and the future. But what social constructionism offers us is the understanding that this is not the end of the story but only the beginning. The question is not whether we forget, but rather what we remember. The project is a project of memory, of constructing and writing a narrative of the past that opens up the possibility of a new beginning, a joint future where all can reside.

The Theoretical Groundings

In the *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook* the author's identify 5 principles of social constructionism that form the theoretical basis of Appreciative Inquiry. These in turn inform the assumptive base of our Reconciliation Initiative.

The Constructionist Principle asserts that "Social knowledge and organizational destiny are interwoven. A constructionist would argue that the seeds of organizational change are implicit in the first questions asked…Thus, the way of knowing is fateful…" (Cooperrider et al, 2003:8). What this principle offers the project is the challenge of moving deeper than our existing pre-conceptions regarding the process of reconciliation and our current understanding of each other, into an understanding that the act of reconciliation is an act of fateful knowledge that can move our country forward.

The Principle of Simultaneity "…recognizes that inquiry and change are not truly separate moments; they can and should be simultaneous. The seeds of change are the things people think and talk about…and the things that inform dialogue and inspire

images of the future." (Cooperrider et al, 2003:8) This informs the assumption of the project that by transforming individuals we can transform communities. By creating a unique space where all perspectives can come into a single conversation, the project seeks to transform the way we usually speak about each other and the challenges facing our nation. It also complements a major component of SD, which focuses first on changing the participants engaging in the inquiry, before looking to change the larger community.

The Poetic Principle can be understood in the metaphor "…that human organizations are an open book. An organization's story is constantly being co-authored." (Cooperrider et al, 2003:8) The project rests on the hypothesis that if history is not a static story frozen in time, but an interpretation passed to new generations in order to create a trajectory for the future – then the site of struggle is firmly located in memory.

The Anticipatory Principle is grounded in the notion that "The most important resource for generating constructive organizational change or improvement is collective imagination and discourse about the future…" (Cooperrider et al, 2003:9) This principle speaks to the generative and future oriented purpose of these dialogues. It is the challenge of finding some consensus on our national project and our national identity, which requires the cultivation of imagination and hope.

The Positive Principle asserts that "…momentum for change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding, attitudes such as hope, inspiration, and the sheer joy of creating with one another." (Cooperrider et al, 2003:9) Building off a common commitment to Christianity and its promise of a hopeful future for God's people, the dialogue aspires to turn the project of reconciliation into a creative process grounded in deep encounter of each other's humanity. This is key to re-igniting passionate commitment to the "unfinished business" of the quality of society we are working to build.

These principles are being merged with a citizen-focussed peace building process called Sustained Dialogue (SD). Originally designed to help end an ethnic conflict in the former Soviet Republic of Tajikistan, SD places its focus on changing dysfunctional relationships among participants, before attempting to develop solutions for the broader community. SD as a process speaks to relationships as both a current challenge to the reconstruction of memory in South Africa and the element that must be transformed by the reinterpreting of history. It defines relationships along five dimensions, each of which must be understood within the context of the dialogue so that participants can strengthen them.

Identity refers to how individuals or groups define themselves, be that based on physical features, or human features such as religion, values, or common experiences. In South Africa identity is often described in terms of physical features but in fact it is also rooted in a much deeper set of cultural values and experiences. The challenge is to uncover those deeper roots to find and strengthen a broader and more inclusive identity.

Interests include what individuals and groups are seeking, be they material like a certain standard of living or more abstract, like dignity or respect. Within South Africa the range of interests that people are seeking is very broad. The challenge for the dialogue is to show participants how they are dependent on each other to achieve their interests and must therefore support each other.

Power can be viewed as both the physical ability to control others and the more abstract capacity to influence people or call them to action.   In South Africa there is both a clear divide in terms of hard and soft power. Politically, black South Africans have control of government structures at all levels; while economically, whites own most businesses and agricultural land. Morally, black South African have great authority because of their past victimization and ability to transcend it and reconcile, while culturally white South Africans have great influence because Western languages and culture play a very

important role. It is the task of the dialogue to better understand these elements of power to show how no group can successfully dominate the other

Perceptions/Misperceptions/Stereotypes refers to how a group or individual views other groups or individuals. South Africa's highly racialized past has bred a whole host of perceptions into all members of the population. Dialogue helps participants evaluate their perceptions and change them.

Patterns of Interaction describes the way people or groups have become accustomed to treating each other, be that through awkward politeness, open hostility, or respectful honesty. Like perceptions, patterns of interaction can also be evaluated through dialogue and new approaches to changing them can be developed.

Reviewing the Project Methodology

In its methodological approach the project merges the Stages of SD and the 4-D cycle of AI. Specifically this looks like:
- Stage 1 & 2: Discovery of participants' shared experiences and relationships
- Stage 3: Dreaming together on what new relationships can look like and how this calls us forth in new ways
- Stage 4: Designing together how to take this into a larger social context – touching others and creating a conversation which places reconciliation back on the national agenda
- Stage 5: Delivery of the scenario to the larger community

As mentioned previously, this Initiative was launched at a 200 person Convocation Event (loosely based on the notion of an Appreciative Summit) where representatives of lay and church leadership from the member churches of the South African Council of Churches[6]. The two-day event focused on exploring what the concept of reconciliation meant to ordinary South Africans across colour, gender and age lines[7]. Participants developed a multifaceted definition of reconciliation and endorsed the idea of using dialogue as a means for promoting it[8]. To implement the program a Working Group was formed to assist the GCC and Idasa in launching a series of local dialogues where communities themselves could decide who should participate, choose a dialogue topic, and decide on what actions to take. It has taken a year to reach the point of launching these local dialogues.

Since the groups were launched, the initial dialogue meetings have focussed both on creating a safe space where participant relationships could be changed, and allowing individuals to share and compare experiences. We would consider each of these dialogues still being in the Discovery Phase and entering Stage 2 of SD.

Reflections for the AI Community

Framing the project of reconciliation through a social constructionist lens, and merging this with different methodologies, allows us to grapple in new ways with old questions. In particular, taking reconciliation out of the traditional "victim-perpetrator" dynamic and into a societal wide process offers that reconciliation at its heart requires a new conception of identity and our relationship to the past and the future. It is in this tension of navigating the past while creating a future that the notion of memory and its central

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[6] Get number of members
[7] See attached Interview Protocol
[8] The full text of the report can be found on www.idasa.org.za

contribution to the future has been most helpful. The divisions within our society are on the fault lines of identity. Historically these have been racially defined, but increasingly they are along class lines too. Each of these divisions speak to a deeper world-view and grappling with the question of what it means to be an African, how to measure a successful democracy and what makes us hopeful for the future of this country.

Finding and sustaining a group of committed individuals willing to walk together on this vague and difficult path has been challenging. Believing that the mere act of holding a space and grappling with what makes this invitational for people to participate, the project partners are learning what it takes to create a truly inclusive and participant led intervention.

Our deepest yearning for this project is that it may contribute to reconstructing the web of relationships and the social fabric of society. Within this lies the often competing claim between justice and forgiveness, a willingness to live together with the need for recognition of past wrongs. What we require is a theology of dialogue that opens up the past and the future in a way that we can construct ourselves while constructing the other.

References

Cooperrider, D.L, Whitney, D & Stavros, J. (2003) *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: The First in a Series of AI Workbooks for Leaders of Change.* Bedford Heights, OH: Lakeshore Publishers.

Krog, Antjie. (1999) *Country of my skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa.* New York: Three Rivers Press.

Saunders, Harold H. (1999) *A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflicts*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

RECONCILIATION:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

These interview questions are a guide for your discussions. Please make sure that you record the key points from the stories that your partner is sharing with you, as you will need to report back on this conversation.

Question 1:

I would like to understand more what reconciliation means to you personally. Tell me of a time when you, or someone close to you, has had the opportunity to reconcile with another person.

What happened? Who was involved? How did it feel? What did you learn about what is needed for reconciliation to happen?

Question 2:

As Christians we are called on to carry the calling of reconciliation. However, each denomination and congregation understands this calling differently. I would like to know more about how your church understands the biblical meaning of reconciliation. Imagine that you were to give a sermon on reconciliation, what would you say?

Question 3:

As South Africans we have come from a history of apartheid and are now working to live together in new relationships to each other. As someone who represents a particular generation, gender and role in the church, do you think that reconciliation is still needed in our society? Please share with me an experience that you feel shows why we do or do not need reconciliation. What happened? Who was involved? How did it make you feel?