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Appreciative and Contestatory Inquiry in Deliberative Forums:

Can Group Hugs be Dangerous?

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Abstract: The project of deliberative democracy is increasingly pursued through designed mini-publics. But exactly how they are designed proves crucial in determining whether or not mini-publics can deliver on their promise. This article explores the role of appreciative inquiry – a version of deliberative design that is gaining ground. In this approach, participants are primed to develop an ‘appreciative gaze’ by focusing the discussion on what already works well in the system and imagining possibilities for building on these strengths. It is distinguished from contestatory approaches in that argumentative, blame-seeking and deficit-oriented forms of discourse are considered counter-productive to the process. We argue against a one-sided emphasis on appreciative inquiry, which must be balanced with more contestatory forms. Focusing on appreciative approaches to deliberation at the expense of contestation obstructs the ability of a group to deliberate properly and secure crucial deliberative outcomes. Our analysis is grounded in the case of the first Australia’s Citizens’ Parliament.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, contestation, appreciative inquiry, citizens’ parliament, deliberative forums

Introduction

The theory and practice of citizen deliberation grow in volume and sophistication, but that does not mean that questions of appropriate structure and procedure are at all settled. Here we investigate the dangers inherent in overemphasizing an increasingly popular approach to forum design and facilitation. This ‘appreciative’ approach emphasizes the constructive or positive aspects of deliberation. While the approach is not without merit – indeed, some of the dynamics facilitated by the approach may be essential for achieving deliberation – its overuse can crowd out more established contestatory forms of discussion to the detriment of good deliberation.¹

In 2007, a columnist for *The Australian* newspaper (Albrechtsen 2007) wrote a column entitled ‘Group hugs can be dangerous’. She was criticizing a deliberative poll. It was, in her words, a ‘talk-fest’ held in Canberra about the relationship of Islamic communities and the wider Australian society. Her discomfort is based on her observation that in this forum, participants were largely ‘sweet talked’ about having a chat with their Muslim neighbors over barbecue while tough and serious issues such as the susceptibility of Muslim youth to jihadist ideology or the possibilities for radical Islam to co-exist with Western modernity were swept under the rug. She acknowledges that the speakers’ bridge-building comments were based on good intentions but maintains that this must not come at the expense of ‘digging a bit deeper’. Albrechtsen warns that flicking difficult issues aside is a dangerous option and that the problem will not go away by non-Muslims hugging a Muslim neighbor.

Albrechtsen is a journalist with apparently little concern for deliberative democracy, but her criticisms do resonate with more theoretical questions that we pursue in this article, as well as with agonistic critiques of excessive civility in deliberative democracy (Mouffe 1999). Our analysis is based on a deliberative event for which we have extensive data, which by coincidence was also held in Canberra. In February 2009, Australia’s first Citizens’ Parliament (CP) enabled 150 randomly selected delegates to deliberate over four days on the topic ‘how can Australia’s system of government be strengthened to serve us better?’ Similar to Albrechtsen’s impressions, we observed a tendency to promote a positive and non-confrontational tone throughout the proceedings while attempts to introduce contestatory modes of discourse were relatively restrained. Examination of the content of participants’ feedback toward the end of the event reveals widespread satisfaction, if not delight, in being able to engage in meaningful and respectful conversation with people they did not expect to

get along with. At the same time, many participants pointed to the lack of opportunity to examine critically and systematically flesh out the issues being discussed.

A ‘positive’ approach to deliberation seems to be gaining ground among forum designers and deliberative practitioners, manifested as ‘appreciative inquiry’ or what we will interchangeably refer to in this article as appreciative design. Some toolkits and handbooks on deliberation stress the importance of maintaining a positive group atmosphere in order to enforce norms of civility and camaraderie among deliberators. Participants are primed to develop an ‘appreciative gaze’ by focusing the discussion on identifying what already works well in the system and imagining possibilities for building on these strengths. Appreciative design can be – and is – contrasted with contestatory dialogue that involves argumentative, blame-seeking and deficit-oriented modes of speech. This contrast becomes a problem if contestatory or confrontational forms of speech are condemned as counter-productive.

While we acknowledge that citizen deliberation needs bridge-building techniques to generate comfortable relationships and shared communicative norms among participants, we interrogate the tendency to *consistently* prioritize appreciative modes of speech over critical ones. We suggest that deliberation needs *both* forms of discourse, albeit possibly at different stages. ‘Group hugs’ or the disproportionate emphasis on positive discourse is a hazardous deliberative practice, precisely because the value of respectful relationships created through appreciative inquiry is undermined by not using them as currencies to instigate an honest and critical conversation about divisive topical issues.

Our article is structured in three parts. We first provide a brief survey of the practitioners’ literature on deliberation to show how appreciative inquiry has become part of the toolkit among deliberative practitioners. We then characterize the design features of the Citizens’ Parliament and show how it predominantly used an appreciative approach. Finally, we examine the shortcomings of this approach by revisiting the principles of deliberative democracy. We lay out the normative and theoretical bases for giving appreciative and critical discourse equal importance. We seek to identify key elements in forum design, and the appropriate balance of appreciative and contestatory inquiry.

Appreciative inquiry and deliberative democracy

The technique of appreciative inquiry originally developed in the field of organizational development. It examines what gives life to human systems when they function at their best (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005, Whitney *et al.* 2010). Appreciative inquiry assumes that

every organization has something that works right – its ‘positive core’ – which animates the system when it is most successful and effective. In its application, participants are asked to draw on their experiences, identify what works well in an organization or a system, and think about how the organization can be like this more often. The discussion aims to generate ideas on how to build upon an organization’s positive core and create shared visions for the future.

This approach begins with the idea that the world is not a problem to be solved (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005) and so moves away from traditional problem-solving approaches centered on identifying what is broken and how it can be fixed. It is *consistently* appreciative in that it eschews deficit-oriented discussions such as those that analyze failures, threats, gaps and obstacles to change. This, however, must not be taken to mean as viewing reality through rose-tinted glasses. Rather, it is an art of asking questions that enable individuals to seek and assign value to an underappreciated positive aspect of the system and heighten its potential for bringing about positive change.

Appreciative inquiry has been widely used in peace initiatives, city planning, corporate reorganization and increasingly, in deliberative forums.² Asif and Klein (2009) suggest that appreciative inquiry and deliberation have ‘a natural affinity for each other’ in that the success of both is contingent on the proximity of conditions for discourse to Habermas’ ideal speech situation. There are four further reasons for this affinity. First, like deliberation, appreciative inquiry is concerned with creating conditions for communicative freedom where oppressive and limiting systems of thought can be overcome (Ghaye *et al.* 2008, p. 374). Appreciative inquiry complements deliberative procedures by providing an alternative language that can fight the dominance of negativism which often constrains thought and action. Second, both demand openness among participants. As the proponents of appreciative inquiry suggest:

Co-inquiry in the presence of other human beings almost always discloses views not quite like our own and is capable, therefore, of dislodging treasured certainties. When we enter inquiry’s theatre, we are often surprised with the ending. But then we are gifted, not with solid certainty but with something even better – the vertigo of new vision. And this is the special paradox of Appreciative Inquiry. Inquiry into the good of the life-generating is neither comfortable nor stable, even if positive. (Cooperrider and Avital 2004, p. xiii)

As in deliberation, appreciative enquiry aims to enrich perspectives carried out in the spirit of mutual understanding. Parties are expected to listen to all positions with an open mind rather than reject arguments based on preformed opinions. Third, both appreciative

inquiry and deliberation are concerned with creating an inclusive and participatory communicative forum where formal authority and command-and-control cultures are replaced by ‘communities of discovery and cooperation’ (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010, p. 4). In business contexts, for example, distinctions based on one’s place in the corporate ladder are blurred by norms of equality where all staff members’ insights are given equal weight. Finally, appreciative inquiry is constructive in making a case for the relevance of deliberative forums. It underscores deliberation’s consequential character or its potential to make an impact on decisions and instigate social change by setting the premise that the system is resilient and capable of positive change.

In handbooks on organizing deliberative forums, appreciative inquiry is often identified as tool for promoting collaborative action. The National Coalition for Deliberation and Dialogue (NCDD), for example, pitches it as a mechanism to generate ideas for community action in a cooperative manner (Heierbacher 2011, see also Carson 2011). It is distinguished from processes designed for decision-making which focus on systematically weighing all options and considering different positions. Instead, appreciative inquiry builds and sustains momentum for change by ‘generating large amounts of positive affect and social bonding – things like hope, excitement, inspiration, caring, camaraderie, sense of urgent purpose, and sheer joy in creating something meaningful together’ (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005, p. 331). Appreciative inquiry is useful in catalyzing and sustaining meaningful discussions among individuals who are otherwise antagonistic to each other. In this context, participants are not just asked to practice tolerance but to forge a new social relationship built on a shared vision for the future (Gergen 2003, p. 54). This practice is used in the United Religions Initiative, an organization aiming to be like the United Nations, to enable different religious organizations to engage in productive dialogue and come up with ways to promote inter-faith collaboration (Gergen 2003, p. 53). The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has also incorporated appreciative inquiry to its suite of training modules that enhance the practice of public participation.

There is much to be said in favor of appreciative inquiry in deliberative contexts, within limits. Appreciative modes of inquiry recognize the link between emotion, affect and their potential to both block and facilitate reasoning (Marcus *et al.* 2000). It has been demonstrated that groups who display higher levels of ‘social sensitivity’ are better able to deal with complex questions (Woolley *et al.* 2010). Our argument is not against the role of appreciative modes of inquiry in group deliberation. Rather, we contend that appreciative

modes of deliberation can be counterproductive if not balanced with more contestatory, or ‘truth seeking’ modes of inquiry. We illustrate the danger using the example of the Australian Citizens’ Parliament.

Australia’s first Citizens’ Parliament

Australia’s first Citizens’ Parliament (CP) was convened on 6–9 February 2009 at the Old Parliament House in Canberra. The event’s aim was to ‘change the way people talk about politics and make political decisions’ (newDemocracy Foundation 2009) by providing an opportunity to think about an issue when given information from different viewpoints and discuss them in a non-adversarial way. Throughout the event, delegates were asked to put forward and deliberate a range of proposals that can further strengthen Australia’s political system.

The CP’s basic design followed the model of the Twenty-First Century Town Meeting, as developed by the *AmericaSpeaks* Foundation. Its key features are the following:

- (1) Diversity of participants: the CP convened a large number of randomly selected citizens (with stratification based on age and education, and one participant from each federal electoral district). One hundred and fifty participants were selected. Slots were also committed to members of the Aboriginal community.
- (2) Neutral materials: all delegates received informational packets that aim to provide an objective account of the issues under consideration. They also had access to an independent reference panel composed of academics, activists, senior public servants and politicians. Members of the panel were tasked to answer participants’ questions during small group deliberations and provide a brief, informative talk in plenary sessions about the advantages, disadvantages and consequences of the proposals being considered.
- (3) Table facilitation: participants engaged in small group deliberations composed of six to eight participants with a professionally-trained facilitator. Facilitators were tasked to ensure that the discussions remain respectful, constructive but not necessarily reach consensus. There was also a lead facilitator who directed the flow of group deliberations from the stage.
- (4) Participation technology and immediate reporting: tables were connected through networked computers so that feedback from each table could be immediately sent to

the ‘theme team’ – a group of volunteers tasked to synthesize the output from all 24 groups and project the gist of their discussions on a big screen. Both majority and ‘strongly held minority views’ were identified.

- (5) Link to decision-makers: towards the end of the CP, participants were asked to vote on the proposals by allocating 100 imaginary points to proposals the individual favored. In the CP’s final session, the six proposals that got most points were presented to the prime minister’s representative. In turn, the representative assured participants that their proposals would be given serious consideration by the government.

A sixth significant component of the CP was its prioritization of an appreciative approach to deliberation, and that is what we examine here.

Manifestations of appreciative design

Appreciative design was utilized to operationalize CP’s aim of changing the way people talk about politics by presenting an alternative to the prevalent mode of political discourse which is adversarial and deficit-oriented in nature. Organizers pitched the event as ordinary citizens’ chance to express their views in a supportive environment where deliberative virtues of inclusion, respect and openness were paramount. As we will discuss in this section, this approach had remarkable outcomes. Appreciative inquiry’s promise of generating camaraderie and positive affect was fulfilled as testified by participants themselves. However, this approach also had an unintended consequence. By ensuring that the CP was safeguarded from antagonistic modes of speech which can put off participants, there was a tendency to privilege deliberation’s appreciative aspect at the expense of its contestatory character. We identify two manifestations of this observation in this section and explain why this is a cause for concern in the next.

Predominance of appreciative framework

The CP was designed based on appreciative inquiry’s premise that the world is not a problem to be solved but that the system has strengths that people can build on. The main charge ‘how can Australia’s system of government be strengthened to serve us better’ could be seen to imply that the system of government was strong and that the CP was a forum to enhance it. More overtly, session topics were phrased in such a way that participants were asked to

focus on the strengths of Australian democracy. Examples of these topics include the following:

Day two topic: proud democracy

- What makes us proud of our democracy?
- How can it be more like this more often?
- What can be learnt from this?

Day three topic: prioritization of proposals

- Which proposals come to mind as best reflecting our number one priority characteristic of a healthy political system?
- Which proposals come to mind as best reflecting our second priority characteristic of a healthy political system?
- Which of the projects come to mind as the most innovative initiatives?
- Which of the projects come to mind as the most easy to implement initiatives?
- Which of the projects come to mind as the most important to implement in the long term?

In the facilitators' manual, these sessions were described as an 'appreciative exercise' in that the questions were meant to foster 'respectful curiosity'. Facilitators were cautioned that 'participants will find it easier to nominate things that they DON'T like, the aim here is to understand what people DO' (newDemocracy Foundation 2009, Appendix 6, p. 3; emphasis in the original). The procedure for ranking proposals also placed the political system's positive qualities in the foreground. Proposals were framed as recommendations that reflect the characteristics of a healthy political system rather than, for example, oriented towards resolving particular issues or addressing the system's weaknesses. This manner of framing questions is described as a 'constructive strategy' to 'build appreciation of the positive rather than problematic aspects of an issue or situation' (Carson 2011, p. 11). Consistent with the CP's main aim, these topic questions steer participants away from antagonistic ways of talking about politics. Also consistent with appreciative inquiry's principles, negative talk or 'deficit language' was discouraged, while focus on 'peak performance' – when the system is at its best – was maintained.

In our analysis of the proceedings' transcripts, we observed that facilitators played an important role in enforcing the appreciative design. Some were liberal in allowing participants to expound on their comments, while others consistently implemented the appreciative approach, as in this excerpt:

Participant 0089 We live in a democracy and we choose those people [in government]. Now we're choosing people that are rude and unenlightened. If they're enlightened people who are aware, they wouldn't treat each other that way. We're electing these people but the thing is . . .

Facilitator Sorry, let's be positive, how do we flip that around?

Participant 4591 We have more say in who we want to run in our government.

Facilitators had different styles of managing deliberations but they were generally consistent in keeping participants on task. Consequently, in appreciative exercises, they were asked to generate positive opinions about the political system, requesting fault-finding statements to be rephrased in a way that responds to the topic questions and therefore reinforcing the session's appreciative design.

To characterize the event as positively framed, however, is not to say that critical voices or views critical of Australian politics were prohibited from coming to the fore. The composition of the reference panel ensured that diverse and opposing positions were presented in the CP. Even though topics of small group deliberations were appreciative in orientation, participants had access to a variety of perspectives on Australian politics through the panel's comments in plenary sessions. The welcome address itself was an occasion where speakers expressed markedly different views on politics. Hon. Fred Chaney AO, the cochair of the CP, described Australia's 'long-lived democracy' as capable of change and that ultimately 'the people' are arbiters of the system of government. He said that the CP could begin 'with the premise that we are a lucky, fortunate country in having such a stable democracy'. On the other hand, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, founder of the newDemocracy Foundation (which co-funded the CP), expressed frustration over partisan politics. He argued that Australia 'has evolved as a society but our political system has held us back'. He described electoral options as 'trite' and a 'mockery of collective intelligence', leading him to conclude that 'governments are failing us'.

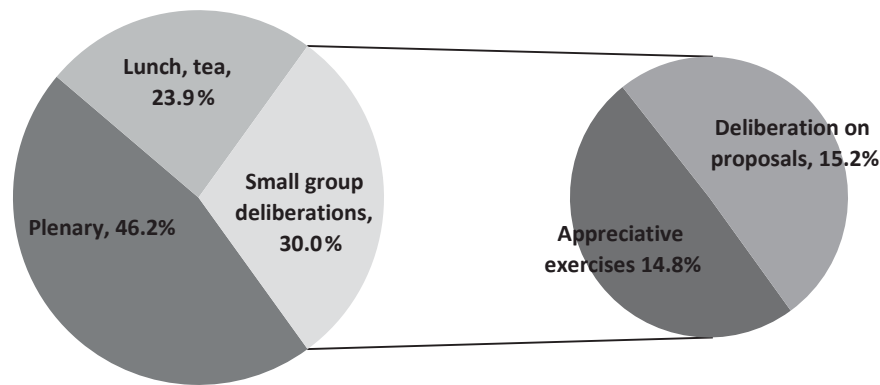


Figure 1. Time allocation for the four days of the CP.

Note: Total time spent (est.): 1,550 minutes over four days.

While a range of appreciative and critical opinions were presented in plenary sessions, the difference lies in the opportunity given to participants to follow-up, reflect, weigh and build on these comments. Figure 1 shows the time allocation among different aspects of the CP.³ This figure illuminates the priorities of the CP's design. Almost half of the proceedings were devoted to plenary sessions. For the most part, these sessions were used to communicate information to citizen parliamentarians through members of the reference panel and disseminate the outcomes of small group deliberations to the broader group. The time allocated for small group deliberations comprised 30% of the entire proceedings. Half of these deliberations were allocated to appreciative exercises while the other half was spent deliberating on proposals put on the table by citizen parliamentarians. As we have already noted, some sessions were explicitly appreciative in their orientation but no session was explicitly devoted to examining systematically and gaining deeper understanding of the criticisms put forward by members of the reference panel or weaknesses that participants perceived in the political system.

The time allocated for deliberating on proposals did not provide ample space to do this either. Although some participants exchanged brief comments about the critical points articulated by some members of the reference panel – e.g. that Australia is an ‘oligarchy’ or an ‘audience democracy’ – these did not directly inform the deliberations on proposals in the same way that statements explaining the strengths of current political arrangements did. We analyzed the references participants made to plenary speakers’ speeches and observed that none of the statements that are overtly critical of Australia’s political system were used as springboard to generate, critique or support proposals. On the other hand, speeches that tend to explain the rationale for the status quo or those that indicate the progress the government

has had in enhancing the political system were incorporated in deliberations. For example, one group was deliberating on the proposal to remove the state level of government. While the popular argument supporting this proposal relates to efficiency, a participant expressed opposition by referring to a plenary speaker who provided reasons for having different levels of government:

One of the speakers . . . was saying about duplication sometimes is a necessary thing because it makes individuals accountable for what is going on. I thought that's an interesting concept, rather than shoving it from one department to another to get every department's rubber stamp on it to have the ownership of local issues dealt with by the local Government and then State Government for State issues, and Federal do Federal. (Participant 7302)

Similarly, a participant put forward a proposal to increase the number of deliberative processes by citing the speech of a member of parliament (MP) who explained that there are already a number of deliberative events occurring in Australia, rather than, for example, premise his discussion on Australia being an 'audience democracy':

Well I'd like to pick up on the last speaker [Alannah McTiernan, MP], on this issues of how do we actually get more of this kind of deliberative process in our democracy and maybe more Citizens Parliaments. Maybe there should be requirement that there be a Citizens Parliament of this nature held in every electorate, every year. (Participant 1612)

Because deliberations on proposals were focused on coming up with recommendations that can enhance the political system, there were few attempts and opportunities to take a step back, unpack the bases of strong criticisms against Australian democracy, test their validity and analyze how proposals being deliberated on address these issues. Instead, participants were asked to examine existing proposals as well as put forward new ones based on the premise that these are meant to enhance the political system. By the end of the CP, there were 50 different proposals on the table – from changing the electoral system to first past the post to having a counterpart of Australian Idol for politicians.⁴

While keeping the forum open to new proposals was a remarkable gesture of inclusion, this also served to undermine the process of systematically and critically examining recommendations. The 'constructive' language promoted by appreciative inquiry stimulated participants to think about creative possibilities for change but, at the same time,

limited their contestatory and interrogative vocabulary necessary for seriously and deeply scrutinizing proposals in relation to adverse political realities. This observation is also supported by the feedback of citizen parliamentarians themselves, as will be discussed in the next section.

Group hug?

Another manifestation of the proceedings' appreciative orientation can be found in the increasingly positive comments articulated by participants as the proceedings progressed. We analyzed the transcripts of the CP and coded the statements from plenary sessions and small group deliberations according to whether they expressed positive or critical comments on Australian politics.

All statements expressing positive characteristics of Australia's political system were coded as 'satisfied' while those expressing disapproval were coded as 'dissatisfied'. Statements that were not explicitly articulating satisfaction or dissatisfaction were not coded such as questions that aim to clarify issues or jumpstart a conversation, selfintroductions in small group deliberations or statements about facts.⁵ Below are examples of statements coded for each category:

Satisfied Just that the system that we have now is pretty good with checks and boundaries and if you do change anything, then you are going to have to consider it because there will be changes. (Participant 2270)

Dissatisfied I think the biggest hurdle is going to be getting the citizens' access to the politicians, so they can get involved. Like our local member, you see him on election time and that's the last time anyone's ever seen him. He's shut his office down and he's gone. They need to be accessible to their communities. They need to speak at the whole public forums. (Participant 1959)

Neither satisfied nor Who is 'we' and what is the relationship that we would like to dissatisfied (not coded) have with the Indigenous Community? (Participant 3814)

Figure 2 presents the relative quantities of statements that qualified for this coding. On the first day, almost three-quarters of evaluative statements about the Australian political system

expressed dissatisfaction. These negative statements were mostly related to the behavior of politicians. A number of participants characterized them as juvenile, comparing politicians to a ‘bunch of kids in a schoolyard arguing about who owns the packet of crisps’ (Participant 3571). Most of these statements were made during the first small group deliberation where participants were asked to share their views on how deliberation could be different to other modes of communication. Participants consider politicians’ behavior as the epitome of ‘how not to deliberate’ and that they, as citizen parliamentarians, would strive to make the CP different.

Statements expressing satisfaction increased on days two and three, which indicates participants’ responsiveness to the positive frames used in session themes. On day two, for example, statements indicating satisfaction increased because this was when participants were asked to identify the features of Australian democracy that they appreciate. Stability was one of the popular characteristics, as well as the country’s ability to peacefully transfer power from one party to another through free and fair elections. Others expressed pride in Australia being one of the first countries that granted women’s suffrage, while some cited the ‘milestones’ of the political system by making reference to their visit to the Old Parliament House’s exhibit on Australian Democracy. Day three presented a similar case. Citizen parliamentarians discussed the characteristics of a healthy political system and provided examples of Australian democracy’s achievements, such as its peacekeeping efforts in East Timor and protecting the freedom of immigrants persecuted in countries of origin.

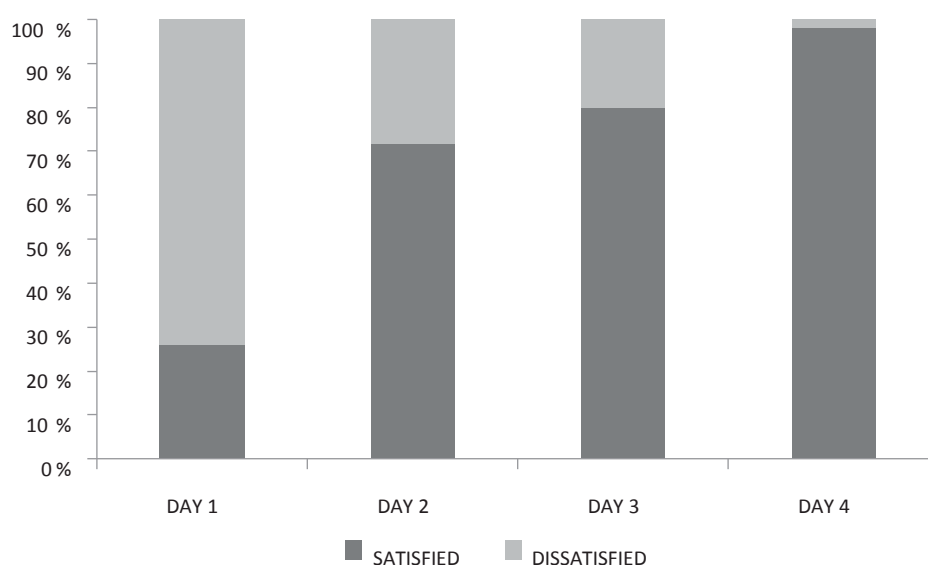


Figure 2. Satisfaction vs. dissatisfaction on Australian politics.

Day four must be read with caution as this day was mostly devoted to evaluating the deliberative process. Statements coded were mostly about the CP as a deliberative forum, rather than statements about Australian democracy. For this reason, the figure on day four cannot be directly compared with figures of days one to three. What can be inferred overall from this figure is the increasing predominance of statements of satisfaction, consistent with the proceedings' emphasis on the appreciative aspect of deliberation.

The content of statements on day four, however, is instructive in terms of examining participants' characterization of the CP's outcomes. In the concluding session of small group deliberations, participants were asked about the highlights and the lowlights of the process. The most common theme that emerged relates to participants' appreciation for being able to meet and engage with a diverse set of people. The following are characteristic of participants' comments on this subject:

I think one of my defining moment is that we've all come together and we're all from different walks of life, walks of life in Australia, itself. We all do different things; we're all different ages; we've all come together, sat down, we might have totally opposing views and we've talked through them and all and made decisions that we're all relatively happy with in the end . . . there's been no animosity, no arguments, no nothing. (Participant 3853)

[I]t's just amazing how so many people from different walks of like different nationalities . . . Different age groups have come together and we have been able to work so well and at such a pace. (Participant 3129)

For the most part, citizen parliamentarians have expressed appreciation for being able to engage with people whom, because of the differences in social backgrounds, they are unlikely to meet, much less have a serious conversation with in their everyday lives. While the rationale for recruiting a diverse set of participants was to ensure that a range of views was represented, the unintended consequence was participants' recognition that it was possible to develop good relationships with different groups of people under supportive conditions. The characterization of these relationships varies. Some referred to having good working relationships while others referred to the development of lifelong friendships. A participant expressed delight for 'finding a new mum in Canberra', indicating a way of defining the relationship between participants from different age groups.

Hartz-Karp *et al.* (2010) explain the prevalence of this kind of feedback in their analysis of the CP in terms of the 'organic emergence' of nationalist-collectivist identity predicated on tolerance, acceptance of the 'other' and embracing of all participants as bone fide Australians who carried equal importance in the deliberative process (HartzKarp *et al.*

2010, p. 367). Coming from a social psychological perspective, Batalha *et al.* (2012) suggest that affective states of mind generated from the CP were a function of the dignity and contentment the delegates felt in participating in a prestigious deliberative event that enforced a set of norms conducive to the development of group identity. Niemeyer *et al.* (forthcoming) similarly suggest that participants increased identification with their fellow citizen parliamentarians as they collectively developed a sense of pride and contentment. All these explanations confirm the resonance of the affective or social dimension in the CP. None of these findings contradict the stress we have placed upon appreciative inquiry in forum design; indeed, all could be thought of as intervening mechanisms through which the effect of forum design is manifested.

The picture gets more complicated when the ‘highlight’ of the CP is understood in relation to its ‘lowlight’. A number of citizen parliamentarians openly expressed dissatisfaction over the quality of proposals they came up with. Some were also concerned that the recommendations were ‘not solid enough’ and might not warrant serious consideration from government. Others wanted to refine the proposals by taking into consideration issues related to feasibility and applicability across different states. Examples of feedback on this theme are the following:

I think it’s not going down to the nitty gritty of what might be able to be achieved and I think that’s the more important thing to have arrived at. (Participant 7990)

Lowlight, probably the simplicity of the proposal, just the way it ended up. I was hoping they might be a bit more fleshed out and might give the final report a bit more weight. (Participant 4845)

Along with similar comments from citizen parliamentarians, these excerpts corroborate our observation about the unintended consequence of an appreciative design. Because of the emphasis on putting forward ‘constructive’ ideas and moving away from a deficit-oriented mode of communication, participants were unable to evaluate critically their recommendations within the context of complex and contentious political issues. This, as the second excerpt suggests, had an impact on the quality of proposals that were eventually presented to the prime minister’s representative. The ones that garnered the most votes at the end of the CP were ‘uncontroversial’ proposals such as youth engagement in politics and citizen empowerment through education. Among the 50 proposals on the table, these were the least contentious ones in the sense that there were no recorded objections to them and consequently, they faced no critical and sustained scrutiny. The prioritization of the

appreciative and constructive aspects of deliberation restrained the CP's potential for generating epistemically superior proposals over which citizen parliamentarians can collectively claim ownership and for which they could hold government accountable.

Group hugs can be dangerous if . . .

The appreciative design of the CP delivered important deliberative goods that contributed to the success of the proceeding, especially in terms of the main aim, to change the way people talk about politics. Moving the event away from antagonistic and deficit-oriented modes of speech was responsive to participants' critique of politicians' 'juvenile' ways of relating to each other. Positively framing session themes also empowered delegates to look at political realities differently and acknowledge the strengths of Australia's political system. The CP provided a supportive environment where participants could 'talk about politics without being howled down' (Participant 1959).

The emphasis on the social aspect of the proceedings was also important, if not indispensable, considering the diverse composition of participants. Appreciative inquiry's ability to generate 'large amounts of positive affect' was illustrated well, as evidenced by citizen parliamentarians' overwhelming feedback on their delight in meeting new people. This, we recognize, is not an easy feat in light of deliberative forums where participants ended up becoming more hostile to each other or more dogmatic in their views (see Hobson and Niemeyer 2012).⁶

The danger remains that the positive social-affective dimension of the proceedings can eclipse the critical aspect of deliberation. We now explain three ways in which this eclipse can happen, and identify antidotes for each.

1. Group hugs can be dangerous if they are framed as an alternative to critical or contestatory deliberation

Framing topic questions or designing session themes is never neutral. Drawing on the social constructionist literature, questions – whether in one-on-one interviews or group conversations – are not just meant to uncover data or, in a deliberative context, facilitate the exchange and evaluation of reasons. Rather, the ways in which questions are framed shape the construction of reasons or responses that emerge in deliberation. They foreground particular aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicative context (Entman 1993). They set the tone for collective meaning-making by placing

boundaries between relevant and irrelevant contributions as well as acceptable and unacceptable ways of articulating statements.

While framing of deliberative process is never neutral, neither does it have to operate in binary terms. A positively framed deliberative forum does not have to eliminate critical frames. Instead, as Asif and Klein suggest, the discursive model of appreciative inquiry is consistent with deliberation *only* if it facilitates the exchange of critical discourses through the interaction of a range of viewpoints. In deliberative terms, critique is not a negative or adversarial contest between opposing positions but a step towards cooperation by enabling participants to vent conflicts which could obstruct cooperative enquiry (Asif and Klein 2009, p. 192, also see Bohman 2000, pp. 27, 205). It is this feature of deliberative inquiry that was compromised by the CP's appreciative design. By focusing on 'what is good' as the starting point for putting forward and examining proposals, this feature undermined deliberation's capacity for problem identification, error spotting and confrontation of conflicting interpretations of specific issues. It restricted opportunities for specific forms of injuries and suffering to be articulated, making these discourses marginal in the construction of citizen parliamentarians' shared narratives through the proposals they put forward. A participant states:

I felt there was too much focus on the outcome of the proposals . . . like this classic sort of male, like we've got solutions; we know what to do had we focused on the issues.
(Participant 7003)

Emphasis on the political system's positive qualities and generation of proposals that would make it better came at the expense of systematic discussion about issues that were relevant for citizen parliamentarians. In the CP, critique of the status quo was a sideshow, often used as supporting evidence as to why particular proposals need to be adopted rather than a subject that had to be dissected. For a forum focused on generating proposals, we suggest that it is important to gain a better understanding of both what it is that participants want to enhance and the nature of shortcomings they wish to address. As Bächtiger (2011) argues, it is through contestation that the goal of epistemic fruitfulness is served. It is a key technique to unleash deliberation's potential for generating epistemically superior proposals, as well as its transformative and inclusive dimensions.

While we express concern over the CP's tendency to prioritize positive qualities of the Australian political system, we recognize that taking an opposing approach can lead to counterproductive consequences too. Focusing on the political system's negative qualities

can generate uncritical solidarity and shared negative sentiments among participants, thereby creating a forum conducive for ‘collective whinging’ rather than epistemic fruitfulness.⁷ It is precisely for this reason that we consider contestation as an indispensable mode of discourse in deliberation which, following Manin (2005) and Bächtiger (2011), means ‘clash of conflicting arguments’ which involves disputing, insisting and questioning. Because topic questions are always framed in a particular manner and exhibit tendencies to steer the deliberation towards a particular direction, the space for contestation of discourses remains important in order to avoid either group hugs or collective whinging. It is when participants are able to examine and revise the terms of deliberation from different directions (appreciation *and* contestation) that deliberative goals stand a greater chance of being met.⁸

2. *Group hugs can be dangerous if they are not used as currencies for deliberation*

Forging respectful relationships among participants performs what Warren calls a ‘discourse-enabling purpose’, to lay the necessary foundations for a collegial, reason-based discussion to occur (Warren 2006, p. 177, also Young 1996, p. 129). Appreciative exercises facilitate the formation of trust and social comfort necessary for having an honest exchange of views. They prepare participants from disparate backgrounds to engage with each other as peers based on shared deliberative virtues. Put another way, appreciative exercises are important preliminaries that can be used as springboards to launch ‘deliberative drifts’ or sequences yielding sincere, reflexive and critical discussion on collective issues (Bächtiger *et al.* 2010). It is this specialized function of ‘group hugs’ that makes deliberation distinct from other applications of appreciative inquiry such as team building seminars, vision-setting workshops or organizational change management. The norms and relationships generated from appreciative exercises only become meaningful in a deliberative forum when they are used as resources to set the stage for and maintain respectful and critical discussion.

The CP presents a case of a deliberative forum which successfully engendered positive affect among participants but fell short in maximizing this momentum for deliberative purposes. Its appreciative design generated social relationships which could have been used by participants to take on divisive issues and inform the creation and revision of their recommendations. By stating this, we do not mean to devalue the CP’s small group deliberations where participants enthusiastically and patiently exchanged their views about democracy and the proposals under consideration. Indeed, these were ‘deliberative drifts’. Rather, our critique is based on the *disparity* between the substantial effort devoted to

generating positive group atmosphere and the minimal attention to utilizing the product of these efforts in deepening deliberation by contesting premises, scrutinizing proposals and as the participant quoted earlier puts it, getting to the ‘the nitty gritty’ of what their recommendations may be able to achieve.

This shortcoming may be a function of time. Four days may not be enough to generate a positive and comfortable atmosphere among participants as well as set the stage for contestatory deliberation. For example, the deliberative procedure in Colorado, *Focus on Longmont*, devoted three months for a series of appreciative inquiry sessions before convening deliberative forums about the city’s strategy for a sustainable future (see Catalyst Consulting 2006). Given that no two deliberative forums are identical, we do not suggest hard and fast rules on how to manage the relationship between (preliminary) appreciative exercises and deliberation proper. We simply suggest that care must be exercised in setting a task appropriate for the available resources, devoting time and effort on generating shared affect that is commensurate and responsive to the demands of creating a respectful, open and critical deliberative process.

3. Group hugs can be dangerous if they result in consistent prioritization of harmony over discomfort

Finally, we suggest that group hugs can be dangerous if creating a harmonious discursive environment is consistently prioritized over making deliberators uncomfortable.

By uncomfortable, we refer to scenarios where participants’ views are confronted in a thought-provoking or even shocking manner, prompting them to defend or reconsider their positions. Recent deliberative theory has incorporated activist or disruptive communicative tactics into deliberation’s speech styles especially in connection with the idea of a deliberative system, which also allows that seemingly non-deliberative acts can have positive deliberative consequences (see Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). Contestation is central to political imagination and so to deliberation (Barnett 2011). Like appreciative exercises, contestatory speech has the capacity to unravel dominant frames and present alternative ways of seeing things, interpreting an issue and resolving differences (Bächtiger 2011). It is also a way to unsettle existing or emerging power relationships in the deliberative process, as long as confrontational speech is backed up with verifiable justifications. This allows deliberators not only to gain understanding of the extent to which their views overlap, but also the depth of their disagreements. Viewed this way, contestation is a constructive or a productive form

of argumentation in that it triggers an examination of reasons for disagreement, unpacks the bases for these differences and potentially, finds ways to understand if not overcome them.

There were moments in the CP where confronting views were expressed, such as in the plenary sessions where some speakers spoke strongly against the role of money in politics as well as the deficiencies of parliament, with members of parliament in the audience. However, what was present in plenary sessions was lacking in small group deliberations. As described earlier, their design left little space for contestatory speech. Participants were made to focus on ‘bridge-building’ activities, ensuring that the deliberative virtue of respect is constantly enforced. Appreciative design begins to be counter-productive in a deliberative process if it consistently aims to promote harmony and suppresses or discourages confrontation. Deliberation must not shy away from causing discomfort, especially if it triggers ‘productive controversy’ and a critical exchange of reasons. While this may potentially strain deliberators’ relationships, we suggest that it is precisely the tools of an appreciative design that can be used to facilitate the regeneration of these respectful relationships.

Appreciative *and* contestatory deliberation

Ultimately, the best chance of achieving the kind of deliberation valorized by deliberative democrats involves both appreciative and contestatory elements (see Table 1). We agree with Bächtiger (2011) that the deliberation needs to be contestatory in order to realize its epistemic potential. Although contestatory modes of inquiry are better than uncontested decree, without of an appreciative dimension there is a risk motivated reasoning (Mercier and Sperber 2011) of the kind of ‘anything goes’ and ‘winner takes all’ debate that is devoid of respect, of the kind that can be witnessed in some legislatures. Mercier and Landmore (2012) have usefully argued for a layer of social psychological theory to understand those contexts in which successful deliberation occurs. We argue that the presence of appreciative inquiry – in its broadest sense where appreciation opens minds to alternative argument – provides an important contextual factor buffering against less deliberative processes such as confirmation bias (Nickerson 1998).

Table 1. Appreciative versus contestatory modes in deliberation.

Less contestatory	More contestatory
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Less appreciative	Decree	Debate
More appreciative	Deference (group hug)	Deliberation

However, we argue that appreciate inquiry in the absence of contestation risks a similar category of problematic outcome as decree, where absolute deference towards a positively orientated discussion obverts the ability of the group to properly deliberate. In other words, generating group hugs alone can be dangerous if democratic deliberation is the goal.

Conclusion

Appreciative inquiry has its place in deliberative forums, but that should not be at the expense of contestatory interaction and critical interchange. Contestation today plays a large part in the theory of deliberative democracy (often placed in productive tension with moments of consensus in deliberative systems), and it merits an equally prominent place in the practice and design of deliberative forums. We have shown through close examination of a case where the appropriate balance was not struck that appreciative inquiry can be used as a resource for genuinely critical and productive deliberation – rather than an alternative to it.

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Notes

1. Note, for example, the ‘Contestations’ in the subtitle of Dryzek (2000).
2. See <http://www.appreciativeinquiry.net.au>. The case of the British Airways is a classic success story of appreciative inquiry. At the time when the airline was faced with serious issues on handling lost baggage, staff members were interviewed and asked to recall a moment when they were able to provide customers with an ‘exceptional arrival experience’. Rather than enumerating their issues on lost baggage, employees identified the company’s best practices that, when implemented more often, can help the airline achieve its quest for world class service (see Cooperrider and Whitney 2005, pp. 18–23).
3. This figure is based on the timetable given to participants and corroborated by facilitation notes and transcripts of proceedings.
4. Participants did not have to deliberate on all 51 proposals. Participants at each table could nominate the proposals they wanted to deliberate. In most cases, proposals were just put on the table but not systematically considered. Examples of the latter are proposals to: change the name of Australia; abolish political parties; abolish the superannuation and allowances for politicians. Examples of proposals that were deliberated include: an independent audit of politicians’ campaign promises; citizen-initiated referendum; change the electoral system to proportional representation.
5. The motivation for a binary coding frame is to have a general indication of the extent to which participants’ statements are responsive to the positive framing of session topics.
6. Although in the case of Hobson and Niemeyer (2012) appreciative modes of deliberation did emerge among a group who began their deliberations on climate change adaptation in a contestatory, if not hostile, environment.

7. Indeed, further comparative empirical study is necessary to have a more complete analysis of the implications of both approaches. We thank Stephen Estlub for this comment.
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