

# Asset-based co-operative management

## OPERA as a form of critical appreciation

paper to the International Social Innovation Research Conference,  
September 2016, Glasgow Caledonian University.

Rory Ridley-Duff, Reader in Co-operative and Social Enterprise  
Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University\*

[r.ridley-duff@shu.ac.uk](mailto:r.ridley-duff@shu.ac.uk)

Suzanne Grant, Senior Lecturer in Strategy and Human Resource Management.  
Waikato Management School, University of Waikato

[slgrant@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:slgrant@waikato.ac.nz)

\* Corresponding author

# Outline

- There are frequent invocations to practice participatory management in both co-operative and social enterprise education (Moreau and Mertens, 2013; Ridley-Duff and Ponton, 2013).
- This paper examines a participatory management approach called OPERA to establish if it promotes critical appreciative processes (CAPs) with an appreciative inquiry (AI).
- We developed findings by participating in four OPERA workshops involving 75 co-operative and SE educators, consultants and managers between July 2014 and April 2016.
- We obtained credible evidence that OPERA contributes to the discovery, dream and design parts of an AI cycle, but found more limited evidence of *critical* appreciation.
- OPERA processes are 'appreciative' in the way that *choices* are made, so they represent an asset-based approach to co-operative management.

# Rationale for the study

- Our starting point is the stated commitment of the social enterprises (SEs) to inclusive / co-operative learning processes that support social transformation.

(Alvord et al., 2004; Nicholls, 2006; Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2015).

- As a result, there is a growing desire that social entrepreneurship educators develops new, inclusive, value-driven and democratically grounded approaches to management education.

(Martin and Osberg, 2007; Pache and Chowdry, 2012; Doherty *et al.*, 2015; Winn and Neary, 2016).

- Having observed OPERA - a five stage decision-making / learning process – in SE conferences, we grew interested in its potential for *critical appreciative processes* (CAPs) in appreciative inquiry (AI).
- So we framed the following question: **‘What learning mechanisms are triggered by OPERA, and do they influence the development of CAPs amongst practice-oriented SE professionals?’**

# Developments in SE education

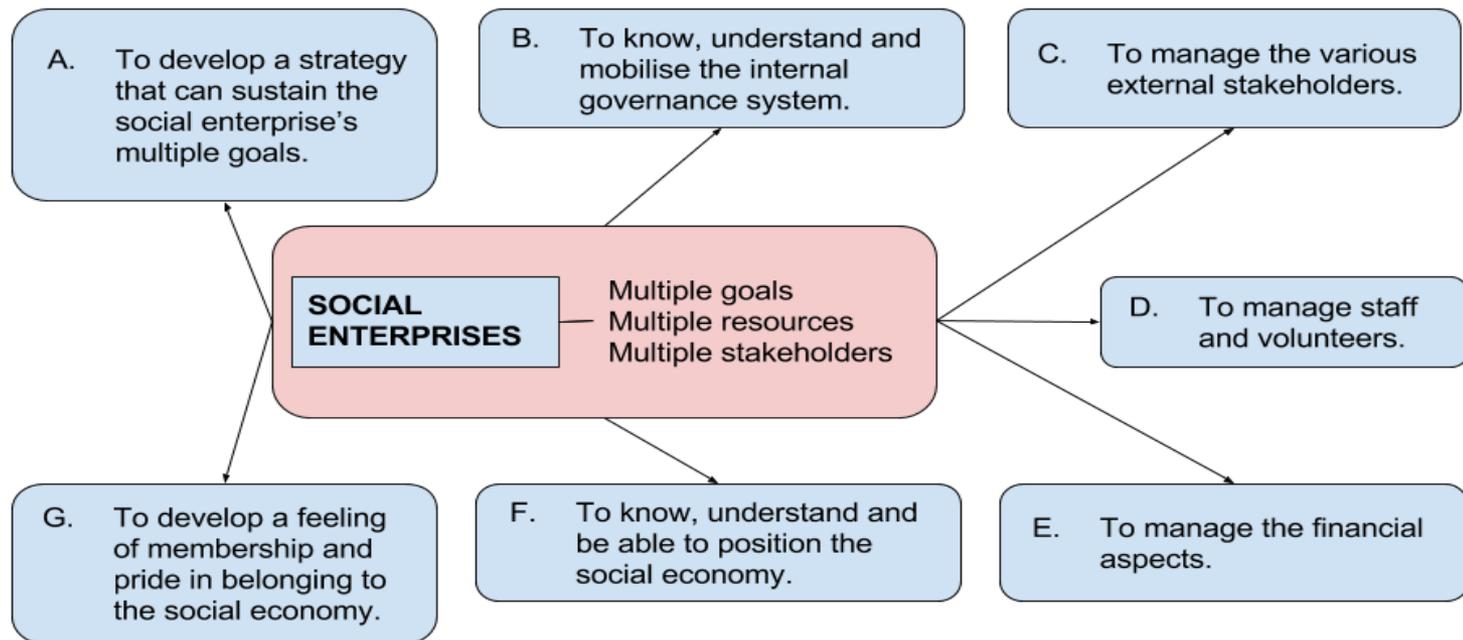
- **Functionalist approaches:** tools that address one or more challenges identified by Doherty *et al* (2009), such as Balanced Scorecard, Business / Social Lean Canvass

(Somers, 2005; Bull, 2007, Osterwalder, 2004; Yeoman & Moskovitz, 2014)

- foundations in identifying / evaluating the functional value of stakeholder participation in governance / business planning (Wright, Paroutis, and Blettner, 2013).
  - presumes that the focus, intent and outcomes of management education is to provide knowledge on the functions and processes of management.
- Mouchamps (2014) evaluated their impact, concluding that they “globally fail to account for the specific features of social enterprises” and - in many cases - lack strong theoretical bases.
  - Paton (2003) classifies attitudes to performance management tools as ‘committed’, ‘cynical’ and ‘reflective’. The ‘reflective’ approach can enhance a ‘competency-based’ approaches to management development.

# Developments in SE education

- **Competency-based approaches:** a switch to a competency framework has been proposed by Moreau and Mertens (2013).
- The knowledge, skills and behaviour needed to accomplish each competency are social constructed as 'local knowledge'.



# Developments in SE education

- **Asset-based approaches:** Appreciative Inquiry and CAPs
- AI starts from a perspective that a community of people already has substantial 'assets' that can be uncovered through discursive dialogue.
- AI starts with a positive statement / proposition, followed by envisioning and dialoguing phases. Participants identify what is 'good' (discover) and then build towards what the best may be (dream).
- Scholars find that the value of asset-based approaches (such as AI) lies beyond the formal process: it stimulates a capacity to bring about changes in understanding (Barge & Oliver, 2003; Bushe & Khamisa 2004; Grant 2006).
- When AI taps people's *generative* capacity to challenge assumptions and develop alternative course of action, it moves beyond functional and competency-based approaches to management by enabling *critical management studies*.

# OPERA as a CAP

- **OPERA is a five stage process** developed by consultants at the Integrated Consulting Group (ICG) in Stockholm (Slaen, Mantere and Helin, 2014). They claim it promotes ‘true participation’ (p. iv) and counters ‘fake democracy’ (*ibid.*, p. 72).
- **CAPs are a development of appreciative inquiry (AI)** with three new innovations:
  - more time, space and commitment to deconstructing the status quo before a switch to ‘appreciative’ questioning.
  - more sensitivity for participants who share ‘negative’ experiences as a pre-cursor to refocussing energy on a more hopeful future (Grant, 2006; Boje, 2010)
  - a return to *generative* questioning, rather than positive thinking (Bushe, 2007, 2013; Cooperrider and Srivastva, 2014; Ridley-Duff and Duncan, 2015).
- Our hunch – investigated through this study - is that OPERA can assist SE development by stimulating CAPs (democratic, inclusive dialogue that leads to critical appreciation).

# OPERA as a CAP

OPERA involves a separation of idea generation (OPE..) from evaluation (..RA). Slaen et al. (2014) argue that the generation process is inhibited if participants face immediate evaluation of their ideas.

- **O**wn ideas – each person works independently to think of their responses.
- **P**airing – pair working provides a ‘safe’ way for people share their responses.
- **E**xplaining - pairs select and present their ideas to clarify the meaning and intent behind their statement(s).
- **R**anking – each pair votes for ideas they want to carry forward.
- **A**rranging – supported statements are arranged into themes to assist action planning.

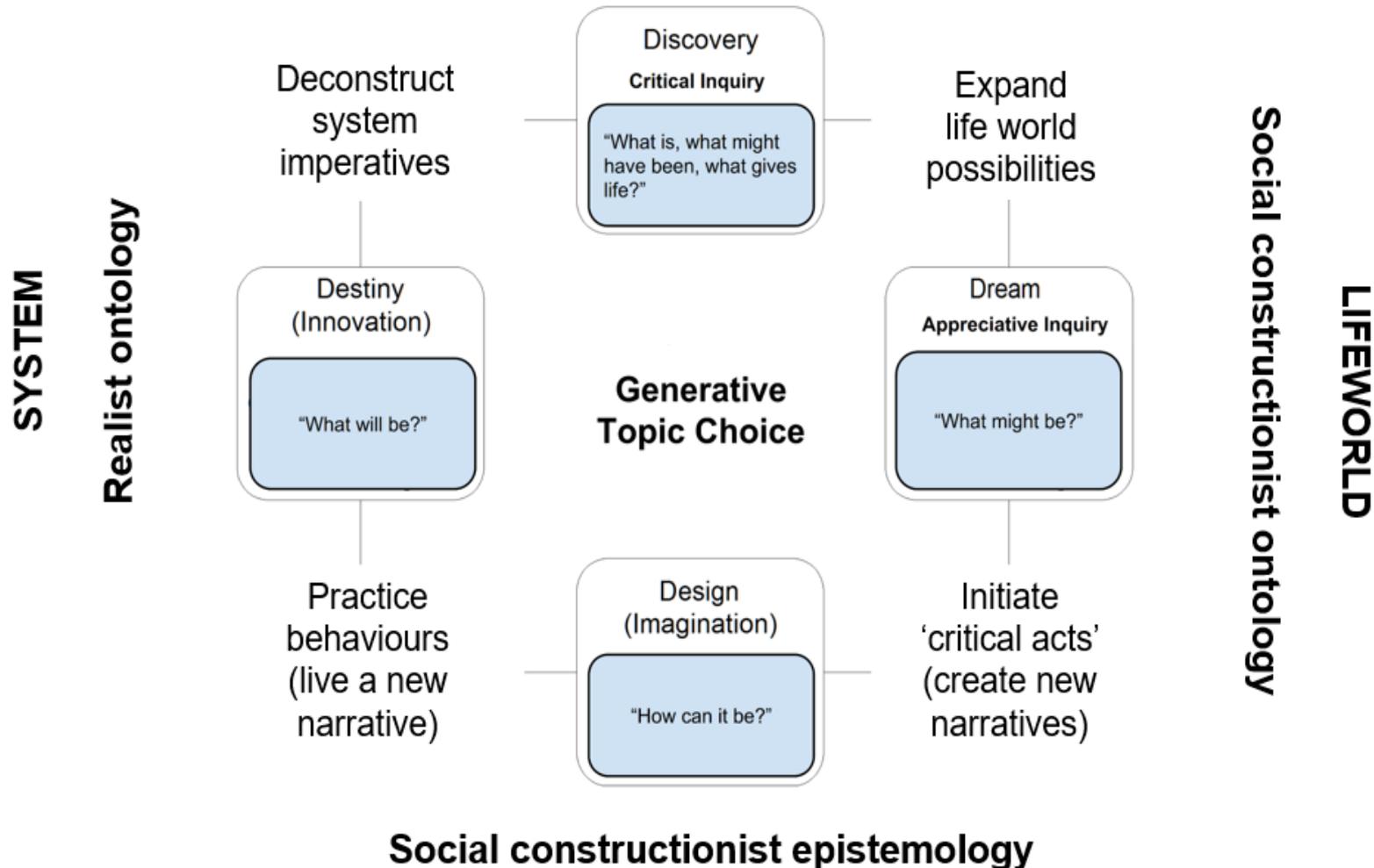
Unlike AI, the OPERA guide does support the use of ‘deficit’ questions that are forward looking (p.31-34).

# Studying OPERA: a critical realist approach

- **Methodology**: our previous research has contributed to a critical turn in appreciative inquiry, based on a Habermasian view of the interactions between systems (objective) and lifeworlds (subjective / inter-subjective).  
(Grant, 2006; 2007; Ridley-Duff and Duncan, 2015).
- Our research philosophy is social constructionist in its epistemology but variable in its ontology: we recognise both the subjective realities that motivate human learning and the constraints in social systems that prevent learning mechanisms from triggering under specific conditions  
(Pawson and Tilley, 1997).
- **Method**: participate in OPERA sessions, diarise participation and facilitation experiences, code findings to understand how OPERA 'mechanisms' contribute to the stages of a CAP.
- **Aim**: Interpret how OPERA 'mechanisms' generate narratives amongst SE educators, consultants and managers.

(Bhaskar, 1978; Habermas, 1987; Finlayson, 2005; Watson, 2011)

# Studying OPERA: a critical realist approach



# OPERA sessions studied

	Acting host	Participant profile	Location / event	OPERA question
1	FairShares Association, Sheffield	24 participants from English and Scottish universities, local councils, voluntary sector and co-op infrastructure bodies, housing groups, consultancies and local SEs.	Sheffield Hallam, SE Practitioner Conference, July 2014	What priorities do members of the association want to set for the next year?
2	FairShares Association, Sheffield	22 participants from worker co-operatives, housing groups, local councils and infrastructure bodies; English, Norwegian, Australian and New Zealand universities.	Sheffield Hallam, SE Practitioner Conference (July 2015)	When is the FairShares Model at its most attractive and useful?
3	Social Enterprise Europe Ltd, Whitby.	13 participants from the British Council Skills for Social Entrepreneurship Programme; the Co-operative College, Social Enterprise Europe; English, Cuban and Panamanian universities.	York St John, SE Education Conf (August 2015)	How can studying the social solidarity economy revolutionise enterprise education?
4	Co-operative College, Manchester	16 participants including co-operative educators and university lecturers in the UK and Canada; plus consultants and practitioners from the UK and EU co-operative movements.	Manchester Met, Coop Education Conference (April 2016)	When is co-operative education at its best?

We passively observed (1), actively participated (2 and 3) then facilitated (4) OPERA sessions with a trained specialist, then reflexively interrogated our findings and tested their trustworthiness and authenticity in our own educational practices (Guba and Lincoln, 1985).

# Developing the findings (1)

- We formulated a question for each of the eight phases in a CAP, then coded our notes and reflective diaries against the relevant question (1 – 8).

Both authors code  
Diary 1

...e ques... to find the...  
...e the... (their...  
...hey ga... inquiries, the...  
...ever, ... not always...  
...describe what FairShares is not, rather than what it is. For...  
...are FCA approved model rules for creating...

 **Rory Ridley-Duff**  
3

 **Rory Ridley-Duff**  
Extensive discussion on question choices in the book show OPERA can be directed at different parts of the CAP cycle.

 **Suzanne Grant**  
2

Both authors code  
Diary 2

...en is the best time to plant an oak tree a) 40 years ago, b)  
... will be better than what you already have.

...ich of their idea...  
...on posed, or ma...  
...pairs presented...  
...sentences on a s...  
...had to speak during this stage, but the emphasis was on...  
...tion was just to clarify the intent of the sentence(s)

 **Suzanne Grant**  
4. Direct links between “explaining” and “articulation”

 **Rory Ridley-Duff**  
4, 5 and 6? Decision-making.

 **Suzanne Grant**  
A negative achievement of 1 & 2 ???

 **Rory Ridley-Duff**  
4 and 6, (4) – everyone speaks (5) don't be a windbag.

Both authors code notes made about  
the text used to train OPERA facilitators

...uce topic from seat, if nervous about

 **Rory Ridley-Duff**  
(4) ‘critical’ acts’ through inclusion (6) ‘live a new narrative – everyone included, everyone has a voice’..

 **Rory Ridley-Duff**  
(5) ‘how the future can be? (avoid wasting time on backward looking discussion).

 **Suzanne Grant**  
So could this potentially go against the objectives in 2?

...group, and 3 minutes explanation time, this

# Developing the findings (2)

- Using our coded diaries / notes, we created summary accounts of the way OPERA contributed to each of the eight stages of a CAP.

CAP	OPERA documentation	Fieldwork
<b>1. 'Discovery' (Critical Inquiry)</b>		
<b>"How does OPERA assist with the discovery of 'what is, what might have been, and what gives life?'"</b>		
	Use "what" questions (S1, p.11) during the O phase (S1, p13-15). Phase 1 is fully supported in the app allowing both synchronous and asynchronous operations. The app asked whether to initiate audio and camera when joining.	Participants were given an opportunity to generate their own ideas during every O stage. In all cases, this was followed by a random 'pairing' technique. New ideas were sometimes generated during P after thoughts/ideas were exchanged.
<b>2. Expand life world possibilities</b>		
<b>"How does OPERA generate critical appreciation that sensitises participants to meanings given to their world?"</b>		
	(Book and app documentation identical). Use "what" questions (S1, p.11). O and P phases change dynamics between introverted and extroverted people, and overcomes limitations in group processes to generate more perceptions (S1, p.8). The O phase encourages vocal plurality (S1, p13) while the P phase sensitises people to 'others' (S1, p.15)....etc.	During the O phase "participants are asked to respect the space of others" and "to think quietly". The facilitator emphasised the value of having 'your own thoughts'. Shy, introverted participants reported that they appreciated the ability to 'gather their thoughts'. The quietness of the room during the O phase was replaced with a buzz of discussion during the P phase. The P phase was guided by the idea "it is easier to share ideas with one other person than with a whole group". The E phase gave pairs a chance to expand each other's lifeworlds and generate sensitivity...etc.

# Quality of participation



Every person shared their **own ideas** during the **pairing** phase



Every person **explained** at least one idea

**Strong on participation:**

All OPERA sessions successfully engaged everyone for the duration of the process.



Every person **ranked** ideas by casting votes and guided the facilitator to **arrange** statements.

# The articulation of ideas

- The first two phases (O and P) were successful at generating a significant number of statements (and could have generated more).
  - In session one, 25 ideas were explained by 12 pairs.
  - In the second, 26 ideas were advanced by 11 pairs.
  - In the third, 14 ideas came from 7 pairs.
  - In the fourth, 17 ideas came from 8 pairs.
- The O and P phases support findings by Oxley et al. (1996) that trained facilitators can prevent ‘anchoring’ (early idea dominance) and prevent extroverts from dominating dialogue.
- In moving from P to E, participants engage in ‘critical acts’ (Arendt, 1958) by selecting and writing down articulations of their ideas (these ended up in outputs from the OPERA). For example:

*“By understanding the multiple perspectives of participants in the solidarity economy, more effective integration of its social and economic aspects can be achieved. Engagement will enhance knowledge of the relationship between the theory and practice of social entrepreneurship, and build bridges between the institutions of organised labour, social entrepreneurship and cooperative development.”*

# Findings

- **The nature of the question is important.** The extended discussion of question choices in the OPERA book shows that they can be directed at different parts of the CAP cycle.
- **The claim that OPERA generates more ideas than group brainstorming or a roundtable discussion looks justified.** The process makes it easier for people to explain ideas to a group by allowing them to 'collect their thoughts' in the O and P phases.
- **The R phase is appreciative in the same sense that AI is appreciative.** All ideas that survive have been positively screened three times (once when they were chosen, once when they were selected by a pair, and finally when they secure votes).
- **The R phase could be influenced by team interactions** - people crowding around the OPERA board and hearing snippets of other team discussions. The facilitator can influence voting criteria in face-to-face OPERA, but not online.

# Conclusions

**RQ: ‘What learning mechanisms are triggered by OPERA, and do they influence the development of CAPs amongst practice-oriented SE professionals?’**

- Personal reflection generates a plurality of voices before the P phase begins by preventing ‘anchoring’.
  - The P and R phases call for skills in comparing and evaluating ideas.
  - The E phase involves learning how to speak in public and explain ideas clearly.
  - In the A phase, abstracting skills are developed as groups are invited to draw out the linkages between statements.
1. OPERA offers a new way to be appreciative (through positive idea selection).
  2. In this study, we found OPERA processes to have much more influence on the early part of the AI cycle (Discover, Dream) than the late part (Design, Destiny), but we believe this is due to the question asked, rather than the process itself.

# Implications

- OPERA introduces new behaviours that enable group members to rapidly acquire 'know-how' and develop local knowledge.
- OPERA can advance the participatory management and stakeholder governance desired by SE managers.
- The value of OPERA resides in the mechanisms that stimulate *generativity* amongst participants.
- Facilitating OPERA processes could be taught as core competence where SE managers need to nurture the development of local knowledge, skills and behaviours.



For references, please refer to  
(or request) the paper.

**Questions  
and discussion?**