

The Synergy Between Desire-Based Research and Appreciative Education

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Abstract

The dangers of approaching research, organizations, and people from a deficit-based perspective are explored before examining two frameworks, Desire-based research (Tuck, 2009) and Appreciative Education (Bloom et al., 2013), that employ an anti-deficit approach. The purpose of this article is to draw parallels between Appreciative Education and desire-based research in hopes that others might be further inspired to conduct additional research on these two topics.

Keywords

Desired-based research, Appreciative Education, anti-deficit approach

R&B singer, songwriter, and producer Kenny “Babyface” Edmonds noted in a radio interview that “I love to write from pain.” (The Breakfast Club, 2022, 26:47-49). His comment reminded me of a line from a research article written by Tuck and Yang (2014) that focused on pain. Although Babyface was referring to the pain associated with helping him write songs, Tuck and Yang (2014) discussed how researchers also have the proclivity to write from pain, but the pain they described was the pain of the subjects of research and their communities. Tuck and Yang (2014) said, “These are stories and data that require little effort — and what we know from years and years of academic colonialism is that it is easy to do research on people in pain” (p. 234). Tuck (2009) had written earlier about researchers who solely focused on the pain of the communities they examined and called it damage-centered research:

In damaged-centered research, one of the major activities is to document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe. Though connected to deficit models— frameworks that emphasize what a particular student, family, or community is lacking to explain underachievement or failure. (p. 413)

Tuck (2009) advocated that taking a damage-centered approach to research was particularly harmful to the communities being researched: “the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community” (p. 413). Deficit-based and damage-centered frameworks do not consider that, “even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that” (Tuck, 2009, p. 416).

To counteract the negative impact of damage-centered research, Tuck (2009) advocated taking a very different approach to conducting research on communities that she called desire-based research. Scholars have described the components of desire-based research approaches as follows: (1) “Desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (Tuck, 2009, p. 416); (2) “Desire, yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also accounts for the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities” (Tuck, 2009, p. 417), and

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(3) “Desire-based frameworks, by contrast, look to the past and the future to situate analyses” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 231).

Although I initially read Tuck and Yang’s (2014) article in my Social Justice in Higher Education class over the summer as part of my MEd in Higher Education Leadership coursework, it was not until I took my Appreciative Education class this Fall 2022 that I had an epiphany about the similarities between Appreciative Education and Tuck’s work on desire-based research. The purpose of this article is to draw parallels between Appreciative Education and desire-based research in hopes that others might be further inspired to conduct additional research on these two topics.

Common Threads, Deliberate Hope

Both the desire-centered and the Appreciative Education frameworks share common threads that amplify deliberate hope. Similar to the desired-centered framework, Appreciative Education is a forward-thinking approach, but incorporates past experiences. Each seeks to honor the past, yet use a different spotlight to highlight the positives of the past, while simultaneously looking forward to where the hopes and dreams of communities and individuals reside. Both frameworks recognize the complexity of communities and students and seek to honor the variety of experiences inherent at both communal and individual levels. Furthermore, both frameworks seek to consider and understand the wholeness, not just the pain, of communities and individuals, respectfully.

Like the desire-based research approach, the foundation of the Appreciative Education framework builds on the affirmative aspects of prior understanding, which “trigger[s] positive connections between new concepts and past experiences, and to project positive images of future potential development as a source of motivation for learning new material” (He et al., 2014, pp. 1-2). Additionally, Appreciative Education provides both a theoretical infrastructure and a flexible framework for educational practice (Bloom et al., 2013). Similar to how Tuck and Yang (2014) advocated for a focus on the desires of the communities being studied, the Dream phase of Appreciative Education similarly encourages leaders to elicit both their employees’ and their own visions for the future of the organization. By first creating a shared vision for the future, the Design phase can then focus on creating “an action plan where individual strengths are aligned to achieve both individual and shared dreams” (Bloom et al., 2013, p. 9).

I speculate that, much to the chagrin of damage-centered and deficit-based framework theorists, the scholarship of the desire-centered approach and the Appreciative Education framework might be unsettling, if not troublesome, to those familiar with examining communities and people through a problem-based lens. For example, in the Pareto Principle or 80/20 Rule, which is a decision-making technique for assessing competing problems (Mind Tools, n.d.), four of the six steps concentrate on analyzing the problem. However, both desire-based research and the Appreciative Education framework seek to center attention on what is going well within communities and individuals. This fundamental shift in focus can provide clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness to work with communities and individuals.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, I cannot help but wonder what might emerge from intentionally combining desire-centered research with the Appreciative Education theory-to-practice framework. Might Appreciative Education benefit from intentionally drawing upon Tuck and Yang’s (2014) work to reinforce the importance of taking an asset-based approach to working with individuals? Similarly, might desire-based research benefit from Appreciative Education’s emphasis on asking generative, open-ended questions as well as the theory-to-

practice nature of the framework that would allow researchers to not only discover the strengths of the community, but also further engage by eliciting the hopes and dreams for the future of those within the community and then co-creating a plan for making that future come true? Separately, both desire-based research and the Appreciative Education framework represent powerful shifts in how to approach communities and individuals, and I would argue that together they could have an even broader and deeper impact. Might our future stories be written from a place of plentitude instead of pain?

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