

# Appreciative Inquiry: Theory and Critique

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was one of the first post-Lewinian Organization Development methods and probably catalyzed the subsequent proliferation of Dialogic OD methods (Bushe & Marshak, 2009) that operate outside the Lewinian paradigm. Firmly grounded in social constructionist theory (Gergen 1978; 2009), AI emerged out of the Department of Organizational Behavior (OB) at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland Ohio and many academic writers on AI received their doctorates there (e.g., Barrett, Bright, Bushe, Carter, Cooperrider, Johnson, Ludema, Powley, Sekerka, Stavros, Thatchenkery). Eschewing “diagnosis” as a necessary or even useful step in organizational change, and incorporating post-modern perspectives on narrative and discourse, (Barrett, Thomas & Hocevar, 1995) the original, seminal article on AI (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) was a revolutionary statement and a precursor to later developments in “positive organizational studies” (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003) and the “strengths based” movement (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Cameron & Lavine, 2006) in American management.

This review begins with a brief description of the AI method followed by the underlying theories of change that support AI practice and the rather scanty evidence that exists supporting them. This review will also consider moderators of AI practice, important critiques of AI, and conclude with some of the more pressing research questions that require addressing for a deeper understanding of how and when AI transforms organizations.

## The Method of Appreciative Inquiry

David Cooperrider, the creator of appreciative inquiry, resisted writing a book on how to do AI until the turn of the millennium because he wanted people to focus on the philosophy behind this approach and not see it as a technique. As a result, many different ways of doing AI have proliferated and it is inaccurate to say AI is done in any one way. For the first 15 years or so AI practitioners based their methods on the initial set of 4 principles (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) which stated that inquiry into the social potential of a social system should begin with appreciation, should be collaborative, should be provocative, and should be applicable. The original method called for a collective discovery process using 1) grounded observation to identify the best of what is, 2) vision and logic to identify ideals of what might be, 3) collaborative dialogue and choice to achieve consent about what should be, and 4) collective experimentation to discover what can be. It wasn't until 1997 that the 4 D model of AI, now almost universally described as the AI method, was created. Diana Whitney, Cooperrider's collaborator on some of the first AI projects in the 1990's, had a major impact on the evolution of the practice of AI and the most authoritative sources on AI practice are Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros (2008), Ludema, Whitney, Mohr & Griffen (2003), and Whitney & Trosten-Bloom (2003). The general outline of the 4D method is as follows.

**1) Discovery.** During this stage participants reflect on and discuss the best of *what is*

concerning the object of inquiry. Sometimes it is an inquiry into the “life giving properties” of the organization (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Sometimes it is the “positive core” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001), where an attempt is made to catalogue the signature strengths of the organization (Ludema et al, 2003). Other times it is a specific capacity or process. For example, if the inquiry is about improving customer service, participants might inquire into their best experiences as a customer, or the best experiences of their customers, or study the best customer service organizations they can find. The extent to which the fruits of this inquiry are then analyzed or summarized varies widely by application. Most often (and this appears to be a key innovation of the AI method) participants are interviewed about their own “best of” experience. Another important innovation has been to have organizational stakeholders act as both interviewers and interviewees, that is, to fully engage all members in the act of inquiry itself (Carter & Johnson, 1999).

**2) Dream.** During this stage participants are asked to imagine their group, organization or community at its best and an attempt is made to identify the common aspirations of system members and to symbolize this in some way. The amount of preparation and the degree to which clarity about that common dream are sought vary widely by application. The dream phase often results in something more symbolic, like a graphical representation, than a mission statement.

**3) Design.** With a common dream in place, participants are asked to develop concrete proposals for the new organizational state. Initially Cooperrider called these “provocative propositions” - a phrase linked to generative theory (discussed below) that still appears in some models. More commonly, social architecture processes are employed where a model of design elements is used to identify categories for participants to organize around and create change proposals, often called

possibility statements or design statements. (Mohr, McLean & Silbert, 2003; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Often, participants self-select into small groups to develop specific proposals within a specific category. The design company, IDEO (Brown, 2009), has been both a source of ideas and a participant in the evolution of the design phase of AI, and use of rapid prototyping processes is increasingly common.

**4) Delivery/Destiny.** In the initial 4-D model the fourth stage was called Delivery but this was subsequently changed by Cooperrider to Destiny as he found that Delivery evoked images of traditional change management implementation. Exactly what ought to happen in this phase has provoked the most confusion and the least consensus amongst AI advocates who recognize that using the outcomes of Design to create new targets, gaps to fill, and objectives to achieve is counter to the very philosophy of appreciative inquiry. At the same time, one of the most common complaints about AI from users is that while energy for change is high after the Design phase, implementation can be very spotty.

Building on Barrett’s (1998) work on improvisational processes in organizations, Bushe (2007, 2011, Bushe & Kassam, 2005) has described an improvisational as opposed to implementation approach to Destiny consistent with a vaguely developing consensus on the topic. In this approach, widespread agreement for the design statements are sought, an event is orchestrated where participants make self-chosen, personal commitments to take action consistent with any design element, and leadership makes clear that there will be no action plans or committees – instead everyone is authorized to take those actions they believe will help bring the design to fruition. Leadership’s role then becomes “tracking and fanning” (Bushe, 2009), finding and amplifying those innovations they want to nurture and creating events and processes to energize self-organizing momentum.

A number of practitioner critiques pointed out that the 4D model omitted an important first step in the AI process of identifying the focus of the inquiry itself. The Clergy Leadership Institute in the U.S. suggested “Define” as the first step and some AI models refer to a 5–D model. Cooperrider’s dissertation called this the “affirmative topic” and many models have retained that label. How, exactly, that topic is defined has not been well articulated but is generally regarded as essential to the overall success of the effort. Engaging the right people, especially powerful sponsors, in identifying a focus that is both of high interest to those leading the organization and will be compelling to stakeholders is commonly held to be critical to overall success (Barrett & Fry, 2005).

Whitney & Trosten-Bloom (2003) identified 8 “forms of engagement” used by AI practitioners. These ranged from interventions where a sole consultant or a small representative group of people do the AI on behalf of a larger group of people to those where most or all of the whole system is engaged in the entire 4-D process. The majority of case studies of transformational change have been of the latter variety (Barrett & Fry, 2005; Barros & Cooperrider, 2000; Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Fry et. al., 2002; Ludema et. al., 2003; Ludema & Hinrichs, 2003; Powley, Fry, Barrett & Bright, 2004) leading to an increasing emphasis in the AI literature on widespread engagement as central to successful AI change efforts (Bushe, 2013; Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006; Cheung-Judge & Powley, 2006). The Appreciative Inquiry Summit (Ludema et.al, 2003; Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000) which has probably become the most often advocated form of engagement, melds elements of Future Search (Emery & Purser, 1996; Weisbord, 1993) with Appreciative Inquiry.

## **Theoretical Bases of Appreciative Inquiry**

In their seminal article (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) argued three main points in support of AI. First, they critiqued the problem-solving approach that, at that time, dominated action-

research, arguing that problem-solving, as a tool for social innovation, did not do a very good job and might, in fact be counterproductive. Secondly, they argued that organizations were best viewed as socially constructed realities, and that forms of organization were constrained only by human imagination and the shared beliefs of organizational members. As socially constructed realities, forms of inquiry were potent in constructing the systems they inquired into, and that problem-solving approaches were just as likely to create more of the very problems they were intended to solve. Third, they argued that the most important force for change were new ideas. They decried the lack of new ideas generated by conventional action research, and proposed appreciative inquiry as a method that was more likely to create new ideas, images, and theories that would lead to social innovations.

As the method of AI has evolved, so have the theoretical justifications and explanations for AI as a change process. The most influential statement has been Cooperrider & Whitney’s (2001) five principles of AI. While some have proposed additional principles (Barrett & Fry 2005; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom 2003) these five have been the most widely accepted, showing up in reviews of AI (Bushe & Kassam, 2005) and non-organizational applications of AI (e.g., Stavros & Torres, 2005; Kelm, 2005). As scholars study the successes and failures of AI, a variety of underlying change mechanism have surfaced and are identifiable. In the remainder of this section ten of the theoretical levers for change underlying AI practice are reviewed.

### *Inquiry as Intervention*

Appreciative Inquiry did not begin life as an organizational change technique – it began as a research method for making grounded theory building more generative (Cooperrider, 1986; Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006). A key underlying theory of change in AI comes from a constructive reimagining of postmodern theory. Acknowledging that all social research is inherently biased by the positioning of the

## *Bushe – AI Theory and Critique*

researcher, Cooperrider argued this was not a reason to throw up our hands and give up the pursuit of knowledge. On the contrary, it frees us to take the idea that organizations are made and imagined to its logical conclusion: that organizational inquiry is simultaneously the production of self-and-world. What researchers choose to study and how they study it creates as much as it discovers the world, and therefore a wide field of creative, positive, possibility beckons to us (Cooperrider, Barrett & Srivastva, 1995).

This is the first and most important contribution that AI made to a post-Lewinian theory of organizational change. In the modernist mind-set of the Lewinian action research model, and most change management models, the purpose of questions is to uncover data – to discover what is there. In the post-modern social constructionism of AI questions are seen as actually creating what is there. Questions about conflict create more conflict. Questions about the life giving properties of the organization create more vitality. AI theorists have stressed the importance of the questions that guide the inquiry process (Barrett & Fry, 2005; Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2000; Whitney & Cooperrider, 2001). Bushe (2013) argues that a lack of attention to the generative potential of questions used in AI processes may explain why some interventions succeed and some fail.

### *Generativity*

Kenneth Gergen's (1978; 1982) concept of generative theory is central to understanding AI's theory of practice. Gergen proposed that we should aim to create a social science focused on its "generative capacity" defined this as the "...capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is 'taken for granted' and thereby furnish new alternatives for social actions" (1978, p.1346). Appreciative Inquiry was developed as a methodology that would meet Gergen's criteria.

The first appreciative inquiry change project focused on the idea of "generative metaphor" as an engine for change (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990). Bushe's (1998) studies of AI in teams found that AI can surface generative metaphors capable of resolving the kind of paradoxical dilemmas (Smith & Berg, 1987) that get groups stuck. Bushe's (2010, Bushe & Kassam, 2005) research has found that the generativity of AI is a key variable associated with transformational change outcomes. "AI can be generative in a number of ways. It is the quest for new ideas, images, theories and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that were not available or did not occur to us before. When successful, AI generates spontaneous, unsupervised, individual, group and organizational action toward a better future" (Bushe, 2007, p.30).

The importance of generativity is encased in Cooperrider & Whitney's (2001) constructionist principle, which has been boiled down to a saying popular in AI circles that "words create worlds". This also highlights the important connections between generativity and discourse.

### *Discourse and Narrative.*

Appreciative Inquiry is heavily influenced by theories of discourse and narrative especially as applied to organizational change (Barrett et al, 1995; Boje, 1991; Marshak & Grant, 2008; Oswick, Grant, Michaelson & Wailes, 2005). In their poetic principle, Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) propose that organizations are more like a book than a living organism, that organizational life is expressed in the stories people tell each other every day, and the story of the organization is constantly being co-authored. The initial storytelling that participants engage in, when they describe their "best of" stories, is a key innovation of the AI method and widely regarded as essential for setting the tone of an AI intervention (Ludema, 2002; Khalsa, 2002). Barrett & Fry (2005) stress

## *Bushe – AI Theory and Critique*

the impact that telling and hearing stories has on participants as a catalyst for change. They propose that stories heard and told during the Discovery phase have a positive impact on relationships, reveal deeply held values and provide coherence and meaning. Bushe (2001) describes how appreciative inquiry can elicit new stories that change the taken for granted assumptions in a group and as a result, change the behaviours of group members quite profoundly. Ludema (2002) argues that the collection, telling, and re-telling of people's best of stories results in a wave of countervailing micro-narratives that combine, over time, to change the prevailing macro-narrative of the organization.

Discursive theories stress that it is through relationships that words come to have meaning and through discourse that relationships are created, maintained and changed. AI theorists stress the importance of word choice from the moment of contact between AI practitioner and client system (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). Calling for the "unconditional positive question" (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2000) they argue that the language of inquiry shapes the relationships that get formed and the entire process of inquiry (Barrett & Fry, 2005). AI advocates note that organizations consist of multiple stories and perspectives and seek to ensure that no particular history or story is considered more significant than another (Whitney, 1996). They note that in every culture or organization there are marginalized voices and that these voices are often the ones where important innovations reside (Whitney, 1996; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). They describe AI as a process where such marginalized voices are more likely to be heard and received.

### *Anticipatory Reality*

In one of his first theoretical statements, Cooperrider (1990) proposed a "heliocentric hypothesis" to support the AI practice of inquiring into the most positive images members hold of their organizations. This

hypothesis proposed that in every social system members hold an implicit or explicit image of the system at its very best, what Cooperrider called the affirmative image, and, just as plants grow toward the light, social systems naturally evolve toward the prevailing affirmative image. Therefore, conscious evolution of the system's affirmative image is a viable path for organization development.

In his later writing, Cooperrider dropped the heliotropic hypothesis and offered a more Heideggerian formulation with his "anticipatory principle" (McAdam & Mirza, 2009). "Much like a movie projector on a screen, human systems are forever projecting ahead of themselves a horizon of expectation (in their talk in the hallways, in the metaphors and language they use) that brings the future powerfully into the present as a mobilizing agent. To inquire in ways that serves to refashion anticipatory reality—especially the artful creation of positive imagery on a collective basis—may be the most prolific thing any inquiry can do." (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001, p.21)

The idea of anticipatory reality as a change lever can be found in a variety of change processes that endorse a "possibility centric versus a problem centric" approach to organizational change (Boyd & Bright, 2007). Boyd and Bright argue that problem centric change processes assume that something is broken and needs fixing, thus making organizational members more wary of consultants and change agents. This, they argue, makes it more likely that organizational members will be more defensive and resistant to the change processes and more focused on self-interests than the common good. The conservative press of fear and negative emotions make it less likely that current norms will be transformed. Focusing inquiry on positive possibilities, they argue, builds relationships and trust and identifies possibilities for shifting normative expectations.

Recently, Bright and Cameron (2009) have revisited the heliotropic hypothesis, arguing that research on positive organizational

climates, positive energy networks and high quality relationships substantiate the proposition that heliotropism exists in social organizations. They also point out that since “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finenauer & Vohs, 2001) an emphasis on the positive must be sufficiently pervasive and strong enough to overcome the natural tendency of people and organizations to be more effected by negative events, situations and interactions than positive ones.

### *Positive Affect*

While the anticipatory principle focuses on the utility of positive images for supporting change, Cooperrider & Whitney’s (2001) “positive principle” highlights the utility of positive affect for building rapport among people to support and sustain change processes. Cooperrider and Sekerka (2006) assert that inquiry into what people appreciate strengthens their relationships and increases positive emotions. They argue that elevation of positive emotions is a first and vital step in the change process. They point to studies showing positive feelings lead people to be more flexible, creative, integrative, open to information and efficient in their thinking (Isen, 2000). People experiencing positive affect are more resilient and able to cope with occasional adversity, have an increased preference for variety, and accept a broader array of behavioral options (Fredrickson, 2001; 2006). Closely aligned is Ludema’s articulation of the nature and importance of hope for organizational change (Ludema, Wilmott & Srivastva, 1997) and the way in which AI can provide hope (Ludema, 2000)

Bushe (2007, 2011) contends that it may be the ability of AI to quickly create good feelings amongst people and toward a change process that has made it so popular among managers and consultants, but he cautions that positive affect by itself may be too fleeting for it to sustain organization change. He proposes that the transformational potential of AI is more likely when positive imagery and affect are used

in the service of generativity. Bright, Powley, Fry & Barrett (2011) echo this view, and provide a perspective on how to inquire into negative emotional states in appreciative, generative ways. There are, however, cases where the positive affect elicited by appreciative inquiry appears to have been central to the change process (e.g., Khalsa, 2002), leading to profound reductions of inter-group conflict and the emergence of shared identities. We will look at this in more detail below in the section on moderators of AI.

### *Building on Strength*

Citing research in sports psychology, education and the Pygmalion effect, Cooperrider (1990) argued that we tend to get more of whatever we pay attention to. Bushe in particular (Bushe & Pitman, 1991; 2008, Bushe, 2001, 2011) has emphasized this aspect of “the positive” – not so much positive anticipations or positive affect but focusing the attention of leaders and followers on the positive traits and processes they want more of, that already exist, as a key engine of change. In his later theoretical formulations, Cooperrider provides a model for understanding the transformational potential of AI as a three phase process where “elevating inquiry” (an inquiry into what we value that increases relatedness and positive emotions) leads to a “fusion of strengths” (awareness of group resources and increased motivation to cooperate) which leads to “activation of energy” (heightened creativity and the courage to take innovative actions) (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006).

Commonalities between this notion of focusing on the positive to guide change and those offered in other change models like Asset Based Community Development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), Positive Deviance (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004; Sternin & Choo, 2000) and Solution-Focused Therapy (de Sharzer, 1985; Molnar & de Shazer, 1987) are noteworthy. However, much of the strengths-based movement in organizations focuses on the elucidation and engagement of individual



competencies (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), ignoring relational realities and for the most part doing little to transform the nature of organization itself. Appreciative Inquiry not only focuses on the best of what is, but engages all stakeholders in a processes of re-imagining what could be and taking ownership for what will be. This “fusion of strengths” and “activation of energy” is generally considered essential to the generative momentum of the change process

### *Stakeholder Engagement*

A number of AI advocates describe the engagement of large numbers of stakeholders as a critical change lever (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006; Powley, Fry, Barret & Bright, 2004; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom 2003). The idea of widespread participation in change is in no way unique to AI, having been a cornerstone of change practice since Roethlisberger & Dickson's (1939) and Coch & French's (1948) seminal research on participation in change. What is different is the degree to which widespread participation as *inquirers* is encouraged (Gergen & Thatchenkary, 1996; Thatchenkary, 1994). Conventional organization development generally involves a small group of inquirers who talk to a large number of stakeholders to get their ideas and views. That small group then analyzes and feeds back what it has gathered. New ideas that have been validated by social science enter the system through consultants and other experts. AI, in contrast, seeks to uncover and stimulate new ideas from stakeholders in the system; ideas that will, at least be new in their status within the system. Ideally, all stakeholders participate in gathering and making sense of the ideas and views of other stakeholders and participate as theorists, dreamers and designers. AI practitioners have incorporated a number of other large group engagement processes, notably Future Search (Emery & Purser, 1996; Weisbord, 1993), World Café (Brown & Issacs, 2005) during the discovery phase, and Open Space (Owen, 1992; 2008) during the design phase.

While getting very large groups engaged in events that lead to change is not unique to AI (Bunker & Alban, 2006), AI advocates make the point that a focus on the positive in AI supports more widespread, voluntary, multi-stakeholder engagement in change activities (Boyd & Bright, 2007; Powley et.al., 2004). People who might not otherwise be willing to participate in a change process are more likely to join in when the inquiry is appreciative. Additionally, the credibility and reach of AI have encouraged organizational leaders to experiment with extreme scale of the whole change processes. For example, World Vision is a federation of approximately 200 fairly independent organizations spread across the globe. It recently used AI for a strategic planning event that included 6,000 members using a combination of face to face and internet based participation.

### *Working with Self-Organizing Processes*

A more recent trend in AI theorizing is to incorporate perspectives on the self-organizing properties of social systems (Jantsch, 1979; Owen, 2008; Wheatley, 1994) into AI practice, particularly in the Design and Destiny phases (Barrett & Fry, 2005 ; Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006; Bushe, 2013). From this perspective, one might argue that the Discovery and Dream phases create the conditions for self-organizing processes to coalesce in positive directions. Attempts to create new cultures by having leaders prescribe and then try to implement a new culture have a propensity to generate negative, unintended outcomes (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). Bushe (2007) argues that leaders can't create new cultures so much as they can unleash cultural change. How the culture then changes is very difficult to prescribe or direct, but having a large number of members engaged in an inquiry into the best of whatever stakeholders want more of greatly increases the chances that the new culture will be better than the old one. Having a more or less shared vision of where members in the system want to go (Dream), the

use of self-organizing design processes appear to increase the speed, engagement and buy-in to the plans and proposals that emerge. With that level of engagement and commitment, use of self-organizing implementation processes, what Bushe & Kassam (2005) label an improvisational as opposed to implementation form of the “action phase” in an OD process, appears to result in more change, more quickly.

### *Life Giving Properties of Social Systems*

Perhaps the most under explored theory of change behind AI is the one that started it all – the idea that every social system contains a set of properties, processes and/or characteristics that “give it life”, and that attention to these and intentional actions toward strengthening them increase an organization’s vitality and capacity (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Avital, 2004). Though it remains central to Cooperrider’s personal view of what appreciative inquiry should focus on (personal correspondence), it hardly shows up in his or other people’s writing, instead having been replaced with the idea of a “positive change core” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006). Perhaps this is because what gives life to anything is spirit, and from this point of view, appreciative inquiry might be considered a spiritual practice (Barge & Oliver, 2003; Drogin, 1997; Reason, 2000) or an inquiry into the organization’s soul (Johnson, 2013). As the language of spirituality is not well received in either the worlds of business or academia, it may explain why this perspective on AI has gained little attention. Even a paper on AI entitled “The spiritual heart of human science inquiry” skirts the issue (Cooperrider & Barrett, 2002). Yet, as an explanation for the remarkable interest in and spread of AI as a change process, and the many spin-offs that have come from it, the spiritual aspect of AI may be worth more examination by scholars and practitioners. Powley (2004) for example, brings the sacred in through the back door in his examination of AI summits as rites of passage. Though his language and focus are secular, the power of ritual for transformative change has

ever been connected with spiritual concerns (e.g, Driver, 1991; Eliade, 1958).

Certainly, a focus on AI as an inquiry into what gives life, rather than an inquiry into “the positive” would overcome concerns expressed when more simplistic visions of AI as a study of the best of what is, to get more of it, are raised. “Could AI have been used to help Hitler gas people better” is the kind of question that focuses on such concerns. An application of AI that was like benchmarking the most efficient gas chambers might indeed have helped Hitler. But properly understood, appreciative inquiry would force gas chamber operators to explore what gave life to their daily existence, to be in authentic relationship with each other, to consider their highest human aspirations. Could a death cult survive such an inquiry?

### *Moderators of AI Practice*

As experience with AI increases and greater numbers of scholars and practitioners study successes and failures, there is an emerging literature on conditions which moderate AI practice and AI outcomes. Two, in particular, are worth noting.

Bushe’s studies of AI in small groups, combined with his research on group development and team effectiveness (Bushe & Coetzer, 2007) led him to propose that AI works differently in pre-identity and post-identity social systems (Bushe, 2002). A pre-identity system is defined as one in which the majority of members do not identify with the system and a post-identity system as one in which a majority of members do identify with the system. The former would include appreciative inquiries that bring together members of different groups, which are used to launch new organizations or networks, as well as those used in existing systems where there is very little sense of psychological membership. Bushe argued that in pre-identity systems, members don’t really care that much about the system’s needs and instead, see the group or organization as one



### *Bushe – AI Theory and Critique*

more thing in their environment that must be dealt with in the pursuit of personal interests. In post-identity systems, by contrast, members take the needs and interests of the system into account and in some cases, might even be willing to sacrifice personal interests for the betterment of the group.

Bushe (2002) argues that the nature of the inquiry and resulting “vision” must be different in these two types of groups. Mirroring his findings on group state guides (Bushe & Coetzer, 2007; Coetzer & Bushe, 2003), he argues that pre-identity groups are best served by an inquiry into the ideal (group, organization, society) but that post-identity groups are best served by an inquiry into the “ought” (what we ought to do given this group or organization’s responsibilities, goals and environment). Inquiry into the ideal, when successful, helps a group achieve a post-identity state and research by Head (2000) found evidence to support this assertion. Bushe argues a post-identity group will be impatient with inquiry into the ideal, and experience it as navel gazing. Instead, members want to increase the group or organization’s efficacy and will be engaged by inquiries that are more focused around increasing the system’s competence and capacity. As described in Bushe (2013) this model explains findings in two published cases of appreciative inquiry; one in the US Navy (Powley, Fry, Barrett & Bright, 2004) and one with an executive team (Newman & Fitzgerald, 2001).

Another moderating influence on AI may be the extent to which appreciation, discussion of ideals and a focus on strengths exists prior to an appreciative inquiry. Fitzgerald, Oliver & Hoaxey, (2010) suggest that in organizations where discussion of such things are absent, AI can be viewed as an inquiry into the organization’s “shadow”. Defining the shadow as censored feeling and cognition, they suggest the transformative effect of AI may sometimes be a result of energy and creativity that is unleashed when shadow material is re-integrated into the system. Bright (2009; Bright

& Cameron, 2009) offers a different way to think about similar issues in his model of normative momentum. He argues that systems tend toward a normal, functional state of operations, with occasional swings toward either more dysfunctional forms of operation or more extraordinary forms of operation. All else being equal, he argues that organizations will experience “normative momentum” toward an “ordinary state” of being, a state of equilibrium in which maintaining operating procedures, efficiency and effectiveness are the preeminent concern and are normally accomplished through reinforcing conformity and standards. The current position of the organization along the continuum from negative deviance to positive deviance will affect both how people experience a change process and how the change process works. Bright argues (2009) that the discovery phase of AI in an organization that is in a dysfunctional, negatively deviant period will have a more dramatic, positive impact than it will in one that is already at the extraordinary, positively deviant end of the continuum. He also suggests (Bright & Cameron, 2009) that the normative press toward the ordinary means that in a dysfunctional state, any change process works with the natural flow as it moves the system back into functionality, but that moving a system toward an extraordinary state must work against that same equilibrating force.

Both these perspectives bring into question Bushe’s (2007, 2011) assertion that a simple focus on the positive is not enough for transformational change and offers an explanation for why and when a focus on the positive may, by itself, be transformational (with pre-identity systems, and with negatively deviant systems). It also suggests that the transformational power of appreciative inquiry may diminish as discussion of strengths and aspirations becomes common place in a system. This fits with reports of people expressing discomfort with continuing to use appreciative inquiry in organizations that have had years of success using it (Fitzgerald, et.al., 2010).

## Critiques of AI

Critiques of AI have gotten more sophisticated in recent years, overcoming earlier critiques which came from people not very conversant with the underlying theory. More recent critiques have come from scholar practitioners who use AI and are aware of its limitations. A common concern is with the possibility that a focus on positive stories and experiences during the discovery phase will invalidate the negative organizational experiences of participants and repress potentially important and meaningful conversations that need to take place (Egan & Lancaster, 2005; Miller, Fitzgerald, Murrell, Preston & Ambekar, 2005; Pratt, 2002; Reason, 2000). Christine Oliver (Barge & Oliver, 2003; Fitzgerald, Oliver & Hoaxey, 2010; Oliver, 2005; 2005b) has provided a series of cogent arguments for thinking of appreciative inquiry as more than just studying “the best of” and bringing greater reflexivity to AI practice. Oliver’s (2005) critique of AI’s habit of decontextualized polarization, with positive and negative treated as having intrinsic meaning, instead of acknowledging that what is positive for some may be negative for others, goes to the heart of the matter. Social constructionists argue that such meanings can’t be pre-assigned by a third party; they only emerge in relationship and even then such meanings are multiple, partial and dynamic. It’s hard to argue that such polarization doesn’t show up with regularity in descriptions of AI, but is that really what is going on in successful AI practice? Is it even possible to inquire into images of a positive future without evoking the negative past or present. Just as AI theorists argue that behind every negative image lies the positive (Bright et al, 2011), social constructionists would argue that behind every positive image lies a negative one (Fineman, 2006). Fitzgerald et.al. (2010) provide numerous examples to show that AI can surface repressed or censored thoughts and feelings.

Johnson’s (2013) explores the many ways casting an appreciative eye can generate

“negative” experiences and how, in turn, exploring those experiences appreciatively can result in “positive”, generative, outcomes. She acknowledges the dilemma at the heart of the appreciative inquiry project: “AI could only be differentiated *by using the language of deficit discourse to define the problem that AI would solve*” (Johnson, 2013, in press). By polarizing AI and problem-solving, an either/or dynamic was set that continues to manifest in descriptions of AI. AI is described as a method of change that doesn’t focus on problems, but research suggests transformational change will not occur from AI unless it addresses problems of real concern to organizational members (Bushe, 2010). Rather than staying stuck in a dualistic, either/or discourse of positive or negative, Johnson argues that the generative potential of AI is most likely to come from embracing the polarities of human existence and that it is the tensions of those very forces that most give life and vitality to organizations.

While Cooperrider would not disagree with Johnson’s nuanced and sensitive exploration of light and shadow, he is suspicious of the nagging desire to bring deficit based theories of change back into play. “I think we are still on this quest for a full blown non-deficit theory of change. I’m not saying that the other isn’t a way of change but I am saying that we are still in our infancy in understanding non-deficit, strength-based or life-centric approaches to change. William James called for it back in 1902, in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, when he said we know a lot about the kind of change that happens when people feel threatened, feel fear and violence is coming at them, but we don’t know much about the kind of change that happens when, in his words, ‘everything is hot and alive within us and everything reconfigures itself around that’. Whether someone would call the initiating experience “positive” or “negative”, the transformational moment is a pro-fusion moment when something so deeply good and loving is touched in us that everything is changed - that’s the kind of change I’m talking about... I don’t think we really understand the

possibilities in that kind of change yet and we aren't going to understand them until we take this to the extremes" (personal correspondence, March 30, 2010).

### **The Future of Appreciative Inquiry**

After 20 years it is abundantly clear that appreciative inquiry, when skilfully done with proper sponsorship and resources, is a potent planned, transformational change process (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Fry et.al., 2002). There are now many published accounts of extraordinary results from its use in a variety of countries. One example is Brazil based Nutrimental Foods which engaged all 750 employees in two Appreciative Inquiry summits and within one year absenteeism decreased 300%, sales increased 27%, productivity increased over 23%, and profits increased 200% (Barros & Cooperrider, 2000; Powley, Cooperrider & Fry, 2002). A very different example is Roadway, a unionized trucking firm in the United States that has had many dozens of AI summits at its various locations since the turn of millennium which have transformed union-management relations and dramatically improved performance (Ludema et.al., 2003). An internal audit completed in 2004 found sites that had gone through AI summits had achieved cost savings almost seven times higher than sites which had not (Barrett & Fry, 2005).

While the potential for transformation has been established, there may be increasing disenchantment with AI amongst managers and consultants arising from a predictable fad phenomenon that seems to plague all organizational change methods. The buzz created by new, successful change processes create increasing requests from organizations that consultants want to meet. Ever more poorly trained consultants provide ever more poorly designed applications leading to a situation where managers think "we tried that (fill in the change process) but it didn't work here". After a while what seemed like a silver bullet becomes yesterday's story and everyone moves on.

Anecdotal evidence is that a majority of OD consultants and many other kinds of consultants and change agents now use aspects of AI in their practice. This review has only considered AI from the organizational point of view but there have been applications at the level of individuals (Kelm, 2005), relationships (Stavros & Torres, 2005) groups (Bushe, 1998; 2002; Bushe & Coetzer, 1995) communities (Browne & Jain, 2002; Finehold, Holland & Lingham, 2002) and, in the case of Nepal, even nations (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008, p.vii). As well, AI has been adapted for use in strategic planning (Stavros & Saint, 2009), program evaluation (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006) and even quality audits (Morris, 2008). One of the downsides of this is that a lot of different things end up getting called appreciative inquiry, which further dilutes general understanding of the really important innovations in this theory of practice and leads to the kind of dumbed down descriptions found in publications like Tiem & Rozenzweig (2006).

What we most need are studies that explore successes and failures of AI to explain the moderators and contingencies that influence AI outcomes (Head, 2005). We are long past the need for articles breathlessly describing this "new" change process or providing short anecdotes of AI success, but unfortunately that continues to be mainly what is published. Instead, we need longitudinal case studies that are detailed and nuanced, like that by Bryan (2009), Messerschmidt (2008) and Miller et.al. (2005). We also need comparative studies that track contingencies, mediators and moderators when AI is used repetitively in the same or similar organizations (e.g., Bushe, 2010; Richer, Ritchie & Marchionni, 2009). Due to the proliferation of methods called AI, and the variety of theoretical levers behind AI practice, these need to be carefully detailed in published reports. We also need to build a body of common models and terms so that studies can be compared. Besides the "4D model" and the "5 principles" few if any of the other useful models and lens reviewed in this chapter are

being used consistently in studying and reporting on AI.

When is AI the most appropriate change process? What contingencies are important to consider when planning an AI? What organizational factors most influence the success or failure of AI? At present we have little evidence based answers to those questions. We also don't have any good theoretical way of thinking about scale-of-the-whole change processes. It seems a common sense proposition that if everyone in the system can agree on what needs doing, execution will be much easier, but is that all that is happening when very large numbers of people come together in an AI summit? Are there other, as yet undescribed network effects from large scales that support organizational change? Can AI processes be scaled up infinitely? How many members in a system need to be engaged for scale-of-the-whole effects to kick in?

There are many more questions that could be asked, as so few have been empirically studied and answered but I will conclude with one final one – the competencies required of the AI facilitator/consultant. Very little has been written about this. Can any clever person with a “positive attitude” learn to facilitate AI summits well? Does it require a “healthy and spiritually grounded” individual (Murrell, 2005, p.111)? Is lack of facilitator characteristics or skills related to AI failure? Maybe - we just don't know.

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*Bushe – AI Theory and Critique*

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