Appreciative Inquiry

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an organization development method grounded in social constructionist theory that engages stakeholders in an inquiry into their collective strengths, assets, and what is working as a precursor to identifying what they want more of and how to achieve that. It has proven to be a popular and successful transformational change approach. Some researchers advocate its use as a participatory evaluation method under certain conditions, particularly when there is a desire to improve a program or process. This entry will first describe the theory and practice of AI, then benefits as a method of evaluation, and some controversies surrounding that.

Appreciative Inquiry Theory

AI was originally developed in the mid-1980s by David Cooperrider, Frank Barrett, Ron Fry and Suresh Srivastva of the Department of Organization Behavior at Case Western Reserve University as a retort to the dominant use of problem-solving in *action research*, a method of improving social systems by involving system members in self-study. They noted the lack of new theory generated by action research, and argued that it engendered an unhelpful bias toward seeing organizations as problems to be solved. They argued that using positivistic, scientific assumptions and methods to improve groups and organizations made the mistake of treating people like simple stimulus-response mechanisms, ignoring how so much of collective life is based on sense-making, narratives, and beliefs about the future. They described how assessing groups and organizations against pre-determined models of health or dysfunction tended to create the very issues they were supposed to uncover and argued, instead, that there were no inherently correct ways to organize; our methods of organizing are limited only by human imagination and our collective agreements. A method of study that was interested in improving organizations, they argued, would have to lead stakeholders to produce new ideas grounded in their collective hopes and desires, and that would most likely emerge if they first inquired, appreciatively, into what gave life and vitality to their organization.

After about 15 years of experimentation and study, a set of five principles of appreciative inquiry were developed that are now widely accepted:

The constructionist principle. What we believe determines what we do, and thought and action emerge out of relationships. People co-construct the organizations they inhabit through conversations and day to day interactions. The purpose of inquiry is to stimulate new thoughts, stories and beliefs that create new choices for decisions and actions.

The principle of simultaneity. As we inquire into human systems we change them. The seeds of change, what is discovered and learned, are implicit in the very first questions asked. Questions are never neutral, and organizations move in the direction of the questions most persistently and passionately discussed.

The poetic principle. Organizational life is expressed through language and narratives, the story-lines people use to make sense of what is taking place. Words are not passive

transmitters of meaning. The words and topics chosen for inquiry have an impact far beyond just the words themselves; they evoke feelings, understandings, and worlds of meaning. Always use words that point to, enliven and inspire the best in people.

The anticipatory principle. Choices made today are guided by beliefs about the future. The creation of positive imagery of a desirable future on a collective basis, and the design of actions to take toward that future, refashions anticipatory reality.

The positive principle: Momentum and sustainable change requires positive emotions and social bonding. Hope, excitement, inspiration, camaraderie and joy increase openness to new ideas and different people, creativity, and cognitive flexibility. They also promote trust and good relationships between people, particularly between groups in conflict, required for collective inquiry and participatory change.

Appreciative Inquiry Method

During the 90s the creators of AI resisted developing formulas for how to do AI, instead encouraging adoption of the principles and experimenting with ways to implement them in practice. As a result, AI is practiced in numerous ways. However, by 2000 Cooperrider and Whitney developed the "4-D" model, a set of 4 phases (Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny/Deployment) that is now widely utilized, while Watkins and Mohr popularized a similar "4-I" model, that has been embraced by many using AI for evaluation.

The 4-I Model

Initiate: Decide how and when to introduce appreciative inquiry. Determine the overall focus of the inquiry. Decide on the appropriate structure and leadership for the inquiry.

Inquire: Develop an interview guide and engage as many stakeholders as possible in a search for what is known about the program, process, group or organization at its best.

Imagine: Work with the information collected during the interviews to catalyze conversations about collective aspirations for the program, process, group or organization's future.

Innovate: Engage stakeholders in proposing activities and projects to move in the direction of those aspirations. Develop and implement processes to encourage taking action and embedding successful innovations.

Various architectures for engagement have been used but most studies of transformational change report using some variation of the "AI Summit", in which a large group of stakeholders go through the 4 Ds, (or Inquire, Imagine and Innovate), over two to four days. In an ideal AI process, all the stakeholders would gather to inquire into the best of what they know about the focal topic, understand and express their collective aspirations for the focal topic, foster the emergence of small groups of motivated people with common ideas/interests to develop proposals/plans for actions, and leave the summit with clear ideas about what they will do next. AI Summits with thousands of attendees have been successfully hosted.

Appreciative Interviews

A key innovation of AI is to gather stories about stakeholders' "peak experiences" at the

beginning of interviews during the 'Discovery" or "Inquire" phases. The generic AI interview asks, "Thinking about your history in this organization, please tell me the story about the time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited to be a part of this organization." The story is probed to understand what brings life and vitality to the organization. The rest of the interview guide asks what they most value about the organization, what their dreams or wishes for the future of the organization are, and what they think needs to happen for the organization to move in that direction. More often, AI interviews focus on something specific the organization wants to improve, like customer service, sustainability, or product innovation. The interview is similarly constructed but refocused accordingly. In general, opening the interview by asking for a personally meaningful, "best of" story about the focus of the inquiry is considered essential for an appreciative inquiry.

Interviews can be done by an individual or small team, but studies have found that getting stakeholders to interview each other increases the amount of change produced by helping to build relationships and catalyze changes in conversations and narratives that occur after the interviews. Many research projects and evaluations studies, however, use just an individual or small group to do the interviews, and don't actually do the other AI phases. Instead, they use the information collected as a qualitative data set that is analyzed using standard qualitative research methods. Most AI advocates believe these should not be called appreciative inquiries; instead call them appreciative interviews.

Using Appreciative Inquiry for Evaluation

Cases that describe full or partial use of appreciative inquiry for evaluation include the effectiveness of foreign aid programs, social service program delivery, the effectiveness of training programs in corporations, ISO 9000 audits, and other organizational processes. There are many descriptions of the use of AI in educational settings, both from an evaluation perspective and from an organization development perspective.

Proponents of the inclusion of appreciative inquiry as an evaluation method list it as a learning and development type of evaluation, or within the category of participatory evaluation. At least five overall benefits have been advanced for using an appreciative approach to evaluation.

1. It generates information that has the maximum potential of being used. The inclusion of many stakeholders in conversations about what matters to them makes it more likely they will embrace the results of the evaluation and do something with it. The process itself can be motivating and energizing.
2. Better information can be gathered more quickly. Large group formats allow for the generation of large amounts of data in short time periods. Personal stories and scenarios provide very rich data for analysis. The collection of real stories from real users emphasize what the users want as opposed to what designers believe they need.
3. It makes it more likely that groups in conflict or who do not trust each other, or do not trust the evaluators, will engage in the evaluation. By having people focus on what they like and want more of, people who might otherwise feel anxious or cautious about truthfully discussing problems and deficiencies are more likely to engage honestly.
4. For similar reasons to number 3, It can be useful when there is a need to generate support for the evaluation, perhaps

because of past evaluation failures, or fear or skepticism toward the evaluation. In situations where the group being evaluated has a history of oppression, asking for their stories of things at their best, and assessment of what works, is often experienced as being treated respectfully.

5. For any system that has democratic, pluralistic, and/or empowerment agendas it is a more congruent evaluation approach. It can increase evaluation capacity of stakeholders and the system. AI's use of storytelling makes it particularly effective in cultures with oral history traditions.

Controversies

Being a socio-rationalist, post-modern approach that challenges the validity of scientific assumptions for studying people, AI does not fit well with traditional criteria for assessing evaluations like independence, neutrality, and minimal bias. AI advocates argue that it is impossible for anyone to enter a social system from a neutral stance, and that there is no such thing as independence; by their very presence evaluators are influencing the social systems in which they enter. While concerns have been expressed that a focus on the positive may undermine the appearance of neutrality and therefore, the collection of valid information, experience in the field suggests just the opposite – that people are willing to be more honest when asked about their opinions of what works than when asked about problems and failures.

Another concern is that with its focus on the positive, AI will miss seeing and reporting important problems. Researchers report, however, that asking questions like "what is your wish for this project?" or "what is your dream for this organization?" or "how could we improve this process?" elicit all the same issues that asking directly about problems

would surface, but does so without feelings of rancor or recrimination.

All advocates emphasize the use of AI in specific circumstances, and not in others. There is widespread agreement that AI is worth considering when it matches the values and culture of those who will use the evaluation, and when the purpose of the evaluation is to develop and improve whatever is being evaluated. Conversely, AI is not likely to be a useful method when the values and culture of the target group does not favor a participatory approach, or there is a desire for mainly quantitative data, and/or when one of the aims of the evaluation is to terminate a process or program.

It has also been noted that successful use of AI requires specialized knowledge and skill sets not normally associated with evaluation training. Training in AI as a change method is available, but training in use of AI as an evaluation method is rare.

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See also Action Research, Capacity Building Evaluation, Collaborative Evaluation, Constructivist Approach, Democratic Evaluation, Narrative Research, Postpositivism

Further Readings

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