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How Has Appreciative Inquiry Lived Up To its Promises and What Will its Future Look Like?

I propose that AI has lived up to its promises by making a focus on strengths a common part of change processes, making social constructionist thinking more widely embraced by managers, accelerating the use of large group engagement, and making people's emotional state at work a legitimate managerial concern. What has not happened is much change in how organizations are studied by researchers, nor much attention to what gives life to organizations. I propose that AI is not used more widely because emergent change processes violate the strongly held narrative of leaders as visionaries.

It would be difficult to overstate the impact Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has had on the field of organization development and the practice of change management, particularly in North America. When I give talks to corporate HR-types in the United States and Canada and ask how many have heard of Appreciative Inquiry, at least two-thirds of hands go up. This is many more than for any other dialogic OD method. Probably the second most known is Open Space, and by only by about a third as many. When I ask how many have actually been involved in an appreciative inquiry, however, only a few hands go up. You could look at that and say, "Well, lots more opportunity out there", which I would agree with. You could also ask why a change methodology with such a long, impressive track record is so underutilized, especially in business.

I appreciate being asked to reflect on "how has AI lived up to its promise and what will its future look like?" I want to acknowledge that I am talking from a US/Canada experience, and that the impact of AI is different in different parts of the world. To its credit, it has had impact all over the world. I can only talk to what I've most noticed where I live.

First, I will briefly highlight some of the many positive achievements of AI, and then describe a few things that I think AI wanted to influence, but hasn't. I conclude with some thoughts on why it doesn't get used more, and what's needed to change that.

How AI has lived up to its promise

Arguably AI's largest impact was making the search for "what works", "strengths", "what we want more of" a common, mainstream activity amongst managers and change practitioners. For those not around before 1990,

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it's hard to imagine the derision and disbelief that met the idea of focusing an OD effort on only the positive. It seemed nonsensical to those operating from a diagnostic mindset that an inquiry would intentionally not ask about problems. Surely we should study and discuss both strengths and weaknesses?

Positively influencing the social construction of reality

In answering that question AI brought the social construction of reality into the mainstream of discourse about organizations and change, not just in academia, but amongst managers and professionals. Being very mindful of language, using affirmative questions and starting with stories are all common practice now, and are justified on the basis of positively influencing the social construction of reality, although most managers wouldn't use that phrase.

This way of thinking brought greater attention to the role that questions play in processes of organizing and change. Ideas such as, we are intervening from the very first questions asked, that our impact is limited by how bold and aspirational our questions are, and such as, questions help create the social reality they ask about, are now common amongst OD practitioners. Many of us now realize the power of well-crafted questions to change how people relate to each other in amazingly short order.

Almost all large-system dialogic OD approaches incorporate elements of AI. And AI, in turn, has helped organizations try large group engagement processes for the first time. While large group interventions predate AI (e.g., Emery and Trist's search conferences, 1973, Schindler-Rainman and Lippit's preferred futures, 1980), their use was amplified by AI. In recent years Cooperrider has been emphasizing the benefits of adopting large group, emergent processes for leading organizations (Cooperrider, 2013).

AI and positive organization studies

How much AI catalyzed the "positive organization studies" (POS) movement in academia is debatable. I do not think AI had much influence on the emergence of "positive psychology", which POS has strong roots in. It is noteworthy, however, that Kim Cameron spent a few years as Dean of the Weatherhead School at Case Western Reserve, where Cooperrider and Fry are professors, before returning to the University of Michigan and leading the POS movement in US business schools.

I think AI helped to increase attention on the role of emotions in organizational life and organizational change. In the US and a few other countries creating a positive emotional climate is now often seen as part of a leader's job. Ironically, it's been social constructionist academics who have had the most difficulty with the idea of "positive emotions". They would say that happy is not always positive and sad is not always negative, that the meaning of emotions are always local and context dependent. You can't assume which emotions are "positive" ahead of time. That perfectly rational position doesn't seem to reflect or affect, however, what people do and say. Probably

because, in practice, meaning is constructed locally, and people feel they can make judgments about whether their emotions are positive or negative. Furthermore, in North American studies, certain emotions reliably have convivial effects on people and social interactions.

How AI hasn't lived up to its promise

To provide a balanced account, I think, requires noting where some of AI's early premises and propositions that have not been picked up. Appreciative Inquiry started as an alternative research methodology to positivism in organizational studies. For those interested in such things, the original Cooperrider, Barrett and Srivastva papers (1995; Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) are still an inspiring vision for a new form of social inquiry, with new goals and new methods. But not much has changed in academia. There is little published research using AI as a methodology, and positivism still reigns supreme in organizational studies (though lots of post-modern theorizing gets published in management journals, very few actual studies do). Most published AI studies and graduate theses I've seen are of two kinds: those that study the AI process using an empirical methodology, and those that use appreciative interviews to gather data that then gets subjected to empirical analysis.

Secondly, Appreciative Inquiry was first described as the study of what brings life and vitality to organizations. The passions that first influenced Cooperrider's ideas, like a) the life-centric properties of organizations, b) how positive images and emotions lead to more vibrant social interactions, and c) how inquiry can infuse more vitality into organizations, still animate him and remain central to his message. But the practice of inquiring into what gives life and vitality to organizations hasn't spread. In practice, managers need to be able to show that they are focusing their attention and spending resources to achieve objectives. While it may be that inquiring into the sources of organizational vitality and flourishing will help leaders achieve their objectives and more, the connection is much harder to sell than proposing, say, an inquiry into the organization's current challenges. And that takes us to why it hasn't spread more.

Why AI hasn't spread more

First, I have to acknowledge that AI has spread amazingly far and wide for any social innovation, and it continues to spread. It is foundational to many other dialogic OD methods and theories. But in the grand scheme of things, AI is still an exotic managerial practice. The popular press almost always describe AI as "a new way to...." Use of AI in business is sparse. Yet, what research exists suggests AI can be astoundingly successful at helping organizations transform and meet adaptive challenges. So why isn't it used more?

I propose one of the main forces against this is the ubiquitous "visionary" narrative of leadership. The idea that leaders must have a vision is so rooted in our cultural narrative that any senior executive who tries to lead their organization using the emergent, dialogic approach to Appreciative Inquiry

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If we can produce a new narrative of leadershipthat people will find compelling and enabling, they will understand why the CEO isn't giving direction as much as shaping the process for finding aligned direction.

will face obstacles (Bushe & Marshak, 2016). Those they report to will question if they are providing the leadership the organization needs. If it's a listed company, analysts will crucify them if they don't provide the illusion of visions, strategies and KPIs. In addition, those who report to them will question their competence to be their leader. Followers may or may not notice how much more anxiety they feel being given responsibility, especially if it's not how things are usually done. Who wants a boss who makes them anxious? Many will be upset at the leader for not telling them what to do and consider him/her a bad leader. Emergent change leadership is far more successful than the plan and execute kind (Rowland & Higgs, 2008), and is what's needed to lead organizations through complex, adaptive challenges (Bushe, 2015). But the story of the visionary leader, and the strength with which it currently holds sway in business culture, means only a very remarkable individual can hold executive authority and lead emergently, whether using AI, Open Space, Conferencing, or any other large group engagement architecture.

A new narrative of leadership

If we can produce a new narrative of leadership – a story of heroic engagement and emergence – that people will find compelling and enabling, they will understand why the CEO isn't giving direction as much as shaping the process for finding aligned direction. It won't be as anxiety provoking for boards, bosses and followers. If it is a powerful narrative, they will even expect it, and consider it a mark of good leadership. In any group that lives into that narrative, I think AI will flourish.

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