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Appreciative Inquiry's Promises and Hopes: What is coming next?

David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva could not have foreseen the enormous impact Appreciative Inquiry would have. The human side of enterprise has become central in many organizations. In this issue of AI Practitioner we want to explore the future possibilities of Appreciative Inquiry. If we were trying to make up a promising agenda for the future, what topics should be on it and why?

When David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva published their first article in 1987, "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life", they could not have foreseen the enormous impact it would have on the field of Organizational Development, on scholars and practitioners, and on organizations and society in general. Since that time, almost thirty years ago, the way people think about organizing and organizations has changed considerably. The human side of enterprise has become central in many organizations, as well as in organizational and social studies. Developments, such as strengths-based organizing, positive psychology, research in neuroscience and positive organizational scholarship, have greatly contributed to a humanly significant science of organizations and society.

Does that mean that we are done, that Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is firmly established within corporate life and has fulfilled its purpose? David Cooperrider himself believes not:

For me, the long-term call and journey to understand the gift of AI – appreciative ways of knowing, appreciative interchange and ways of relating, and appreciative ways of designing – is still in its infancy and perhaps always will be as the numbers of AI co-authors and co-creators multiplies. AI is not a thing or a static concept, but an ongoing co-construction of reality; it's the result of many voices, time and circumstances, planned and unplanned experiments, new discoveries and designs, narratives and cases, and unlimited imagination. All I am certain of right now is this: AI, as long as it is constructed upon, practiced or inspired by the sense of the mystery and miracle of life on this planet, will never become inert or lifeless.

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In this issue of the *AI Practitioner* we want to explore the future possibilities of Appreciative Inquiry. If we were trying to make up a promising agenda for the future, what topics should be on it and why? Is there a new agenda emerging for AI practitioners and scholars, or do and can we continue the existing one?

We have invited several people from the AI community, as well as from outside, in this issue to explore the possibilities for AI in the coming years. What do they notice happening in their communities and organizations? What are the upcoming and important topics, developments or possibilities that make up the AI agenda for the future? So, many of the articles in this issue are of a reflexive nature. They invite you, as a reader, to re-consider what it was that attracted you in the first place to join the AI community and in the second place what motivates you to continue or renew your “membership” for the coming years.

Original and possible promises of AI

Before we let our guest authors answer these and other questions, I want to recall some of the promises that David Cooperrider and the late Suresh Srivastva wrote about in their first article. They serve as good points of reference, with the addition of several questions that reflect my own curiosity. Not all list items are discussed in this issue and most questions will not be answered either. They are an ongoing and ever expanding invitation to you to respond to, maybe in your daily practice or by being stimulated to write a future article in this or in another magazine.

1. Transformative capacity

According to the first article on Appreciative Inquiry in 1987, practitioners of AI aim to develop organizations to a higher level, in which organizational paradigms, norms, ideologies or values are transformed from which a more egalitarian, post-bureaucratic form of organizing can emerge. Where do we see this happening and to what extent does AI constitutes this transformation? If we look at transformative organizations such as Google, Semco and Goretex, which are shining examples of democratic workplaces, what can we learn from them that expands our thinking about AI? Are there factors other than AI principles and a focus on inquiry and appreciation that are contributing towards egalitarian, post-bureaucratic cultures? There might be more to these, and other, examples that is worthwhile to learn about as they can hold the germs for the future development of Appreciative Inquiry.

2. Generativity

Real innovations that shake up a whole market, such as Airbnb and Uber, grow and develop at a great distance from established companies for a reason. Disruptive innovations can seem very scary and dangerous for companies whose successes are based on old business models and protective strategies. So how can AI help these established organizations look the devil in the face so that they dare to challenge their assumptions about themselves, their markets and customers? Are they willing to renew themselves, develop new identities,

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strategies and relationships? And if so, how does AI support these kinds of transitions over longer time periods? The answers to questions like these can help make the generative potential of AI real, practical and effective.

3. Organizing as a mystery to be embraced

This still is –and may be the most promising – thought in the original article. Being able to experience mystery is in itself a transformative act. People experience it in the moment when they are most real, alive and present. Past and future merge into the here-and-now; every moment is new and fresh. How does AI help people in everyday life to marvel, to be open, curious and mindful? When they start to realize that the state of not knowing is actually more common than the state of knowing? This is especially important in those situations when people want to accomplish something, whether to escape a problem or a threat, or to move towards a goal or purpose. If AI could increase the amount of reflectiveness, contemplation and marvelling in our organizations, communities and families, what would its impact be, and what would it look like? It certainly offers a counter tendency to the fears we experience when we don't want to change, look into unfamiliar situations or when we feel that somehow our identities are threatened.

4. The power of inquiry

Did Einstein discover the Theory of Relativity by accident, a side-effect of what he was searching for, or was it a deliberate and focused act right from the beginning? From innovation theory we know that the principle of serendipity says that many discoveries come as a surprise to the researchers involved and are a by-product of what people were actually searching for. So, does it make a difference if we inquire into topics or situations with a specific purpose in mind, or just because it intrigues or frustrates us, because we are simply curious or come to the question in a state of incomprehension? Whatever triggers the inquiry process, we are never certain what will come out of it, especially when our original question snowballs and turns into an unstoppable movement. So, to what extent do our ambitions, aspirations and goals, as extensions of the past, stand in the way of or stimulate real and authentic inquiry as a process of not knowing? With this knowledge in mind we might start holding inquiry inside organizations more lightly without wanting right from the start to attain that specific goal or end result and become much more sensitive about our motivations along the way as we go.

5. The moral potential of AI

AI is a morally relevant theory and practice: it affects the way people live their lives in relation to one another. How can we increase moral considerations and consciousness preliminary to and during the inquiry process to include as many possible of the stakeholders' concerns and interests? As the choices of topic(s), participants and process design all demarcate what and who are included or excluded, the motives and concerns of initiators, decision makers and facilitators become paramount. The way they co-produce becomes just as important as what they produce. This will not only influence the outcomes

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of the inquiry process but also its durability and of the AI intervention. So, to what extent do we want to make moral and relational concerns more central to AI – and what are those concerns?

6. AI beyond management fashion

A common complaint from people and teams who use AI often is that they, or their surroundings, have grown accustomed to the 5D steps. They have internalized or incorporated AI well, but in a way that has become routine. AI then runs the risk of practitioners approaching situations again as “problems to be solved”. How do these processes of standardization work, such that as soon as people and organizations become familiar with a process, they start looking out for the next management fashion? How can we sustain and develop creativity, aliveness and curiosity amongst people and in processes to keep AI fresh and new, as if people were using it for the first time? What kind of knowledge and skills support this kind of experience? Besides stimulating AI as a philosophy or action research method in organizations and communities, we have to think about the ways in which we can make AI sustainable.

7. Incorporating notions on power and politics

Authors writing about AI have not so far paid a great deal of attention to the subject of power and politics. Possibly because what we pay attention to might grow. But organizations do pay attention to power and politics. Metaphorically, they can be described as arenas in which differences in opinions, interests and strategies are continuously negotiated and re-negotiated. One reason for this neglect might be that, as AI practitioners, we do not wish to stimulate power and politics inside organizations, although some authors on management do acknowledge its merits and value. If we do not understand the workings of power and politics as distinct features of organizations, or do not pay attention to them, the effectiveness of AI interventions might be severely hampered.

On a more fundamental level, managers and facilitators who apply AI are part of existing power relations and, whether they are aware of it or not, use them to influence relationships in order to meet particular interests. Refusing to admit, or being unaware, that Appreciative Inquiry, is in itself a power-full act, comes at a cost of not achieving generative solutions, of continuing existing power relations and not learning about the power dynamics within the organization. There is great potential in including power and political dynamics: they are indispensable elements of organizational life. This is what Ralph Stacey talks about in his article on the paradox of consensus and conflict. The writers in this issue touch upon some of these questions, and many of their own. I hope they inspire your curiosity and imagination about what AI has in store for us.

References

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