

Five Theories of Change Embedded in Appreciative Inquiry

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Annotation: Bushe describes five different ways of thinking about how an appreciative inquiry can create change in social systems. These are the social construction of reality, heliotropic hypothesis, the organizational inner dialogue, paradoxical dilemmas and appreciative process theories of change. Each directs us to different ways of thinking about and implementing an appreciative inquiry when our purpose is developmental change. The key data collection innovation of appreciative inquiry is the collection of people's stories of something at it's best. If we are interested in team development, we collect stories of people's best team experiences. If we are interested in the development of an organization we ask about their peak experience in that organization. If enhanced leadership is our goal, we collect stories of leadership at its best. We need to embrace different ways of inquiring appreciatively but to do so, we need theory that tells us what ways will work -- how and why. In this paper, Bushe offers a way to begin thinking about these questions.

In this paper I will describe five different ways of thinking about how an appreciative inquiry can create change in social systems. Appreciative inquiry is a form of action research that attempts to create new theories/ideas/images that aid in the developmental change of a system (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). The key data collection innovation of appreciative inquiry is the collection of people's *stories of something at it's best*. If we are interested in team development, we collect stories of people's best team experiences. If we are interested in the development of an organization we ask about their peak experience in that organization. If enhanced leadership is our goal, we collect stories of leadership at its best. These stories are collectively discussed in order to create new, generative ideas or images that aid in developmental change of the collectivity discussing them.

I am concerned that as appreciative inquiry becomes "fashionable" two undesirable things are happening. One is that any inquiry that focuses on the "positive" in some way gets called appreciative inquiry (AI). I have already come across a consulting firm that asked people

to rate how good the organization was on a number of items on a 5 point scale and called this appreciative inquiry. The result will be that the unique power of this idea gets corrupted and lost and appreciative inquiry becomes just another discarded innovation on the junk heap of "failed" management effectiveness strategies, like QWL, TQM, BPR, etc., etc.. Anyone involved in any of these processes knows they all contained excellent ideas and useful techniques but "failed" because of consultants calling whatever they did by the currently fashionable acronym who sold these to managers who didn't know the difference.

A second concern is that some practitioners, especially graduate students, can develop a zealous attention to "appreciation" without any theoretical rhyme or reason to their practice. Promoting appreciation where there has been little can, of itself, generate a wave of energy and enthusiasm but that will go away just as quickly as the next challenge or tragedy to a social system rears its head.

In this paper I want to appreciate appreciative inquiry as, itself, a generative metaphor that has

led me to new ideas and images of how to change social systems. I do this also to caution against the indiscriminant application of appreciative inquiry, calling for a disciplined and reasoned approach to its use. I believe that AI can be very helpful in the right time and the right place. We need, however, to develop a model of where and when that is. Some people seem to believe that use of appreciative inquiry is more an ideological than practical question, and that its use will always have a positive effect. I strongly question that. From a purely practical standpoint I think researchers and consultants will find that systems full of deeply held and unexpressed resentments will not tolerate an appreciative inquiry until there has been some expression and forgiving of those resentments. From a theoretical perspective there is the question of what happens to negative images and affect if they are "repressed" from collective discussion by a zealous focus on the "positive". Experience from psychoanalysis, sociology and medicine suggest repression usually results in some nasty side effects.

Secondly, we need to embrace different ways of inquiring appreciatively but to do so, we need theory that tells us what ways will work – how and why. In this paper, I offer a way to begin thinking about both questions, especially the latter. I will first review two key theories of change contained in the writings of Cooperrider: the social construction of reality and the "heliotropic hypothesis". Then I will present three ideas that I have stumbled across in my use of AI: the organization's "inner dialogue", resolving paradoxical dilemmas, and appreciative process. Each directs us to different ways of thinking about and implementing an appreciative inquiry when our purpose is developmental change.

Socially Constructing Reality

Those familiar with AI know that the dominant theoretical rationale for AI is post modernist European philosophy (for an excellent summary related to this theory of change see Barrett, Thomas & Hocevar, 1995). From this point of view there is nothing inherently real or true about any social form. All social organization is an arbitrary, social construction. Our ability to create new and better organizations is limited only by our imagination and collective will. Furthermore, language and words are the basic

building blocks of social reality. Rather than seeing language as a passive purveyor of meaning between people, post modernists see language as an active agent in the creation of meaning. As we talk to each other, we are constructing the world we see and think about, and as we change how we talk we are changing that world. From this perspective, theory, especially theory that is encoded in popular words or images, is a powerful force in shaping social organization because we "see what we believe". Creating new and better theories/ideas/images is, therefore, a powerful way of changing organizations. Appreciative inquiry seeks these new images in and among people's best intentions and noblest aspirations, attempting a collective envisioning of what the group could be at its very best.

From the practical standpoint the problem is how do we get people to dream alternative futures together, to envision new patterns of social organization that are better than what they currently have or may ever have individually experienced? My own experience as an OD consultant is that it is very difficult to get a group of people who work together to talk about things they might hope for but have never seen. This is especially true in business organizations which tend to have a culture that values "hard headedness" and devalues "fanciful thinking". It is scary to verbalize those basic human desires for community, love, fealty, making a contribution in an organization where that is not the norm. To talk about "how things could be" when no one has ever actually seen them that way is to open oneself up to ridicule and embarrassment. Indeed, if there is a lot of repressed yearning in the system, anyone who names what is yearned for is sure to be ridiculed and shamed as a defense against experiencing that yearning. About the best one can expect is that people will talk about things they have experienced elsewhere, or read about, since they can defend themselves against ridicule by pointing to places where those noble aspirations and intentions are being lived.

I have found that an appreciative inquiry, where people listen to each other's stories about micro moments in organizational life where the best in us is touched, can create a unique climate for collective dreaming where the forces of ridicule and repression are momentarily suspended. There is something about telling one's story of

"peak" organizational experiences, and listening to others, that can make a group ready to be open about deeply held desires and yearnings. I am sure that there are other factors, beside the AI technique, that are necessary to make this happen (e.g., quality of leadership) but the technique is astounding in the speed with which it can create such a climate in the right place at the right time. Into this climate, then, a different kind of conversation can take place and from that, a different social reality can evolve.

One more point about the social construction of reality. From this point of view means create ends and this is especially true about our means of inquiry. How we go about studying something will impact what we "see" and in some cases, will even create what we then "discover". At the core of appreciative inquiry is "inquiring with the heart". What that means is difficult to describe on paper, a lot easier to teach in practice. For myself it means that before I ask a question or make a statement I locate my consciousness in my heart region and notice how my thoughts and questions are shaped and let those be what I say. In my personal and professional life this has had a consistent, profound, healing effect on my interactions with others. I think it was Jung who said that inquiry with the head only can never heal as the head is concerned with analysis which only serves to cut things up and examine them in parts. The heart, however, is concerned with bringing things together and wholeness and it is from here that inquiry can be healing. Can analytical forms of action research, which cut up an organization or group for analysis, attending to all the "problems" and "deficiencies" (based on the theory of the researcher/consultant) ever hope to really heal a system; to make old wounds go away and add health and vitality to the relationships in that system? I no longer think so. Can appreciative inquiry? If it is carried out with an open heart, I think it can.

More could be said about the social construction of reality theory of change embedded in AI but let me turn to implications of this theory for OD practice. First, it means that the way the inquiry is carried out is very important. Techniques which help to open the hearts of those engaged in the inquiry should aid it. For example, Cooperrider (1996) has talked about the heightened quality of interview data that come from having children interview adults and I think

some of this impact can be explained by the heart opening potential of that. Secondly, this means that the key to creating change in the organization is creating new theories/ideas/images that enter the everyday language of system members. Therefore, both the process of creative ideation and the process of importation of that creativity into popular usage are critical for change. Once we collect the stories, then what? From this perspective the hard work of change begins. I do not think nearly enough about these two processes has been written about.

The Heliotropic Hypothesis

In an intriguing paper Cooperrider (1990) presented his "heliotropic hypothesis" which is that social systems evolve toward the most positive images they hold of themselves. These images are not necessarily conscious in that they may not be discussible by the members of that social system, but nevertheless he argues that such images exist and the more they "affirm" the group the more firmly they hold the group to a pattern of being prescribed by the theory/idea/image the group has of itself at its very best. When these images are out of step with the requirements the social system faces the group will experience itself as dysfunctional and rational attempts to fix itself will not work until the underlying "affirmative image" of the group is changed. Appreciative inquiry, therefore, attempts to create a new and better affirmative image for the social system, one better aligned with the organization's critical contingencies.

Surprisingly, there have been no published attempts to assess the validity of this hypothesis and I will not attempt to argue for or against it here. But it is an important theory of change embedded in AI and as such, has important implications for OD practice. From this point of view the quality of the output of the AI, the affirming image, is all important for its change potential. How this affirming image is constructed needs to be thought about carefully. Does it have to be a managed process or can we trust that the process of AI will itself unfreeze the system so that a better affirmative image will naturally form? If managed, who needs to be involved in generating the image? How do we know when we have a good enough new image? How can we know which images will

"stick" while others fall quickly into disuse? These are the sorts of questions that the AI practitioner, operating under this theory of change, ought to have answers to.

The Organization's Inner Dialogue

Now we turn to 3 theories of change that have been evoked for me by AI. The first I call changing the organization's inner dialogue and it comes from the observation that if you think of organizations using the metaphor of human consciousness, with many different voices saying things within one's mind, there are layers of awareness in the organization, just as there are in the human mind, of what is being said. In the human mind we have the most conscious layer, which tends to be a rational layer, of things we are aware we are saying to ourselves. The organizational analog for this are the things that are said between people in "official" meetings of the organization – things that are said out loud so that everyone present can hear. These are events like committee meetings, departmental meetings, workshops and offsite retreats, strategic planning sessions and the like. This I call the conscious, rational part of the organizational mind. What is said here is "discussible" by all employees who are in attendance and in that sense the organization as an entity is consciously aware of it.

Between and around events, however, are things people talk about in smaller groups or in confidential conversations. Often these entail interpretations and judgements about the events that these people would not verbalize in an "official forum of organizational business", like a meeting. As such, the organization as an entity is only partially aware and to the extent that these perceptions, interpretations and judgements are not discussible in any official forum of organizational business, they are out of awareness. They are like the "inner dialogue" of the human mind that operates at a subconscious level. In individuals these are the day dreams that we quickly forget or may not even notice that we are having, the patterns of thinking and judgement that operate just out of awareness but powerfully effect our conscious, "rational" thoughts. Psychologist call these scripts or schemas and some therapies, like neuro-linguistic programming and rational-emotive therapy, operate mainly at this level of consciousness.

I want to suggest 3 things that can form the basis of using AI as a change strategy:

- 1 Organizations have an inner dialogue made up of the things people say to each other in small confidential groups that are undiscussible in official forums of organizational business.
- 2 This inner dialogue is a powerful stabilizing force in social systems that accounts for the failure to follow through on rationally arrived at decisions. It is here where people's real thoughts and feelings about what is discussed in official forums are revealed and communicated.
- 3 This inner dialogue is mainly carried through the stories people tell themselves and each other to justify their interpretation of events and decisions.

The change theory is: If you change the stories you change the inner dialogue. Nothing the "rational mind" decides it wants will actually happen if the "inner dialogue" is resistant to it.

When people talk in the hallways and over coffee it is often stories of past events that they use to justify the interpretations and judgements of current events. These stories get passed on and embellished with time and their historical veracity is irrelevant to the impact they have on how people make sense of organizational events. From this point of view AI can change an organization if it changes the stories that circulate in the organization's inner dialogue. Let me give an example.

One organization I work with has a strong and deep (but changing) inner dialogue about the lack of "real leadership" in the organization. Of course this is not discussed in official forums. Just the opposite. Those in authority are praised and accolades given for their leadership prowess. But in the inner dialogue, just the opposite happens. Authorities are described as gutless wonders who have no integrity, blow with whatever wind is strongest and can only be relied on to act politically in their best interest. Little wonder then, that almost none of the "soft" organizational strategies agreed upon during a major strategic planning exercise had been implemented three years later. In an appreciative inquiry into leadership, people in this organization interviewed their executives

about the greatest acts of leadership they had seen in the organization as well as what they would consider their own peak leadership experiences.

The interviewees were stunned by the stories their leaders told – almost always stories about great personal integrity and courage where someone took the "right" stand even though it was politically unpopular or highly risky. Stories about events from the past that involved these leaders were radically changed as new appreciations about the motives and meanings behind their actions evolved. As these stories changed, greatly different interpretations of the current actions of leaders began to emerge in the parts of the organization that had been involved in the appreciative inquiry. Leaders were now being supported by the inner dialogue where in the past they were resisted, and some really different organizational strategies were implemented in the "soft" side of the business.

From this theoretical point of view, the key to OD practice is the stories and the way in which these are communicated to others in the organization. Those most impacted by the new stories are those who get to hear them, first hand, from those who tell them. Finding ways to help make that happen are clearly important. The use of interview protocols where people simply capture a few key images or "quotable quotes" does not make sense from the inner dialogue view of change. Rather, what is required are richly woven short stories, written in the first person. The interviewer's job is not to simply transcribe what the interviewee said, like a journalist, but to use the craft of the literary writer to make a document full of vignettes that will invite and delight those who read them. As well, it is critical that the data not be anonymous, as in typical action research feedback reports, but directly attributed to whomever the story came from. Following on from the logic of the inner dialogue view, it might even be better to skip the writing all together and help people really hear each other's stories. Some possibilities are using edited videotapes of people telling their stories and bringing large numbers of people together where individuals take turns at a microphone telling their stories. From the inner dialogue view of change, what is critical to creating change is not the generation of new images/theories but the telling and retelling of stories that create new and more

efficacious meanings that support organizational evolution.

Resolving Paradoxical Dilemmas

Another way in which I have seen AI lead to developmental change is in offering images that resolve paradoxical dilemmas for groups (Bushe 1998). All groups, especially those in organizations, face paradoxical requirements where they are asked to simultaneously do mutually incompatible things. In one study I was able, in about 2 hours, to help project managers in an MIS organization list 28 paradoxical requirements they experience in their organizational life. These are things like organizational injunctions to "staff up projects to ensure the best people are doing the work" and "staff up projects to ensure developmental opportunities for staff"; "always meet deadlines" and "never give customers defective work"; and so on. For the most part managers find ways to work around such paradoxical dilemmas and they get the work done in spite of them. But as Smith and Berg (1987) point out, groups can become stuck in a paradox where the nature of the paradoxical dilemma facing the group is unconscious or undiscussible. In such a case, a group will look and feel "stuck", constantly repeating failing patterns, finding itself with the same issues over and over that never seem to get resolved, all the while losing energy and motivation to continue operating as a group.

An AI with a team can evoke stories and images that aid the team in moving through the paradox it is stuck in. Let me give an example. An "empowered work team" of analysts was stuck over what Smith & Berg (1987) call the paradox of authority. The issue was that people were not willing to authorize others to act on the group's behalf but at the same time some wanted authority to act on the group's behalf in dealing with others in and outside the organization. The group had not discussed the problem this way. Rather, a sense was developing that "this empowered work team stuff just doesn't work" as the group became paralyzed by the inability of members to take action without having to convene a meeting of the group to get sanction. This was experienced by all as very frustrating.

As a team building intervention each member described to the whole team the best team he or she had ever been a member of (Bushe &

Coetzer, 1995). One member told the story of working on a charity fund-raising drive with people who had been loaned, full time for 3 months, from their respective companies. Each person had pursued independent, creative initiatives in raising funds while at the same time fully supporting the initiatives of others. There was a program of activities to be done that had built up over the years and was fully documented for them. Over and above that, individuals pursued the group's core mission however they thought best.

The team reacted a little differently to this story than it had to others. Members were quieter and more withdrawn. It then dawned on me that this story offered a way out of the authority paradox (which, at the time, was one of a number of alternative explanations I had for their stuckness). I asked how the group was able to let others have free reign without fearing someone, due to inexperience or eagerness, would get them into a bind? He said "we decided we had no way of knowing if we could trust each other so we figured we had more to lose by not trusting than by trusting". At this another member piped in "so trust costs less".

The image of "trust costs less" blended this group's bottom-line business identity with the essential element for the resolution of the paradox. Because it was such a novel combination of those words, it opened up new gateways to emotional issues in this group. They were able to explore what the *price of distrust* was. Some were angry about how much other's distrust had *cost them*. People were able to admit that they hadn't felt trusted, hadn't been trusting others and that they believed trust would cost less. From there it was easy to decide on the "core program" and general objectives for individual initiatives.

It is probably true that all sizes of social systems can become stuck in an undiscussible paradoxical dilemma. One way out, and perhaps the only way out, is the development of new images that jostle conventional thinking and offer new ways of acting. Take for example the impact the image "sustainable development" had on what, to that point, seemed the intractable opposition of the business community and environmentalists. From this point of view, then, the change potential of AI is in its capacity to offer such images. The implications for OD

practice lead to very different implementation scenarios. For instance, we would want to have some kind of diagnosis, or set of hypothesis, about the kinds of paradoxical dilemmas facing the system before we begin the inquiry so that we can be sensitive to possible ways out presented in the stories. We would be most concerned with 'word smithing', the creation of an image that captures people's energy and offers the solution to the dilemma they are caught in. The conduct of an AI from this perspective requires a much greater consultant, manager, or researcher-driven focus than one from any of the other change perspectives where there is a greater emphasis on fostering openness to what emerges from the collective inquiry.

Appreciative Process

While the first four theories I have described relate to AI as an action research process, "appreciative process" (Bushe & Pitman, 1991) is more a change agent technique. I mention it here because the theory of appreciation and its impact on organizations is clearly an important justification for appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, 1991; Barrett, 1995) and because it has had the greatest personal impact on my consulting practice. It has also considerably influenced my thoughts on Leadership, that part I call the Appreciative Self (Bushe, 2001)

Appreciative process theorizes that you can create change by paying attention to what you want more of rather than paying attention to problems. Cooperrider's (1991) review of the research on sports psychology, the Pygmalion effect and brain functioning supported the ancient wisdom that you get more of whatever you pay attention to. As a change technique, appreciative process involves *tracking* and *fanning*. Tracking is a state of mind where one is constantly looking for what one wants more of. It begins with the assumption that whatever one wants more of already exists, even if in small amounts. Fanning is any action that amplifies, encourages, and helps you to get more of whatever you are looking for.

Recently I had a group of Executive-MBA students use appreciative process to create a change in any social system they chose. We were all blown away by the results. For example, one manager's "problem person"

became his star employee when he looked for examples of her being a star. Another manager's conflicted and competitive team became a cohesive, cooperative unit when he looked for examples of cohesion and cooperation. Those using it with spouses or children felt that major positive transformations had occurred in their families.

It would be a mistake to say these are only examples of behavioral modification – of reinforcing desired behaviors. While there is some of this, the most critical part of appreciative process required for it to work is a change in the consciousness of the change agent. It begins with an act of belief, often in the face of accumulated evidence to the contrary. It requires a real change of "attitude" for those of us used to being "critical" or providing "corrective feedback". It seems much easier for many of us to know what is missing, what we don't want, what is lacking in others and ourselves. All too often the main themes of discussions in organizations are what isn't working, what is wrong, what goals or standards are not being met. What is the impact of that on us? As my EMBA students found out, it seems to be more difficult and take more effort to notice what isn't missing and get clear about what we really want more of.

While working with a manager who can be bossy, sarcastic, demeaning and nasty, I worked on "seeing" the part of him that is compassionate, wise and wants to be a good leader. The result was that I not only observed much more compassionate and wise behavior, but the part of him that wants to be that way recognized me as an ally and we developed a deep, trusting relationship. I am sure that would never have happened if I had mainly paid attention to the behavior I didn't like. As I was to find out, he was well aware, usually after the fact, of his own meanness. He still acts "poorly", but not as often and as people who work for him come to see him as I do, with not nearly as harmful an impact.

From this point of view, then, appreciative inquiry creates change by focusing attention on where things are working and amplifying them through fanning. Utilizing such a theory, the collection of stories and creation of generative images is not nearly so important, perhaps not even necessary. Instead, what is necessary is a

change in the problem oriented, deficiency focused consciousness of those intervening into the system to an appreciative one that believes that there is an abundance of good people, processes, intentions and interactions, just waiting to be seen and fanned.

Summary

In this paper I have reviewed five different theories of change that someone using appreciative inquiry could operate from in an organization development intervention. These are the social construction of reality, heliotropic hypothesis, the organizational inner dialogue, paradoxical dilemmas and appreciative process theories of change. In an earlier paper I argued that the development of AI as an OD intervention would depend on creation of new theory and that good practice would follow (Bushe, 1995). I am even more convinced of it now as I increasingly see evidence of attempts to do appreciative inquiry simply by asking people for "best of" stories with little theoretical or practical consideration of how this will lead to change in the systems being studied. Appreciative inquiry can be a truly revolutionary way in which we study and change social systems. Being someone, however, who believes that balance is where we find the "natural good", I think appreciation needs to be balanced with critical thinking to lead us there.

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