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# From Appreciative Inquiry to inquiring appreciatively

**ABSTRACT**

The intention of this article is to foreground inquiring and to connect it to some of the key ideas in systemic thinking and practice; to expand the idea of appreciation by connecting it to systemic ideas and the German critical tradition; and to formulate an ethical foundation for inquiring appreciatively (i-a).

**Introduction**

The ideas and practices known as Appreciative Inquiry (AI) have had their twentieth anniversary. AI was developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Shrivastva and first described in their original work: *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life* (1987). These ideas and practices have become widely known for creating a positive and future-oriented based research, leadership, and Organization Developmental (OD) approach.

Numerous books and articles have explored the ideas and practices of AI on a wide variety of organizational and leadership issues. In contrast with the traditional problem-focused approaches to leadership, AI has proven itself a valuable supplement to the traditional modernist (and earlier) approaches to developing organizations. However, the focus on the positive and life-giving forces of human activities has, for many OD practitioners, been taken as a 'positive focus only'.

Much of the work on AI has been centred around a 4D model: Discovering the best of what is, Dreaming of the best possible future, from the best of what is combined with the dream we are to create our Destiny, and finally Delivering – transforming ideas to practice.

Taking a look at some of the headlines of the most cited work on AI, this should not be a surprise. Just to mention a few: *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000), *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* (Watkins & Mohr, 2001), *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization Toward a Positive Theory of Change*, (Cooperrider et al, 2000).

All influential writers – and all very powerful headlines. For many people, the POSITIVE focus has been seen as the THE approach and practices of AI. If you

take a closer look at the work of these writers, they also highlight curiosity and describe AI as an appreciative mode of inquiry for living with, being with and directly participating in the varieties of social organization.

In this paper our ambition is to broaden Appreciative Inquiry both as an idea and in practice. The vital inspiration for this step comes from a number of writers and practitioners.

Some of the writers who have elaborated on the ideas of AI in line with our thinking are Christine Oliver and Kevin Barge (Oliver, 1996 and 2005, Oliver and Barge, 2002 and 2003, Barge, 2004 and 2007) and Harlene Anderson (Anderson, 2008). In their work, they re-connect AI practices to some of the basic principles of a systemic-constructionist approach. With labels like Collaborative Inquiry (Anderson) Relational Inquiry (Barge), and Reflexive Inquiry (Oliver), they invite us towards a more systemic-relational approach to inquiry.

To take the next steps, we see these ideas as invitations to carry on the journey with AI. To elaborate ideas and practices in AI we suggest:

Foreground inquiring to give it a more vivid understanding and use by connecting it to some of the key ideas in systemic thinking and practice:

- Foregrounding inquiring as a relational linguistic process (Gergen, 1994).
- Connecting it to the idea of neutrality as an obligation for engendering curiosity (Cecchin, 1987) – by circular and reflexive questioning (Tomm 1988, I, II and III, Hornstrup, Tomm and Johansen, 2008).
- Inviting innovation by revitalising Cooperrider and Shrivastva's (1987) invitation to be provocative through connecting it to Cecchin's (1992) idea of irreverence.

Methodologies for working appreciatively: look for and create patterns of connectedness in human living and human communication.

#### **Expanding the idea of appreciation by connecting to systemic ideas**

Biology of Love (Maturana and Varela, 1987), (Maturana and Poerksen, 2004), Bateson's (1972) idea of patterns of connectedness, expanded by the work of Honneth (2006) working within a German critical tradition on appreciation as love, respect and appreciation/affirmation. Beside this, inspired by Oliver, we issue an invitation to move from either problem-focused or positively-focus to a focus which includes both.

This gives us three methodologies for working appreciatively:

Firstly, an invitation to look for and create patterns of connectedness by seeing the appreciative approach as an invitation to a more complex (circular) understanding of human living and human communication.

Second, to help us give these ideas a more concrete 'footing', we borrow three notions from Honnet's work – that is love, respect and affirmation as important to the growth of human relations.

Third, to move from being either problem or positive to being both. When the focus on problems and critical voices is eliminated, we risk to both acting anti-appreciatively and eliminating the potential for innovation and progress.

'Get it good', not 'get it right' – one way of making this change could be to change from AI (noun) to i-a (verb).

### From AI to i-a

#### First the inquiring: foregrounding inquiring as a relational process

An important feature in inquiring processes is to see it as a relational process, where the outcome of the inquiry process is co-created and thereby a result of the relational qualities of human systems (Pearce, 1993).

To underline this relational and process-oriented approach, we have chosen the label inquiring – appreciatively inspired by ideas from Barge and Oliver, where they see AI used as a fixed model or method: 'Treating Appreciative Inquiry as a noun, for example, in the phrase, "conducting an Appreciative Inquiry," moves people to view "it" as a particular type of conversational episode that is guided by certain rules.'

This could be seen as an invitation to 'get it right' when using AI, where we would like the invitation to 'get it good' – get it flexible, fluent – using it in the flow of relationships and conversations. One way of making this change could be to change from AI (noun) to i-a (verb):

The focus has been on what form and sequence of conversational episodes need to occur within an AI and less on how one begins to 'inquire appreciatively' during a conversational episode or moment. The inquiry process can become more complex as managers and consultants make choices about the areas they inquire into, how to respond to other participants' comments and what gets made in the flow of conversation.

This move highlights the difference between a fixed method or model, and invites us to understand and to use 'appreciative inquiring' processes with an obligation to sensitivity to the context and the people involved. And we need to be more:

'... specific about how managers and consultants should make choices about the kinds of moves or acts to perform within the ongoing flow of conversation.'

When foregrounding a process focus – foregrounding inquiring, it always involves a linguistic orientation. When we speak our language we both bring forth something known, and at the same time create something new.

An utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing. It always creates something absolutely new and unrepeatable, and, it always has some relation to values (the true, the good, the beautiful, and so forth). (Shotter, 2005A)

Besides, we also emphasise that all processes have direction – we expect something more or less distinct to happen. We want people to tell us their story or version of a given topic, or we want to create changes by asking circular or reflexive questions. To foreground inquiring is to be aware that 'the word forms itself in the atmosphere of the already spoken, it is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said - which is needed and anticipated. Such is the situation of any living dialogue.' (Shotter, 2005B)

#### Inquiring as an obligation to curiosity – reflexive and generative questioning

To take a step into ways of understanding and working with the inquiring process, we use the idea of neutrality as a necessity for curiosity (Cecchin, 1992) and the

transformation of these ideas into reflexive and generative interview processes. (Tomm, 1988 III; Hornstrup et al., 2005; Hornstrup and Tomm, 2008)

Inspired by Bateson’s idea of circularity, Cecchin sees a circular perspective as an invitation to take on a more systemic attitude. It invites us to accept and welcome of the complexity of interactions. It helps us to increase our curiosity. (Cecchin, 1987)

This circularity can be of practical use in the form of circular and reflective questioning. (Tomm, 1988 III; Hornstrup et al., 2005) The intention behind circular and reflexive questions is both exploratory and innovative. This act can be seen as exploration with the purpose to make new discoveries. (Tomm, 1988 III). The guiding idea is that questioning as dialogic processes are interactional and therefore systemic. All the different elements of the subject are somehow connected to everything else. Reflexive and generative questions are formulated to draw to our attention, and to create patterns of connectedness. These questions create connections between ‘persons, objects, actions, perceptions, ideas, feelings, events, beliefs, contexts, and so on, in recurrent or cybernetic circuits.’

Reflexive questioning is a way to trigger reflexive activity in systems. The leader’s or consultant’s intention is to interact in a manner that opens space for the system to see new innovative possibilities and to evolve more freely.

<p><b>Inquiring – curiosity and irreverence:</b></p> <p>Being curious about my own curiosity and knowing.</p> <p>Being curious about the curiosity and knowing of the other.</p> <p>Being curious about the language we use, the relationship we create and the context we work in.</p>		<p><b>Appreciatively:</b></p> <p>Personally – valuing and loving the person.</p> <p>Legal &amp; morally – recognising and respecting legal and moral rights and duties.</p> <p>Professionally appreciating the personal and professional competences and contributions.</p>
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We see this curiosity having three different directions or purposes:

First, to be curious about the curiosity and knowing of the leaders – to be aware of how their ideas and knowledge guide the questions asked and the possible ‘blindness’ this knowing creates

Second, to be curious about the curiosity and knowing of the employees being interviewed, the leader can choose not to share this with the employee, or can actively invite the employee to co-create the focus and process

Third, to be curious about the language used and how it creates focus and understanding, as well as inviting other language-games into the conversation. Another purpose is to be curious about the relationship between the leader and employee, and how other people or groups might influence or be influenced

Irreverence is an invitation to undermine constraining patterns and stories.

by the outcome of the conversation. A final question: how does the wider organizational context connect to the conversation?

### **Inviting to innovation – provocative and irreverence connected**

In the words of Ken Gergen, we can define the usefulness of the ideas we use in inquiring processes by their 'generative capacity'. That is, 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'.

This line of thinking is a vital part of AI. In the writing on AI in action research it is argued that AI action research should start with appreciation, and in the conduct of research it should be provocative, applicable and collaborative (Cooperrider and Shrivastva, 1987). Even though the provocative element has been there from the very beginning, it has played a less prominent role in the 'doing' of AI. When the provocative element gets a less prominent position in the inquiring process, there is a risk of less innovation; that the processes cannot generate radical new ideas is obvious.

By connecting the idea of provocation and innovation with the idea of irreverence (Cecchin et al., 1992), i-a is given a stronger generative touch, urging us to be even more innovative and to generate new possibilities for conducting i-a processes. The invitation is to act irreverently and provocatively; and to challenge guiding assumptions, values and processes that can block the way to even more life-giving and better-performing organizations.

At the same time, irreverence is seen as an invitation 'to undermine constraining patterns and stories,' hopefully in a way that will help leaders and organizations to cut loose from these stories and patterns, and to 'move them in the direction of making the changes they desire'. (Cecchin et al., 1992) So we should ask ourselves how our ways of inquiring appreciatively 'present provocative new possibilities for social action.' (Cooperrider and Shrivastva, 1987)

### **Expanding the idea of appreciation: Patterns of connectedness – a biology of love**

Two key issues in inquiring appreciatively, inspired by Gregory Bateson (1972) are how we can create patterns of connectedness, and create differences that make a difference. In our work we join the two 'batesonian' notions into a guiding question: How can we make a difference that makes a difference – that connects? By using this question we want to underline that by working (inquiring) appreciatively, our purpose is to make a difference. By investigating high points (or problems) of the past and present, we want to connect them to our dreams of the future. We want to challenge assumptions, rules and procedures that keep us from creating innovative new ways of working.

To create a difference that connects is a vital starting point when working appreciatively. In our thinking, appreciation (in traditional AI) easily becomes something that stands in opposition to a problem-focused approach. In our view, the idea of inquiring appreciatively holds much more than that:

Firstly, creating patterns of connectedness with the people we work with also includes taking their worries and problems seriously – excluding the possibility of talking about problems and frustrations can be seen as anti-appreciative.

Second, we believe that when expanding the understanding of an appreciative based approach to Organizational Development and Research, we need to look at appreciation as love, respect and affirmation. (Honneth, 2006)

Maturana's notion of 'the biology of love' helps us understand the importance of appreciation (love). Maturana claims that the only emotion that supports the creation of relational and social coexistence is love. Love becomes a domain of appreciative and affirmative co-existence that invites us to create 'relational behaviours through which another being arises as a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself.

By using an appreciative language and tone of voice, we can work in ways that continuously create a world with a language and emotions that makes it possible for people to 'grow in well-being'.

A loving and appreciative co-existence invites a special awareness of the other people involved. This invites us to be careful when listening to others. Instead of listening to judge whether 'what is said is right or wrong', our listening should focus on 'in which circumstances what is said is valid'. This is an invitation to listen intensely to the person speaking and to listen to our own listening.

To grow oneself we need appreciation in the triple sense of esteem, respect and appreciation.

#### **The struggle for appreciation – love, respect and affirmation**

Further ideas can be found in the German Philosopher Axel Honneth's work, inspired by Hegel and the German/European critical tradition. Honneth's most influential work for us is The Struggle for Appreciation. Honneth and others frequently use appreciation as a synonym for recognition, because it contains a more vivid and deeper understanding of the idea of appreciation. In Honneth's own words, self-esteem, self-respect and self-appreciation are vital in forming a 'good life'. To grow oneself we need appreciation in the triple sense of esteem, respect and appreciation. (Honneth, 2006):

- Loved – connected to a private sphere where family and friendship is important
- Respected (esteemed) – connected to a public sphere where respect for moral and legal rights is vital
- Valued – connected to a social sphere where we as individuals feel appreciated as a part of cultural, political or organizational communities

Honneth distinguishes between these three different spheres (private, public and social); but we use idea to expand our understanding of the role of appreciation in organizational work. In many people's lives, the three spheres are more and more interconnected.

A relational appreciation, including these three elements, can be seen to make difference, making it possible to create a positive understanding of self. In an epistemological view, Honneth connects appreciation with making a distinction. When we appreciate another human being, we make him or her distinct as a person of value. A disrespectful approach to others is to ignore them, look through them, not to see or hear them. This non-appreciation can result in a feeling of 'non-being'.

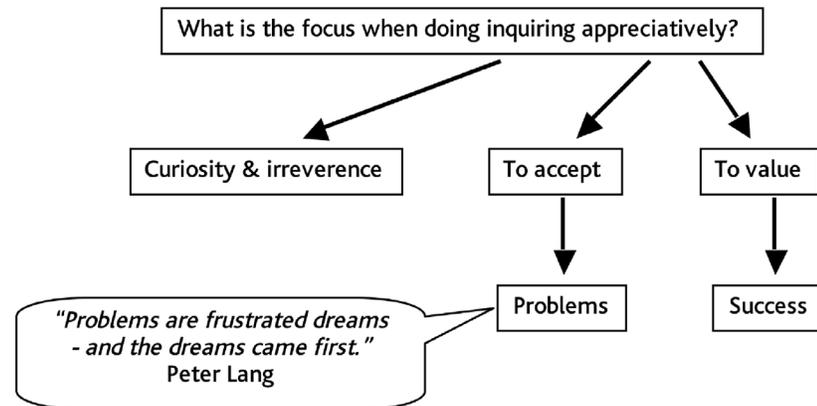
We see connections between Honneth's work on appreciation and Maturana's idea of the 'biology of love'. Both see love/appreciation as a fundamental

All elements of organizational life have potential for learning and innovation.

condition for human well-being and development. In spite of Honneth's position within a critical tradition, we dare to let his work inspire us in developing i-a, as we see the same underlying intent.

In Honneth's work, the focus is on human life in a post-modern society. In our work, we use the inspiration to look at and further develop Appreciative Inquiry in the world of OD and organizational research. We are taking Honneth's thinking into a different frame – and therefore the ideas and especially their practical consequences are ours.

Figure 3: the Focus of i-a



### From problem or positive to both and...

This is an invitation to curiosity – from a systemic aesthetic point of view. Every interaction has its own logic – it is neither good or only bad, it simply works. Our obligation is to act with sensitivity, understanding, using a curious approach – to accept that the systems simply do what they have to. (Maturana and Poerkesn 2004)

In a critical approach to AI, Oliver argues that a traditional (positively-focused) use of AI can be seen as a way of eliminating the possibility of talking about problems and frustrations (Oliver 2005). This closes down one of the key ideas in our approach to inquiring appreciatively: all elements of organizational life have potential for learning and innovation, both the successes and the more problematic parts of organizational life.

In our view a more simple 'positive-only' focus on organizational life does not fully take into consideration the complexity of organizations and human co-existence. By eliminating problems from our inquiry, we 'run the risk of alienating organizational members and silencing their voices. Voices of hurt, injustice, outrage, sadness, regret, and fragility may be central to organizational learning and transformation as they highlight significant issues that need to be addressed'.

Working with inquiring appreciatively we appreciate Cooperrider's point that in every problem there is a frustrated dream (Cooperrider, 1999). This means that we can see 'even "negative" life-draining moments are the seeds for hope and transformation.' In line with Bushe's findings (2007), the main difference between AI/i-a is not a positive versus problem-focused approach, it is the generative force in inquiring appreciatively.



With this in mind let us remember Peter Lang's words – 'Look for where the energy is, hook on to it and go on from there.' And let us take the idea that a problem can be seen as a frustrated dream and use problems as a 'roadmaps' towards dreams. Let us not let anger and frustrations block the way to innovation. See them as invitations – and see the energy in anger or frustration as a powerful source for change.

This combination of curiosity and appreciation can be described as meeting the other with a combination of a mindful curiosity and a 'hurtful' appreciative approach.

### Conclusion

Turning AI into i-a is an invitation to be aware of the choices we make during any OD or research process. Using the elegant words of Chris Oliver and Kevin Barge, we see i-a as an invitation to keep this question in mind: 'How does one make choices that are elegant, aesthetic, and fit the emerging context?'

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This publication is for people interested in making the world a better place using positive relational approaches to change such as Appreciative Inquiry.

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