Defining Appreciative Inquiry

A Review of Research

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Abstract

Appreciative Inquiry involves, in a fundamental way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to comprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. Appreciative Inquiry, relatively a new concept, but a hopeful one, will be giving a steering to the organization's for their sustainable growth by concentrating on what is working and needs to be valued. This concept gives a fresh dimension to the strategic orientation of an organisation.

The purpose of the present article is to read the various definitions of Appreciative Inquiry proposed by different researchers and practitioners, employing content analysis methodology and establish areas of 'agreement' and to construct such a 'general' definition of Appreciative Inquiry. This article is divided into three sections. In the first section, content analysis methodology used on Appreciative Inquiry definitions is presented. The second section highlights the key words in various definitions of Appreciative Inquiry and tabulates the definitions through a categorization of 'substantive terms'. The last section discusses the results of research methodology followed by conclusion and limitations.

Keywords: *Appreciative Inquiry; Holistic Developmental Approach; Organizational Development; Decision Making.*

INTRODUCTION

Appreciative Inquiry has a potential to become a dominant tool in the area of strategic orientation of a company, because of its potential to transform the framework in which the process of decision making is done. This concept can make our decision making process more interesting and can satiate it with positive energies. Appreciative inquiry is an approach to be sought what is right in an organization in order to create a better future for it. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was one of the first post-Lewinian Organization Development methods and probably catalyzed the subsequent proliferation of Dialogic OD methods (Bushe & Marshak, 2009) that operate outside the Lewinian paradigm.

Through this concept Organisations can take in all the positives from the environment. This concept advocates to shift from the rule of thumb decision making process, look for problems and try to find solutions. This will have a profound impact on the sustainability of an organization and therefore it will have significant impact on:

(a) Decision Making Process

(b) Change Management Approach

(c) Organisational Development

(d) Human Resource Development and Training

(e) Strategic Thinking and Orientation

Despite all the benefits and consequences of this approach there exist a diversity of definitions of appreciative inquiry. While there exists no universally accepted definition of appreciative inquiry various researchers have contributed to its discernment.

A review of current literature of appreciative inquiry many attempts by authors to in terms of what they perceive as its key components and conceptualizations. This divergence of sentiment can be ascribed to various reasons like

a) The concept is still in its infancy

b) Resistance to change

This lack of established common grounds for the 'basic' meaning of appreciative inquiry is the main purpose of this present article. The present article will be dissecting the diverse definitions of appreciative inquiry proposed by different researchers and practitioners, employing content analysis methodology, and establish areas of 'agreement' and to construct such a 'general' definition of appreciative inquiry in general perspective. This article is divided into three sections.

In the first section, content analysis methodology used on appreciative inquiry definitions is presented. The second section highlights the key words in several definitions of appreciative inquiry and tabulates the definitions through a categorization of 'substantive terms' (Zaltman et al., 1982).

The final section discusses about the outcomes of research methodology followed by conclusion and limitations.

CONTENT ANALYSIS – METHODOLOGY

Content analysis is an appropriate method when the phenomenon to be observed is communication rather than behaviour or physical objects, and it has produced useful results many times in marketing research (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991; Resnik and Stern, 1977; Stone et al., 1966). It is defined as an objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of a communication (Wang, 2001; Kimberly, 2002). It includes observation as well as

analysis. The unit of analysis may be words (different words or types of words in the message), characters (individuals or objects), themes (propositions), and space and time measures (length or duration of the message) or topics (subject of the message). Marketing research applications involve observing and analyzing the content or message of advertisements, messages, newspaper articles, etc. According to Kolbe and Burnett (1991):

> … content analysis is valuable in collecting data about communications when there are no theoretical underpinnings. Such a theoretical content analysis is useful in fostering future research and theory-building efforts because they collect information about a communication form.

So far, the attempts to define appreciative inquiry, within the appreciative inquiry literature, are the attempts to specify the concepts that form the essence of appreciative inquiry. From the literature, it is possible to pull up the definitions of appreciative inquiry. From the extracted definitions it may be possible to choose these key ideas and position them on some form of perceptual/conceptual map, from which content analysis can be used to generate categorizations of 'similar' clusters.

In the present research, the 'communications universe' (Kassarjian, 1977) is specified as appreciative inquiry literature. The convenience sampling method has been adopted. Given these factors, the results obtained from this sample are sufficiently general to transfer to the population as a whole.

REVIEW OF DEFINITIONS

According to Cooperrider, D.L. & Whitney, D., 'Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives a system "life" when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to heighten positive potential. It mobilizes inquiry through crafting an "unconditional positive question" often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people.'

According to White, T.H. (1996), 'Appreciative Inquiry focuses us on the positive aspects of our lives and leverages them to correct the negative. It's the opposite of "problem-solving".'

According to Watkins, J.M. & Bernard J. Mohr. (2001), 'Appreciative Inquiry is a theory and practice for approaching change from a holistic framework. Based on the belief that human systems are made and imagined by those who live and work within them, AI leads systems to move toward the generative and creative images that reside in their most positive core – their values, visions, achievements, and best practices. AI is both a world view and a practical process. In theory, AI is a perspective, a set of principles and beliefs about how human systems function, a departure from the past metaphor of human systems as machines. Appreciative Inquiry has an attendant set of core processes, practices, and even "models" that have emerged. In practice, AI can be used to co-create the transformative processes and practices appropriate to the culture of a particular organization. Grounded in the theory of "social constructionism", AI recognizes that human systems are constructions of the imagination and are, therefore, capable of change at the speed of imagination. Once organization members shift their perspective,

they can begin to invent their most desired future.'

According to Cooperrider, D.L. et al. (2001), 'Appreciative Inquiry deliberately seeks to discover people's exceptionality – their unique gifts, strengths, and qualities. It actively searches and recognizes people for their specialties – their essential contributions and achievements. And it is based on principles of equality of voice – everyone is asked to speak about their vision of the true, the good, and the possible. Appreciative Inquiry builds momentum and success because it believes in people. It really is an invitation to a positive revolution. Its goal is to discover in all human beings the exceptional and the essential. Its goal is to create organizations that are in full voice!'

According to Srivastva, S., et al. 'Appreciative Inquiry is a form of organizational study that selectively seeks to highlight what are referred to as "life-giving forces" (LGF's) of the organization's existence. These are the unique structure and processes of (an) organization that makes its very existence possible. LGF's may be ideas, beliefs, or values around which the organizing activity takes place.'

According to Cooperrider, David L; Whitney, Diana; and Stavros, Jacqueline M. (2003), 'AI is an exciting way to embrace organizational change. Its assumption is simple: Every organization has something that works right – things that give it life when it is most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. AI begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy and vision for change.' '…AI recognizes that every organization is an open system that depends on its human capital to bring its vision and purpose to life.'

'… the outcome of an AI initiative is a long-term positive change in the organization.' '…AI is important because it works to bring the whole organization together to build upon its positive core. AI encourages people to work together to promote a better understanding of the human system, the heartbeat of the organization.'

According to Cooperrider, David L, et al. (2000), AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. It centrally involves the mobilization of inquiry through the crafting of the 'unconditional positive question, often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people. …AI deliberately, in everything it does, seeks to work from accounts of the "positive change core" – and it assumes that every living system has many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link the energy of this core directly to any change agenda and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized. …As people are brought together to listen carefully to the innovations and moments of organizational "life", sometimes in storytelling modes and sometimes in interpretive and analytic modes, a convergence zone is created where the future begins to be discerned in the form of visible patterns interwoven into the texture of the actual. … images of the future emerge out of grounded examples from an organization's positive past. …[This convergence zone facilitates] the collective repatterning of human systems.'

According to Bushe, Gervase (1998), 'Appreciative Inquiry is a form of action research that attempts to create new theories/ ideas/images that aide 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 its best…. these stories are collectively discussed in order to create new, generative ideas or images that aid in the developmental change of the collectivity discussing them."

According to Steinbach, John (2005), 'AI is intentional inquiry and directed conversation and story-telling that leads to a place of possibility. Possibility is fresh, new, and sacred. The story is the genesis of all that is human. Societies are stories, as are companies, schools, cities, families and individuals. There are bricks and mortar and flesh and bones, but all of it comes from a story. Even the flesh and bones of one person comes from a story of two people uniting to form another. I can think of many moments where groups reached a profound spot with AI and touched a sense of freedom. Usually one person would say something like, "From what we heard in these stories, we could..." and there follows a collective deep breath and then silence as people consider the new "we could". Possibility sits in the room as a space of silence and then thought fills the space. Where does the thought that enters at that time, which has a feeling of vitality and newness, come from? It does not come from the person who spoke because that person would not have developed that thought without the conversations that led to synapses firing in a certain way. The thought is not merely a product of the collective because an individual must form the thought. The thought comes out of relationship, conversation, and newly created images. This "thing called AI" is one of the finest ways to experience the power of language and to hone our skills with words, ideas, and stories. There are times when the possibility is so stunning the group has to sit in silence if just for a couple ticks before saying, "well, yes, maybe, why not, let's do it." There must be a gap that arises in the field of the known to entertain the unbridled possibility of novelty. There is a break in the routine story and supporting conversations so something new can creep in. This is the opening where novelty can arise. With no gap, we only have the billiard ball predictability of continuity. The openness to new ideas is not coerced. People don't have to force each other to listen to other's ideas and possibilities: minds are opened because the nature of the stories are so compelling and energetic.'

According to Hammond, Sue (1998), 'The traditional approach to change is to look for the problem, do a diagnosis, and find a solution. The primary focus is on what is wrong or broken; since we look for problems, we find them. By paying attention to problems, we emphasize and amplify them.

> …Appreciative Inquiry suggests that we look for what works in an organization. The tangible result of the inquiry process is a series of statements that describe where the organization wants to be, based on the high moments of where they have been. Because the statements are grounded in real experience and history, people know how to repeat their success.'

From all these definitions individual word-concepts have been taken in order to provide a much sharper focus on the problem at hand. Examining each definition produced a list of terms as demonstrated under:

(a) Best in People

(b) Asking Positive Questions

(c) Positive Potential

(d) Mobilizes Inquiry

e) Best Practices

f) Builds Momentum

g) Life Giving Forces

They are fully shown in Table 1 (content comparison of definitions of appreciative inquiry) with the help of 'dots (•)' for each conceptualization of the definitions given by each author that fall within each classification.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The theory of Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in a paper they published in 1986. David Cooperrider, the creator of appreciative inquiry, resisted writing a book on how to do AI until the turn of the millennium because he wanted people to focus on the philosophy behind this approach and not see it as a technique. The basic tenet of AI is that an organization will grow in whichever direction that people in the organization focus their attention. However, organisations, consultants, groups, people etc. are encouraged to customize appreciative inquiry approach to meet their needs, but the goal should remain the same: Help an organization, people, consultants, etc., build upon what they do best in a positive manner.

A common concern with the application is the possibility that a focus on positive stories and experiences will invalidate the negative organizational experiences of participants and repress potentially important and meaningful conversations that need to take place (Egan & Lancaster, 2005; Miller, Fitzgerald, Murrell, Preston & Ambekar, 2005; Pratt, 2002; Reason, 2000). Christine Oliver (Barge & Oliver, 2003; Fitzgerald, Oliver & Hoaxey, 2010; Oliver, 2005; 2005b) has provided a series of cogent arguments for thinking of appreciative inquiry as more than just

Table 1: Content Comparison of Definitions of Appreciative Inquiry

S.No.	Reference	Best in People	Asking Positive Questions	Positive Potential	Mobilizes Inquiry	Best Practices	Builds Momentum	Life Giving Forces	Total
1	Cooperrider, D.L. & Whitney, D.	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	5
2	White, T.H. (1996)	✓	✓	✓		✓			2
3	Bernard J. Mohr. et al (2001)			✓		✓			2
4	Cooperrider, D.L. et al. (2001),	✓	✓	✓			✓		4
5	Srivastva et al.							✓	1
6	Whitney et al (2003)			✓			✓	✓	3
7	David L, et al. (2000)	✓	✓	✓			✓		4
8	Bushe, Gervase (1998)								0
9	Steinbach,John (2005)	✓							1
10	Hammond, Sue (1998)		✓		✓	✓	✓		4

studying 'the best of' and bringing greater reflexivity to AI practice.

The main objective of this research is to analyze the existing definitions of appreciative inquiry by using content analysis methodology and to put an effort to establish common ground for the 'basic' meaning of appreciative inquiry by giving a comprehensive definition for appreciative inquiry. The analysis of the existing appreciative inquiry definitions has given 7 fundamental 'conceptual categories' based on which these definitions have been built.

Of all the definitions collected, it can be argued that the definition presented by Cooperrider & Whitney is the 'best' in terms of its coverage of the underlying conceptualizations of appreciative inquiry:

'Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives a system "life" when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to heighten positive potential. It mobilizes inquiry through crafting an "unconditional positive question" often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people.'

The definition of appreciative inquiry draws on a great variety of thoughts and its practices in various fields. Although, in the long run this may well prove to be its biggest strength, but in the short term, theory building is hindered by the lack of a shared understanding of key constructs. Every addition in the level of focus discloses a further layer of constructs to be defined in terms of their key concepts. This research methodology reduced appreciative inquiry literature to its key conceptualizations. Purely as a stimulus to promote further academic discussion, the author of the research propose a new definition of appreciative inquiry which may prove to be more comprehensive and relevant in both business and academic perspectives and is given below:

'Appreciative Inquiry in a central way includes art and practice of asking positive questions to mobilize inquiry about best practices among people so that a positive potential can build momentum to identifying the life giving forces to a system and thereby providing a way to embrace organizational change.'

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study has contributed to the existing knowledge related to appreciative inquiry theory. It is hoped that more similar research can be conducted on the use of this important and emerging concept. Although the study has provided new insights into the conceptualisation of appreciative inquiry, the study suffers from various limitations. These limitations provide better direction for future researches in the area of appreciative inquiry. Despite all the efforts put into this study in explaining the concept of appreciative inquiry, definitions can be collected and separated into two broad categories including academic and industry to arrive at more conclusive results. Thereby, establishing areas of 'agreement' and to construct a 'general' definition of appreciative inquiry for both perspectives. Current research centres on definitions only from academic perspective. Future research is anticipated to close this gap by, if possible, collecting definitions from academia as well as industry. Ten definitions for this study have been collected from different sources of

previous literature. In this collection process some definitions within the sample literature may have been missed, which otherwise could have been included for final assessment. These limitations are inherent symptoms of the high level subjectivity in any qualitative research methodology. Furthermore, this study will also provide some research opportunities in the future studies by examining the definitions from various other models besides content analysis.

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