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# Appreciative Inquiry and Organisational Change. Applications in Medical Services

Daniela COJOCARU<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper starts with K. Gergen's ideas on the nature of theoretical knowledge and its role in social transformation and presents a methodology for generating knowledge and change in organizations, called appreciative inquiry developed by Cooperrider and Srivatsva. This methodology assumes the hypothesis that any organization is an arbitrary social construction, whose boundaries are drawn only by human imagination and collective will. There are presented the principles by which the appreciative inquiry is conducted in organisations and the discussions about the specific of knowledge produced in the context of organizational transformation. Gervase Bushe, one of the theorists of appreciative inquiry, considers it an organizational theory and a tool of social change, one of the most significant innovations in action research. At the end, the paper (article) explores applications of AI in the specific context of medical organisations and services.

*Keywords: appreciative inquiry; social change; organization development; social constructionism; action research.*

## Introduction

Action research (Miftode, 2003: 422-437) emerged in the 1950s<sup>2</sup> as a result of concern for creating a research method leading to practical results, but also to the development of a new social theory; it was hoped that action research becomes an important tool for social change, putting special emphasis on involving the subjects as co-participants in research. Although action research has been and remains the "cornerstone" of organizational development practices according to Bushe (1995), the last two decades have promoted a variant of it, called appreciative

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<sup>2</sup> The term "action research" was launched by Kurt Lewin in 1944.

inquiry. The concept of appreciative inquiry was launched by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivatsva in the work *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life*, published in 1987. The authors of this article resume a debate on the importance of a theory for social-organizational (re)construction, discussed in the light of the potential of Action Research; they use the ideas of Kenneth Gergen relative to the nature of theoretic knowledge and its role in social transformation, proposing a redefining of the scientific goals of Action Research: “the purpose of science is not the discovery and verification of social laws allowing prediction and control” (Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1987: 130), but social and behavioral sciences should be rather defined in relation to “their capacity to generate”, thereby understanding the ability “to generate the guiding assumptions of culture, to raise fundamental questions on contemporary social life, to reconsider what is taken for granted and thus offer new alternatives for social action” (Gergen, apud. Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1987: 128). Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is the product of the socio-rationalist paradigm that treats social and psychological reality as a product of the historical moment, always open to construction and reconstruction. The perspective embraced by appreciative inquiry opposes logical positivism based on the hypothesis that social phenomenon are sufficiently stable, long-lasting and replicable so as to be generalized accompanied by assumptions: a) Social order is fundamentally unstable, being at any time the product of negotiations or agreements between individuals, a tacit or explicit convention assumed by the latter; b) The models of social and organizational action are not imposed in a biological or physical way, they are capable of an infinite variety; c) Social action is likely to be interpreted differently depending on the historical context in which it takes place, none of the interpretations being evaluated as objectively superior to another; d) Human actions are prescribed by ideas, beliefs, intentions or theories; transforming conventional human behavior is achieved by changing conventional ideas, theories and ideologies. Socio-rationalism believes that the theories we embrace, our beliefs and representations on social systems have a strong effect on the nature of social reality; e) The most powerful vehicle communities dispose of in order to turn their conventions or agreements in norms, values, goals, or ideologies is the act of dialogue, made possible by language; therefore the changes taking place in linguistic practices can engender profound changes in social practices; f) Social theory can be seen as a high-class language owning its own grammar, which can be used as a linguistic tool capable of creating new models of action; g) Any theory is normative, whether this is intended or not, and has the potential to influence social order regardless of whether people have or don't have reactions of acceptance, rejection or indifference; h) Every social theory has a moral significance: it has the potential to shape and regulate inter-personal relations in everyday life; i) Social knowledge relies on collective interaction: it is created, maintained and used by the human group.

## **Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Action Research**

The essential difference between *Appreciative Inquiry* and traditional *Action Research* is that the latter is centered upon what Cooperrider calls *deficiency paradigm*, in that it is oriented to identifying the problems (failure, deficiencies) of a social system and their solutions: “When organizations are approached in terms of deficiencies, all properties and modes of organization are examined for dysfunctional but potentially solvable problems” (Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1987: 146). In contrast to this, appreciative inquiry focuses the interest for knowledge not so much on solving problems, but rather on social change “Appreciative inquiry addresses a research perspective which seeks to discover, understand and innovate the organizational processes and order” (Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1987: 146). Moreover “Appreciative Inquiry refers to both a search for knowledge and a theory of intentional collective action, in order to help develop the normative vision and will of the group, organization or society in general” (Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1987: 147). Appreciative inquiry is presented by Cooperrider & Srivatsva (1990) as a form of Action Research, which meets this requirement of social sciences related to “its ability to generate”, differing from the traditional perspective in two key directions: a) Reconsidering the role of theory as a key agent of social transformation and eliminating “artificial dualism” that separates theory from practice; b) A change in focus of the Action Research from problems (deficiencies, malfunctioning) to an affirmative (appreciative) form of inquiry.

## **Appreciative Inquiry and Social Change**

AI is built on the assumption that any organization is an arbitrary social construct whose boundaries are drawn only by human imagination and collective will. G. Bushe believes that language and words are the foundation of social life, in accordance with the post-modernist view on language, seen as an agent involved in creating meaning. Consequently theory, particularly the theory encoded in words or images, has the power to shape social organization because we “see what we believe” (Bushe, 2001). Therefore, given the desire to change an organization, the strategy is redefining the way people within it explain the values that have led to success. Change is thus seen primarily in the attitude of members that define the organization and are part of it. In any organization, change can be achieved by modifying the “histories” or “stories” that circulate informally - usually in small groups - are confidential and cannot be discussed in official meetings. These stories work on the human mind at an unconscious level. Specialists in NLP use this technique in therapy. The key to organizational development are stories and how they are conveyed within the organization; this is why in any organization we can speak of “golden days” stories with respect to outstanding people, which are

brought to present as legends or histories of the respective organization. These legends are designed to state what the organization used to be and, implicitly, what it intends to be. G. Bushe (1995) considers that *the great promise made by Appreciative Inquiry* is to give the organization a moment of self-support by updating existing values into the system, values that have created outstanding performance. Appreciative inquiry is considered by him a three-stage intervention (Bushe, 1995: 14-22):

- APPRECIATIVE DISCOVERY refers to searching the best examples an organization encountered in the members' past. This finding is based on the topic proposed by the inquiry- for example teamwork, customer service, leadership etc.
- APPRECIATIVE UNDERSTANDING refers to an in-depth understanding of the organization and the contexts that generated moments of high performance.
- *APPRECIATIVE AMPLIFICATION* is the last stage, which strengthens and amplifies the elements discovered and understood that have contributed to the high performance of the system.

### **Characteristics of Appreciative Investigation**

The requirements assumed by the AI model are the following:

- The investigation of organizational life should begin with ASSESSMENT, this principle assuming that the first task of the researcher is to discover, describe and explain these social innovations, however small, which gave birth to the system and activated the members' skills and energies, acting as participants in shaping and transforming organizational reality. The goal of AI is the comprehensive approach to organizational factors and forces, of whatever nature (ideological, structural, technical, cultural, etc.) enhancing the total potential of an organization.
- Research on organizational life should be APPLICABLE, in that it must generate theoretical knowledge that can be used, applied and validated in action.
- Research has a CHALLENGING nature, since the appreciative knowledge of what was, what is or will be in terms of success/ performance turns out to be relevant for what might be; this information may result in projecting images of development opportunities to be used in the future.

## **What Distinguishes Appreciative Inquiry**

AI theory is based on 5 principles, explained by Cooperrider & Withney (2000: 3-27):

- THE CONSTRUCTIONIST PRINCIPLE states that organizations are living human constructions based on our knowledge, beliefs, ideas. It urges us to examine the mental models we have on organizations. From this perspective the ideas, beliefs and representations that members have on the respective organization become the destiny of that organization.
- THE PRINCIPLE OF SIMULTANEITY refers to the fact that research and organizational change are not separate, but simultaneous moments. Research is a form of intervention because the questions we ask people are starting points for future images that will inspire the organization's future. From this viewpoint "even the most innocent questions cause changes"; so change is not something that occurs after a data analysis and presentation of results, but actually begins along with research.
- The POETIC PRINCIPLE refers to the ongoing construction and reconstruction of an organization, just as a poem can be interpreted and re-interpreted, each reinterpretation offering new meanings. In other words, organizations change according to the way the organization's stories change.
- THE ANTICIPATORY PRINCIPLE teaches us that projections on the future guide the system's behavior and actions that lead to the emergence of this future. Positive images with respect to future lead to positive actions, whereas negative ones lead to negative actions or behaviors. The fourth principle is related to the first, organizations representing social constructions.
- THE POSITIVE PRINCIPLE is more related to the researcher. The more positive the questions we ask, the more we get a faster and more successful social change. Thus, organizations will move in the direction which is being considered. In order to cause a positive change, the system must be analyzed based on "the positive principle" (Norum, 2001).

## **The 4-D Cycle of AI**

AI is a four-cycle process based on the assumption that inquiry and dialogue trigger change in the direction aimed for by the research. The design of AI discards organizational patterns and common practices (animosities, blaming etc.) and replaces them with the will to learn, mutual respect and cooperation. Members are engaged in interviews, focus-groups centered on what was best in their organization's past, on hopes and dreams with respect to future and practical ways of

changing rather than discovering problems and failures. This vision marks a radical change in the approach for organizational research and assessment: instead of seeking *what does not work*, we identify *what works best*. This does not rule out identifying the less positive aspects; however, these aren't the core of the investigation, but valuating the positive, successful elements which reinforced and amplified by the members of the organization will lead to positive social change effects, benefiting both the organization as well as the individuals.

The four phases of the process are (Cooperrider & Withney (2000: 18):

- The first phase, DISCOVERY, is the phase identifying positive “stories” and having them circulate among the organization. The starting point of the investigation is the selection of positive/ affirmative topics; assuming the organization is developing in the direction it is studying, the choice of research topics is significant and strategic - themes are articulated in affirmative terms and must be related to the area the organization wants to develop and therefore to where they can be enhanced. This type of inquiry uses *the appreciative interview* which relies on an *interview guide* with questions revolving around positive themes. This stage involves interviewing everyone in the organization. In general, the practice is the *mutual interview* between peers, but it can be also conducted as a *focus group*.
- DREAM is the stage when people describe their desires and dreams relating to work, their motivation and their work and organizational relations. Typically, this stage takes place in a group meeting during which data and stories collected in the first stage are shared with the others.
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> phase or DESIGN uses data collected in the first two stages: once the system has a coherent picture of what it intends to become, it needs a new social architecture. This stage deals with the projection of infrastructure and management system needed to support the system's vision. It can be defined as a process of reinvention within the organization. .
- DESTINY, the 4<sup>th</sup> stage, is concerned by implementing the plans for support, maintenance, adjustment and development of what was envisaged.

Appreciative Inquiry is a type of research which aims to plant the seeds of social change. It is used worldwide by companies, corporations, governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in pioneering experiments related to the organizational development processes.

## **Applications of Appreciative Inquiry in medical organisations and services**

The Appreciative Inquiry has been applied in various domains beyond the area of: healthcare (Rubin, Kerrell, & Roberts, 2011; Hirunwat, 2011), evaluation (Messerschmidt, 2008; Cojocar, 2008; Ojha, 2010; Kavanagh et al., 2010), therapy (Sandu & Ciuchi, 2010; Donaldson & Ko, 2010; Rubin, Kerrell & Roberts, 2011; Wendt, Tuckey & Prosser, 2011), in education field (Kumar & Chacko, 2010; Kelly, 2010; Cojocar, D., 2011), human resources development (Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1987; Cooperrider & Srivatsva, 1994; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Rattanaphan, 2010; Bushe, 2010). In the sphere of medical organisations and services, Appreciative Inquiry has been used in order to increase their effectiveness and quality, based on the four major values it integrates: positive character, practical applicability, proactive and collaborative character (Seel, as quoted by Knibbs et al., 2012). However, a number of authors make a distinction between interventions using the AI principles and philosophy and those that follow the entire 4-D process. Although there are approaches in the exploration of organisations and in organisational interventions using the AI philosophy and spirit, they must not be mistaken for AI proper, the same way the latter must not be mistaken for the inquiring appreciatively but without abandoning the deficiency paradigm. Thus, “you cannot use appreciative inquiry as a questioning technique within the problem-solving model and achieve the desired result” (Hammond, as quoted by Onyett, 2009: 501). In very broad terms, one of the most often evoked effects of AI in medical organisations is its contribution to the creation and co-creation of an organisational culture that “favours the achievement of desirable results” (Onyett, 2009: 502). A number of authors show how, in a very broad range of contexts, the approaching health organisations in an appreciative manner improves behaviours in the sphere of organisational management, fact that is associated with a better employee morale, increased patient satisfaction in relation to the quality of services, decreased staff turnover and increased commitment to the organisation. In general, AI is described as a means for doctors and hospital managers „to overcome defensiveness, turf battles, negativism, change fatigue and slow response times” (Onyett, 2009: 502), as well as a process for building success in the organisational environment, exploring and using solutions that have already been found and tested in that particular organisation instead of trying to import “best practices” from outside the organisation. Another virtue of appreciative inquiry derives from its holistic and participative approach, which allows all the important categories of social actors in the organisation to see it not only from their own point of view, but also from the point of view of the others; the combination of their readings increases the degree of understanding concerning how the organisation operates, as well as forging a possible shared reading of the latter. In their study, Cohn et al (as quoted by



Onyett, 2009) highlight five themes as sources for shared dissatisfaction within medical services: the representatives of the management team feel overwhelmed by the complexity of situations and insufficiently appreciated for their efforts, those at the basis of the organisation feel oppressed by those at higher levels, the middle levels of decision and execution feel fragmented and confused, both doctors and patients feel captive in a care system that is uncoordinated and, more importantly, unresponsive etc.; the most important detail is that each party sees the others as the source of a solution, ignoring or not being aware of the role they could play in the general improvement of the organisational climate. Also, the solution-centred approach in medical organisations is generative and on the one hand it strengthens the therapeutic alliance in the patient-doctor relationship, while on the other hand it is a catalyst for the development of *empowering care networks*, which draw upon a reading of success shared by all the levels of the organisation, including here the beneficiaries of the services. AI can be incorporated in current organisational management practices, as well as being used in order to develop best practices models in medical services (Cohn, as quoted by Onyett, 2009), as long as several principles are observed: positively reinforce practices and desirable organisational behaviours; focus discussions within the organisations on the question “what works well in your/our activity?”; integrate in the intra-organisational evaluation activity the opportunity for people to show their appreciation for the individuals, contexts and behaviours that have at some point helped, enriched or inspired them. Without being considered a panacea for the problems in health and care services, AI is a particular methodology, due to the fact that it creates the opportunity for all the important actors in an organisation to reflect on their successes and achievements (Carter, 2006), and this can be a source of inspiration for development and change in the organisation.

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