GENERATIVITY AND THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POTENTIAL OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

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In this paper I will argue that it is unclear how important "positivity" is to the success of appreciative inquiry but that it is much clearer how important "generativity" is. I juxtapose the positive and the generative not because there is some contradiction between them; I see them as being fairly independent characteristics of an appreciative inquiry. Rather, I do so from a fear that conceptual understanding of appreciative inquiry as a transformational change process will be lost under debates about when or where positivity is desirable. Both those who extol the virtues of AI (e.g., Arkin, 2005; Oswick, Grant, Michelson & Wailes, 2005) and those who critique it (e.g., Grant & Humphries, 2006; Fineman, 2006) tend to put a great deal of attention on the so-called "focus on the positive" and very little on the generative component of AI. In this chapter I attempt to bring this imbalance to awareness and resurrect the importance of the generative – both as an input and an outcome - to appreciative inquiry. This chapter has two parts. First, I will describe what I mean by generativity and positivity more clearly and review results of my research on multiple appreciative inquiries that suggest generativity is required for transformational change while positivity is not in itself sufficient. The second section shifts to practice, and a description of ways in which I have attempted to accent the generative during appreciative inquiry.

WHY GENERATIVITY?

One of the seminal sources for appreciative inquiry was Kenneth Gergen's (1978) paper, "Toward Generative Theory". In it he demonstrated that normal scientific assumptions could not be successfully applied to studying human societies and so achieving the scientific values of prediction and control weren't possible in social psychology. He argued that, instead, we should aim to create a social science focused on its "generative capacity". Gergen defined this as 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" (1978, p.1346). The early image of appreciative inquiry was that it would be a form of inquiry that would do that – it's impact would come from the creation of new ideas, perceptions, metaphors, images, and theories that furnished better alternatives for organizational actions (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

As I've come to think of generativity applied to organization development (OD) practice, it occurs when a group of people discover and create new ideas that are compelling to themselves and others and provoke new actions. A generative idea is one that causes people who hear it to shift how they think about things and opens up new possibilities. A generative OD intervention is similar. We can say the outcome of an appreciative inquiry is generative when one or more new ideas arise that compel people to act in new ways that are beneficial to them and others. The compelling nature of the idea shows up in a

number of ways: it keeps being talked about, shifts the discourse, and results in new sense-making which in turn results in new actions. Clearly it is possible to be generative without being appreciative or positive. Many of the examples of generative theory Gergen (1978) alludes to, like the theories of Freud or Marx, did not come from "looking at the positive".

AI can be generative in a number of ways. It is the quest for new ideas, images, theories and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that weren't available or didn't occur to us before. When successful, AI generates spontaneous, unsupervised, individual, group and organizational action toward a better future. When AI is transformational it has both these qualities: it leads to new ideas, and it leads people to take new actions. It is the generativity of the inquiry that makes that happen.

Cooperrider (1990) has written about the power of positive images to generate and direct action. Cooperrider & Whitney (2001) introduced the "positive principle" mainly from the point of view of the utility of positive affect for building and sustaining momentum for change. But the image of the positive arises in AI in many more ways than that. There are many useful ways in which "the positive" can help create OD interventions that are more generative (Bushe, 2007a). Briefly, they are positive stories, ideal images, hope, positive emotions, the ratio of positive to negative talk, the power of a "positive attitude", and the power of focusing on what you want more of. Each can contribute to the transformational potential of AI, but simply a focus on the positive, without a focus on the generative, will likely not produce much

change at all. I believe it leads to many instances of "AI failure" that one hears about but rarely reads about (Newman & Fitzgerald, 2001, and Grant & Humphries, 2006, being good exceptions).

For example, about ten years ago I spent a day with a group of construction managers telling stories of their best experiences of leadership. It was one of worst interventions I've ever run. It followed the letter but not, I now believe, the essence of AI. In response to their first ever employee opinion survey some senior managers decided they needed to better train managers in leadership. I spent one day with the head of HR and a C-suite member devising this attempt to identify a common leadership model. We did Discovery, Dream and Design in one day with all 50 managers in the organization. It was a conventional design. We began by having them pair up to tell stories of the best leader they had ever seen. Pairs met in fours to share stories and insights. Insights were extracted to create provocative propositions about leadership. Our hope was that including all the managers in a positive conversation about leadership would result in a shared model of leadership for the organization. As I look back on it now, I see that I did not pay enough attention to what would be required for this activity to be generative. These men (and they were virtually all men) had never thought much about leadership and didn't have much in the way of personal stories of inspiring leadership. The "best of" stories that were selected in small groups to be told to the whole group were pathetic. The CEO displayed a somewhat interested demeanour through the first two thirds of the day and less interest thereafter – symbiotically influenced by and influencing the slowly declining energy as the day wore on. Nothing generative emerged to power the rest of the process and it painfully ground on – I don't even remember how it ended. Simply focusing on the positive and telling stories of it does not guarantee a successful intervention!

I am concerned about the number of people I meet who claim to be doing AI but don't seem to understand the importance of generativity as a condition and an outcome of AI. When people first look at AI they seem to get blinded by the "positive stuff". After years of focusing on problems and deficits and dysfunction they get entranced with "focusing on the positive" and equate this with AI. They see it as action research with a positive focus. My early writings are guilty of describing AI this way (Bushe & Coetzer, 1995) but I've come to see it as quite different from action research (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). A recent study of consultant perceptions of appreciative inquiry versus action research (Egan & Lancaster, 2005) didn't mention generativity once but discussed positivity in great detail. When they listed the "strengths" of AI as seen by the consultants, however, many were about its generative nature (e.g. provides individuals with opportunities to access new possibilities). Even contemporary OD textbooks seem to have made this error, some even describing AI as action research with a positive focus (e.g., Cummings & Worley, 2005). Critiques of AI as being too exclusive in its focus on the positive, repressing or oppressing the "negative", or putting it into the shadow, seem based on this same, poorly constructed understanding (e.g., Grant & Humphries, 2006; Fineman, 2006). Where the focus on the positive becomes a real problem, as these and other critiques imply, is where appreciative inquiry is used as a way to avoid the leader's or change agent's

anxiety, while making an attempt at organization development. These managers say "lets stay focused on the positive" as a way to avoid facing some fear – a fear of what might be said, a fear of not being able to manage the fall out, and a fear of being emotionally hijacked are all common. When used in this way AI does become a label for a new form of repression, one more process where some voices are silenced. But critics who equate this with AI make a straw man out of AI or are critiquing poor applications of it.

Most successful cases of AI describe the importance of new ideas generated by the inquiry. For example, the recent US Navy case (Powley, Fry, Barrett, & Bright, 2004) describes between 60 and 70 new ideas emerging from AI summits. Bushe & Kassam's (2005) analysis of 20 AI cases found that cases of transformational AI had two things that distinguished them from non-transformational cases: 1) a focus on changing how people think instead of what people do, and 2) a focus on supporting self-organizing change processes that flow from new ideas rather than leading implementation of centrally or consensually agreed upon changes. Both of these have to do with what I am calling generativity. Perhaps the most generative ideas that emerge from AI are "generative metaphors" (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990, Bushe 1998). Generative metaphors are powerful juxtapositions of words that open up new avenues for thinking and acting. Bushe (2001b) describes how the generative metaphor, sustainable develop-ment, transformed relationships inside and outside a prominent eco-advocacy group. In Bushe & Kassam's (2005) study, all the transformational cases showed evidence of generative metaphors while only 8% of the non-transformational ones had them

Between January 2006 and March 2007, while consulting to a metropolitan school district I was able to study eight sites undertaking appreciative inquiries into learning. Different sites ranged from single high schools to a complete "families of schools" (a high school, adult learning centre and feeder elementary schools). A research grant allowed for multiple streams of quantitative, informed observer and survey data to be collected and analyzed in an attempt to understand what affected the degree of change observed in the different sites (Bushe, in press). After one year, half of the sites (4) showed transformational outcomes that I believe will show up in hard measures of student learning and school success – that study is in progress. Another quarter of the sites (2) showed positive incremental changes – doing more of the same that I do not expect to create any discernable impact on hard outcomes. Two sites showed no impact, though one of the schools in one of those sites did have positive incremental change.

Figure 1: Average Scores on Positivity of AI by Degree of Change in 8 sites
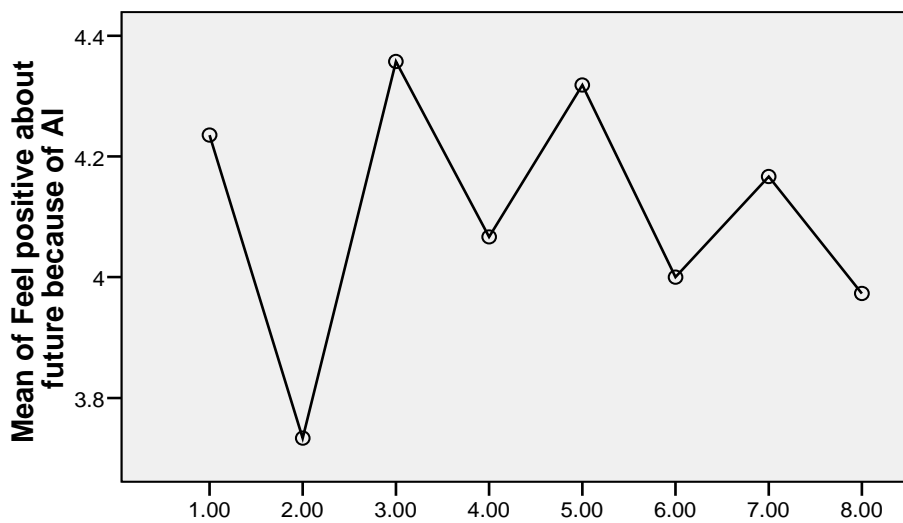
There was no relationship between how "positive" the participants rated their experience of AI, the AI summit, nor how positively they felt afterwards, with the degree of change at their site. On post summit surveys from 224 school staff who were at one of the summits and filled in a survey, all 10 items related to positivity correlated from .08 to -.08 with degree of change. A representative example is given in Figure 1. The average response to the item "At this stage, I feel positive about the future because of my participation in the Appreciative Inquiry process" was within a narrow band of 4 to 4.4 out of 5 in all but one school. This was true of all measures – people rated the AI experience and their feelings very positively. But as you can see, the school that experienced the most change had the second lowest positivity score while the school that experienced the least change had the third highest.

The lack of relationship between positivity and degree of change raises issues about the role of positivity in AI outcomes. Because most people expressed very positive feelings about the summits and the AI process in general, the study could support the position that positivity is necessary but not sufficient for change. I can't test that with this data. What I can explore, however, is the importance of generativity. There's evidence that generativity does significantly differentiate degree of change. At each site Discovery Documents were created at the end of the Discovery Phase by the site coordinating teams to capture key learnings and were distributed before the summits. One of the few survey items that does correlate significantly with degree of change is "The stories contained in the Discovery Documents helped me to see our school/centre from new perspectives" – clearly a measure of generativity. This finding is consistent with ratings informed observers made during and after the summits, where the correlations are much stronger. The quality of the Discovery Documents and the insights that emerged were both strongly correlated with degree of change.

When the genesis of the changes that occurred at the four transformed sites

(described in more detail in Bushe 2007b; in press) are traced they all appear to have started in one of two places – either as ideas that were generated during the Discovery phase or ideas that were generated during the Design phase. By contrast, the incremental change sites tended to have the strongest scores on positivity, but lacked much in the way of provocative ideas. These two sites, one a high school and another, a family of schools, were sites where most people were happy with the way things were. Whatever occurred as a result of the AI was just an extension of processes and programs already in place.

One of the findings from this study, not surprising to students of organizational change, is that in each of the transformational sites there were widely acknowledged problems or concerns that the AI helped them to address. This raises perhaps another clichéd misunderstanding about AI – that it ignores problems and focuses on strengths. Change sponsors and the organizational members involved in AI are naturally going to be concerned with problems or why put all the effort in the first place? As Tom White, the president of GTE, said about their appreciative inquiry process, "We can't ignore problems – we just need to approach them from the other side" (1996, p.474). I think it appropriate to say that AI is just as concerned with eliminating problems as any other change process, but that it does so through generativity rather than problem-solving. AI is interested in changing the "deficit discourse" to a more affirmative one, but again that does not preclude being concerned with problems. It just requires that we deal with them differently.

PROMOTING GENERATIVITY IN AI

One of the propositions I've made in the past is that AI seems to work differently with pre-identity and post-identity groups (Bushe, 2001c). Pre-identity groups or organizations are those with members who don't feel a strong sense of belonging or concern for the group. AI can be transformational with such groups by creating a stronger sense of identity and membership with the group. In such groups the so called AI "core questions" (e.g., tell me about your peak experience in this organization) are very useful during the Discovery phase. Post-identity groups, on the other hand, experience such inquiries as relatively unproductive naval gazing. People are committed to the group and their interest is in increasing the group's efficacy and meeting the group's needs. With such groups the inquiry needs to focus not on who we are but what we do. These inquiries usually need to focus on different questions and need to include stakeholders from outside the group to be effective.

Other's research seems to confirm this. For example, Newman & Fitzgerald's (2001) case describing the difficulties of using AI with an executive team can be explained as the problem of using a pre-identity question with a post-identity group. The US Navy case (Powley et al, 2004) conforms perfectly to the predictions of this proposition. Initially the IP group in the Navy was a pre-identity group. The issues that surfaced were pre-identity ones and the main impact of the inquiry appeared to be to create a much greater sense of identity for the IP group, both within itself and within the Navy. Subsequent AI Summits with IP group members moved away with from a concern about

themselves as a group to concern with how they support the larger Navy's mission.

This distinction between pre-identity and post-identity seems to me to be critical in designing an appreciative inquiry that will be generative (produce useful new ideas that provoke new actions) and I will refer back to this as I explore ways of making AI generative. In the remainder of this paper I will explore three areas of opportunity for increasing the generativity of AI: generative questions, generative conversations and generative action.

GENERATIVE QUESTIONS

One of the hallmarks of appreciative inquiry is the nature of the questions asked. Asking people to recollect their most positive memories or positive stories as a way to build relationships and discover the collective wisdom has a number of utilities I won't discuss here. What I do want to pay attention to is the generative nature of the questions. When I look at examples of lackluster appreciative inquiries, I can almost always see the genesis of failure in the quality of the questions formulated. Most people doing AI begin by having people focus on some personal peak experience. That's good, but it is not enough. I have found that generative questions usually have the following four qualities:

They are surprising. They are questions that people haven't discussed or thought about before. They are questions that cause people to reflect and think. This in itself increases the generative potential of the question.

They touch people's heart and spirit. The questions take people back to memories that are personally meaningful and have deep emotion attached to them. They take

people to memories that touch their spirit – what most matters to them. This is generative for a couple of reasons. 1) It's what really matters to people, so things that get discovered are more likely to be meaningful and therefore impact meaning-making. 2) It surfaces a great deal of energy, which will be required for generative action.

Talking about and listening to these stories and answers will build relationships. As a result of these questions people will feel closer to each other. They will think they have revealed something important about themselves and learned something important about the other person. A greater sense of vulnerability and trust will be engendered by asking and answering these questions. There are many indirect effects from this on generativity, but the direct one is the open mindedness, and greater willingness to publicly dream, that is more likely when people feel safe and affirmed.

The questions force us to look at reality a little differently, either because of how they ask us to think or because of who we are listening to. Sometimes reality can be reframed by the way a question is asked. Sometimes reality gets reframed because the person we are listening to is telling us something very different from our stereotypes or assumptions. The linkage to generativity is obvious.

In addition, when, where and how people interview each other can increase or decrease the generativity of the interview process. For example, having a handful of people do all the interviews reduces the generativity of the Discovery Phase. It generates a lot more interest, engagement, excitement, relationship building and on-going conversation the more people are involved in interviewing as well as being

interviewed. Getting the stories of marginalized members of the system can sometimes be the most generative thing you can do. This allows the really new ideas, which always exist at the margins of social systems, voice. As I noted above, sometimes it's during the collection and discussion of stories that new ideas and images enter the organization's narrative (Bushe, 2001a; Ludema, 2001) and this is one place where AI's transformational potential seems to emanate from.

A reminder that the state of identity of the group needs to be assessed before constructing generative questions. For a pre-identity group, questions that identify what is most valued by members, and dreams for the group, are the ones to ask. For post-identity groups, questions in support of the group's efficacy, asked of both members and stakeholders, are more likely to be generative.

GENERATIVE CONVERSATIONS

I think there are many ways to increase or support the generativity of the Discovery, Dream and Design phases left to be discovered. I don't think it requires an unflinching focus on the positive. Ron Fry (2007) describes this very well in a recent working paper. If someone wants to talk about what they don't like in their organization, telling them "no, we can't talk about that, this is an appreciative inquiry" is an act of repression and likely to turn people off. What a traditional inquiry is likely to do is to ask them to elaborate on what they don't like and fully explore what they don't like and why they don't like it – what we might normally think of as responsible, value free, curiosity driven inquiry. But it wouldn't be very generative. We'd know lots about the person and their

discontent but not be much farther in generating a better future.

Or we could ask them what is missing, what they want more of, what their image of what the organization ought to be is that is creating this gap between what they want and what they see. This kind of inquiry is much more likely to be generative. Out of it can come new ideas and images that point us toward a better collective future. I think it unwise to try and banish discussion of what people don't like during appreciative inquiry; especially if they have a lot of emotional charge around it. Instead, let's try to be thoughtful in how we make a space for inquiry into hurt, anger, injustice, despair - doing that in a way that contributes to the group's ability to understand, and bring into being, its collective aspirations. Often, when we don't acknowledge and create a productive space for "negative" feelings, they show up in ways that aren't helpful. There are ways to do that which are much more productive (see Pamela Johnson's article in this volume for some wonderful examples)

We need to think about how to design the interview process, about what happens with the stories, and how a collective inquiry into the affirmative topic takes place generatively. Synergenesis (first described as synergalysis – Bushe, 1995) has proven to be a generative way to stimulate Discovery during an appreciative process (Bushe, in press). Synergenesis requires a small group, a small set of rich stories written up in the first person from appreciative interviews, and a central question the group is trying to answer. The purpose of the group is to generate new ideas to answer that question. The stories are there to create a collective experience that catalyzes that conversation. It is very simple. Everyone in the group reads the

same story together. Then they discuss what images and ideas the story provoked in them, related to the focal question. They are not trying to analyze the story or look for themes in the stories. They are simply trying to capture and list as many ideas for how to answer the question as possible. Some of those ideas won't be in the stories at all, they will emerge from the discussion. When the conversation runs out of steam, the group moves on to read another story. The group continues to do this until reading more stories does not create any more new ideas. Not only does synergenesis help to generate new ideas, it can generate a shift in the ongoing organizational narrative as people leave the synergenesis session influenced by the stories they've read and the conversation they've had. This is another place where the transformative potential of AI arises. The ongoing narrative is altered by new images and ideas and sometimes important new relationships are built among the people who participate.

We need to think about how to maximize the generativity of the dream phase and use that to power highly generative design statements. The purpose of the Dream phase is to surface the common values and aspirations that enliven the system. A generative dream phase will help people uncover values and aspirations they might not have been aware of. The Design phase is about the social architecture that will actualize those values and aspirations. Cooperrider called the output of Design "provocative propositions" because he was trying to maximize generativity. Things that are provocative are, by definition, generative – they provoke/generate thinking and action. A generative design phase will produce a blueprint for a house so beautiful, and so functional, people will be excited to build it

and move in. How do we ensure discussion and buy-in to design statements without long, laborious meetings that sap the energy and generativity from the group? We need better ideas about how to avoid the paralysis of consensus seeking while still creating a high level of agreement and alignment with the ultimate design.

GENERATIVE ACTION

In the meta-case analysis (Bushe & Kassam, 2005), we found 11 of the 13 non-transformational cases designed the Destiny or "action phase" using traditional change management: Get either consensually or centrally agreed upon goals – or in these cases, design statements. Set up action teams. Try to implement something. But in 6 of 7 transformational cases they didn't use action teams or try to manage implementation from the top. Instead they adopted an "improvisational approach" to the action phase. The specifics varied from case to case but in every case new ideas emerged that were widely accepted and authorities' sanctioned people to do whatever made sense to them to move the organization toward its dreams and designs. Rather than trying to implement something, leaders looked for where people were innovating and helped them along when they could. This approach seemed far more generative – much more change occurred much more quickly. The same approach was used in the Metropolitan School District and 50% of the cases had transformational outcomes.

It appears that if the first 3 D's are generative, and people are encouraged to take personal action, people will step forward to champion parts of the design. As in every participative change process, they are often the younger employees who

have more energy and hope and are willing to put in some effort. Because they are younger and less experienced they usually have less informal influence and so another transformative potential of AI is to empower a new wave of informal leadership throughout the system.

Here is my current recipe for a generative Destiny phase.

1) Create collective agreement on what you are trying to accomplish (the result of the 1st three D's). This is 0ne reason why the AI Summit (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr & Griffen, 2003) has emerged as the most popular form of engagement for AI. In my consulting practice I tell clients the ideal scenario is take everyone to a stadium for 4 days to do the entire 4 D cycle at once – but nothing is ever ideal so let's work back from there to what is possible. By having as many people as possible involved in the process, in a contained space over a few days, widespread understanding and ownership of the Dream and Design are much higher.

2) Ensure that people believe they are authorized to take actions that will move the organization in the direction of the Design. Ensure they understand they don't need permission to act. They shouldn't wait around for some committee or plan – none is being created by the leaders. They, however, are free to create any groups or plans they think are in alignment with what you are trying to accomplish. Leaders should clarify what is out of bounds and then get out of the way

3) Get commitments from everyone to take some kind of initial action. This can be done through some kind of ritualized event, after the Design statements have been finalized, where improvisational

destiny is explained and individuals each make some kind of public declaration of something they will each do in service of the new design. Salancik (1978) argues that commitment gets created when people take actions that are voluntary, visible, and relatively irreversible and those are good things to think about when constructing events to launch the Destiny phase.

4) Rather than planning and controlling, leadership is more generative when it looks for any and all acts that move the organization in the desired direction and finds ways to support and amplify those efforts. I call this tracking (looking for where what you want more of already exists) and fanning (adding oxygen to a small fire to create a blaze) and have described this leadership style in more detail elsewhere (Bushe & Pitman, 1991; Bushe, 2009). Those facilitating the AI effort can support the generativity of Destiny by creating events where innovations and initiatives are shared, discussed and fanned.

The generativity of Destiny can also be enhanced by using AI in an iterative way – making the lessons and outcomes of one AI the focus of inquiry for the next AI. Say an initial inquiry into customer satisfaction (only useful with a post-identity group) reveals that a key element is the relationships customers develop with sales personnel. During Destiny another AI could be launched to look at the nature of highly satisfying customer relationships, and so on, creating an ongoing stream of new ideas, new conversations and new possibilities.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to bring generativity back into the center of discourse about the transformational change potential of appreciative inquiry. I have argued that the profound impact that a collective shift toward appreciative dialogue and affirmative discourse has on people can blind us to what else needs to go on for appreciative inquiry to be a successful OD intervention. It seems that generativity and positivity are both possible without each other, but that without generativity, positivity by itself does not promote much change. I propose that the power of appreciative inquiry, one of the few methods that can actually lead to "planned" transformational change, only happens when the positive is used in the service of the generative and encourage scholars interested in this approach to begin studying the interplay of these two factors in organizational change efforts.

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