

Rogers, C. (2008). Appreciative Inquiry: A Powerful Family Therapy Intervention, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 4(1), Counselling in the Asia Pacific Rim: A coming Together of Neighbours Special Issue, 78-90.



APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: A POWERFUL FAMILY THERAPY INTERVENTION

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Catriona Rogers

Re-Authoring Lives

Hong Kong, SAR, China

Email: c.rogers@re-authoringlives.com

Abstract

Working with families is now a priority with the helping professions. But, how should we, as helping professionals, work with families? How do we empower them, transform them and give them the means to sustain change?

To meet the demands of today's world an approach is required that is generative, positive, constructive, co-creative and creates a world of hope. Appreciative Inquiry is such an approach.

The research is an exploration conducted within the paradigm of social constructionism. It is a cross disciplinary study, using Appreciative Inquiry (AI), an OD intervention as its research methodology. The subject of the inquiry is Optimum Family Functioning.

AI is grounded in social construction in which wholism, connectedness, interrelatedness are valued and closely aligned with Asia's philosophies.

There is a matching between Hong Kong's 'can do', "nenggan" culture and AI. Both are extremely positive in their outlook. HK is a "present/ future oriented society" looking to what is possible tomorrow, rather than dwelling on the influence and analysis of the past. And it is a "collectivist" culture where family is still highly valued.

The intention of the study is to contribute to the future wellbeing of families in Hong Kong.

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Introduction

'The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes'
(Proust n.d.)

'We have reached the end of problem solving as a mode of inquiry capable of inspiring, mobilizing and sustaining human systems change. The future of Organisational [family] Development belongs to methods that affirm, compel and accelerate anticipatory learning.'
(Srivastva & Cooperrider 1998)

'is [family] organisation a problem to be solved or a mystery to be embraced?' (Cooperrider 1990)

'We are in an era in which the family is facing enormous challenges posed by political and social revolutions, rapid technological changes and attendant shifts in beliefs and valuesSupport is needed ... if the family is to perform successfully its key function of socialising offspring and providing nurturance and security to its members, enabling them to play a constructive role in.... society.' (Geismar & Camasso, 1993)

Around us in newspapers, on television, in books, in general conversation, we constantly hear about the problems that families face, about dysfunctional families, about children's problems and problem children, about ineffective and negligent parenting. 'New labels for new syndromes appear with monotonous regularity'. (Gergen 1994) We endlessly discuss what is not working. We are marinated in problem thinking, labelling, diagnosis, pathology and dysfunction. We no longer talk about the problems families *have* but the problems that families *are*. The 'dominant narrative' (White & Epston 1990) has become negative.

Working with families is a priority for the helping professions. But, how should we, as helping professionals, work with families? How do we empower them, transform them and give them the means to create and sustain change?

In the field of psychology, approaches that are generative, positive, constructive, co-creative and affirmative create a world of hope and accelerates progress towards futures that are desired and dreamt of. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is one such approach

Cooperrider & Whitney (1999) summarize it thus:

'Appreciative Inquiry is a form of organizational [family] study that selectively seeks to locate, highlight and illuminate what are referred to as the life –giving forces of the organization's[family's] existence. (Elliot 1999). It seeks out the best of "what is" to help ignite the collective imagination of 'what might be'. The aim is to generate new knowledge which expands the 'realm of the possible' and helps

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members of an organization [family] envision a collectively desired future and to carry forth that vision in ways which successfully translates images of possibility intentions into reality and belief into practice. Its central thesis is that the world is constructed rather than an 'it' that 'is'. It is choicefully affirmative, pragmatic and hopeful.'

The Research Study

The research investigation was conducted as an Appreciative Inquiry, which is both the philosophical approach and the methodology for the research. **It is an exploration conducted within the paradigm of social constructionism**, which challenges the limitations of the scientific model of research and the underlying a priori assumptions of the empiricist paradigm in psychology. (Gergen cited in Misra 1995)

It is a cross disciplinary study, using AI as its research methodology to explore the topic: Optimum Family Functioning. This was the first time that AI had been applied in families, which are viewed in this study as small organisations. It was also, as far as could be determined from extensive searches in the OCLC academic papers and journals, the only known study, at the time, of Optimum Family Functioning. Of 386 entries under family functioning, the papers which addressed what impacts family functioning focused on negatives.

The suitability of using Appreciative Inquiry in the cultural context of Hong Kong/Asia

The use of AI in research undertaken in Hong Kong raises the question of its suitability for application in an Asian cultural context.

We cannot assume that Western approaches and research methodologies can cross cultural boundaries and “with the emphasis on the single individual and its requisite institutions, can effectively participate in a world of interdependence”Lago (1996). Western and Eastern worldviews differ greatly.

The worldview underpinning Western culture has emerged as the byproduct of two major traditions of thought: the empiricist and the rationalist. (Gergen 1994), both rooted in Cartesian philosophy – ‘cogito, ergo sum’, ‘secular individualism’ in which inner direction is emphasized’ (Lago 1996). The focus on separation, the individual, self direction, and self actualisation differs from the Asian view.

China’s worldview, and one that is prevalent in Asia, has developed from Confucianism and is one of interconnection, interrelatedness, order and harmony, in which relationships are key. Everything is “independently interrelated in the harmony of the universe” (Lago, 1996); the psychosocial unit is collective not individual:the group, family, work, society, or national. Maintaining interconnection and harmony with the group is a key value and problems arise when this is broken or imbalanced.

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The Chinese teach that the self should be submerged for the good of the family, community and country.

Fons Trompenaars, a 'guru' of cultural education, researched seven dimensions of culture and plots individual/national characteristics along these continuums: universalism/particularism, individualism/communitarianism, neutral/emotional, specific/diffuse, achievement/ascription. On each of these continuums China lies towards one extreme with the USA, Australia, Germany at the other. However, while the models indicate national positions on these dimensions, we must remember that not all individuals always conform to their group! For example, in Hong Kong, ABCs (American Born Chinese) and 'Easternised Expats', are two cultural groups who may not fit into the 'typical' national profile.

The question is whether AI is an appropriate approach for use for research in Hong Kong, which is Chinese yet very multicultural.

AI has as its theoretical underpinning social constructionism which supports a multicultural perspective. Although it arose in the West, it embraces both Western ideas and concepts and those found non-Western traditions. The locus of knowledge and the generation of meaning, is seen as being, not in the individual mind, but in relationship. Gergen, (cited in Misra, 1993) asserts that we are "constituents of relationships embedded within and defined by relationships." In this alternative concept of a 'decentered self or relational view', there is no separating of self from relatedness. "Relationships take the place of the individual self as the atom of cultural existence"(Gergen, cited in Misra, 1993). This view is very similar to the Chinese/Asian view. Constructionism has a commitment to plurality versus unity, to giving equal value to different accounts of reality rather than favouring one account deemed to be *'the truth'*. Multiple truths are recognised and accorded equal status. This too fits with the Chinese/Asian view.

AI, with constructionism as its philosophical approach and underlying metatheoretical stance, with its ability to embrace cultural diversity, and with its choicefully positive focus is considered by the researcher, to be very well suited to being applied in the Asian/Chinese culture of Hong Kong.

Inquiry as Intervention

The notion of inquiry as intervention in social systems has emerged only recently in respectable academic circles, with action research having being its forerunner. There is now consensus emerging among action researchers that inquiry can be conceptualised and practised as an intervention process: 'dialogue presents a potent method of integrating inquiry and intervention and it can contribute to the intermingled process of knowing and changing'. (Tandon cited in Reason & Rowan 1981)

AI is a 'collaborative inquiry'(Torbert in Reason & Rowan 1981). It draws on elements of several approaches, being most akin to in- depth interviewing and action research

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approaches, with concepts shared with the personal construct approach. It has similarities to an in depth interview where the concern is with eliciting subjective meaning by using the core conditions of counselling, empathy and respect, to connect and get results and not just answers. It is a 'conversation with a purpose' (Bingham & Moore cited in Banister 1994). This interrelatedness and interconnectedness is acknowledged by AI as being necessary in a successful inquiry.

AI was selected as the most appropriate means of exploring the research question: it aims to study what gives life to a human system when it is at its best. It is an approach rather than a theory and as such , according to Jahoda (Banister 1994) cannot be verified or falsified.

Social Constructionism

AI is grounded in social constructionism, and is a generative and creative approach.

The key concepts which distinguish it are:

- The locus of knowledge shifts from being in the individual mind to being in relationship. meaning shifts from being seen as a product of the individual mind.
- Meaning is generated through communicating and relating ie meaning is relational - a 'joint action' .
- Language is no longer tied to describing facts but is a generative, creative activity whereby groups of people [families] can interpret events and share the meaning of these interpretations. We do not 'describe the world we see but we see the world we describe'".
- There is a commitment to giving equal value to different accounts of reality, rather than favouring one account deemed to be 'the truth'.
- Reality becomes a subjective interpretation, a creation rather than an objectively observable fact and as a result new possibilities can be constructed.

Appreciative Inquiry: The Research Methodology

Appreciate: to value or estimate highly; to be fully aware of all the good qualities in ; to raise or increase in value/valuing: the act of recognising the best in people or the world around us, affirming past and present strengths, successes and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems.

Inquire: to ask a question, investigate, search for knowledge, explore, discover, ask questions, invoke curiosity, to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities

The art of appreciation is the art of discovering and valuing those factors that give life to a [family] organisation or group and its power rests with its self reinforcing and self generative capacity.

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AI is a means of directly participating in the life of a [family] in a way that compels one to inquire into the deeper life-generating essentials and potentials of [its] existence. (Cooperrider 1990). It allows us to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality and excellence) to living systems. In seeing more, seeing deeper, seeing what is already there but not yet recognised in conscious awareness, we increase or add value. It is a co-creational act which brings to life this dimension through being not passive and objective but by being active, creative and co-constructive. AI is not a mechanistic process but “ a deeply human process seeking to tap into the memories and imaginations of people” (Elliot 1999).

Cooperrider and Whitney (1999) summarise it thus:

It seeks out the best of ‘what is’ to help ignite the collective imagination of ‘what might be’. The aim is to generate new knowledge which expands the ‘realm of the possible’ and helps members of an organization [family] envision a collectively desired future and to carry forth that vision in ways which successfully translates these images of possibility into reality. Its central thesis is that the world is constructed rather than an ‘it’ that ‘ is’. It is ‘choicefully affirmative, pragmatic and hopeful.’

The process involves interviewing and storytelling to draw the best of the past to set the stage for effective visualisation of what might be. ‘It is an inquiry process that affirms our capacities of imagination and mind as well as our capacity for conscious choice and cultural evolution.’ (Cooperrider & Whitney 1996).

AI distinguishes itself from other problem solving approaches in that it is *choicefully positive*. It does not connect itself to the problem at all, and as such goes beyond the solution-problem solving approaches and methodologies.. Problem talk is not avoided but the focus of energy in AI is the positive. If negativity arises it is dealt with appreciatively, without losing the positive context/culture of the inquiry. In sharing, relating, and communicating, families are able to look over their history, with a choicefully positive outlook, realising that the events of the past are not facts ‘cast in stone’ but are open to interpretation. Evidence of strengths, assets and competence are found and through communication, conversation, a new positive, desirable future is generated, first in language and then in action.

Assumptions and principles of AI

AI is a philosophy, an approach and a methodology. It assumes from the start that the glass is half full. Further, it assumes :in every human system, something works: what we focus on, and the language we use, becomes our reality: reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities - value differences: the act of asking questions influences the group in some way: people have more confidence and comfort to move to an unknown future when they carry forward parts of the past: what we carry forward should be what is best about the past

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AI embraces five principles:

Constructionist: The way we know is fateful. We create reality through how we know something eg a table, seen as a circle with legs, opens up other possibilities such as it being a stool. Nothing is fixed, fact, true and everything is flexible, open to interpretation and possible.

Simultaneity: The seeds of change are implicit in the questions we ask. Thus inquiry becomes an intervention. The topic we choose to inquire into guides the outcome eg: if we inquire into family dysfunction what we find will differ from inquiring into optimum family functioning.

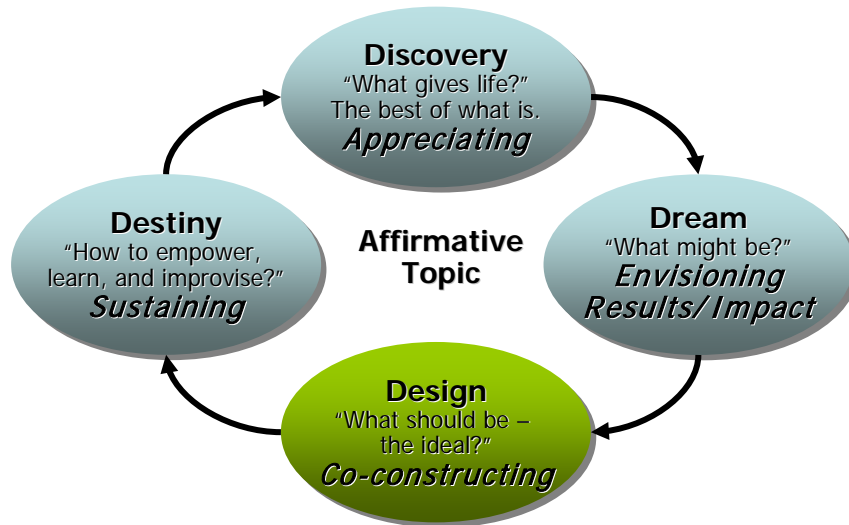
Poetic: Family and individual life stories are like books or poems which are open to different interpretations on each re-reading. We construct our history not just out of remembered facts but also through the lens of, the present. History then becomes a source of learning and inspiration for the present and future.

Anticipatory: Our most important resource for generating change is our imagination and discourse about the future. We project the images we hold of the future ahead of ourselves, as onto a movie screen, which brings the future into the present as a powerful mobilising agent and guides our current behaviour. Thus through the causal influence of our minds, we control our own future reality.

Positive: The more positive the questions asked of a group, the more long lasting and effective the change effort. Plants grow towards the light – they are heliotropic.- and we tend to grow towards the positive. The choice whether to hold negative or positive is up to us. Is the glass half full or half empty? AI aims to develop our affirmative competency.

The Process of AI: The 4-D Cycle

The AI 4-D Model



Discover: Discover and value those factors that give life to the organisation (family). The task is the discovery of the positive exceptions, successes and most vital or effective moments.

Through interviews and storytelling, participants remember significant past achievements and periods of excellence. By telling stories they identify the unique factors that contribute to peak experiences

Dream: Envision what might be. When the best has been identified the mind naturally begins to envision new possibilities. Valuing the best of “what is” leads to envisioning what might be. Envisioning involves ‘passionate thinking’ - creating a positive image of a desired and preferred future- the creation of a vision which will guide behaviours and actions to manifest the anticipated reality.

Design: Through dialogue the Dream , is articulated. ‘Stretch goals’ are chosen for all relevant areas of functioning. Participants then work together to carry forward their Dream in ways which successfully translate intention into reality. Roles and responsibilities are established; strategies are developed and resources mobilized to manifest the Dream

Destiny: This is an ongoing creative process. It is not a goal or ending but is about internalizing and living the reality of the Dream. It involves continuing the actions and practices from Design while allowing for ongoing reflection and celebration of what is already working.

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The Appreciative Interview

The interview is based on the assumption that the participant is healthy and vital. The interviewer must have an “appreciative mindset” initiating and maintaining the appreciative focus of the process, ‘walking the talk’ and being conscious and intentional about all communication. The interviewer approaches the participant/s as a very special person/s and connects through empathy, demonstrated personal excitement, commitment and positive care. They focus intently, listening with ‘third ear’ and ‘third eye’ in an attempt to elicit stories. They guide the conversation using value adding skills and the ability to spontaneously reframe questions which bring out the best in everyone. And they maintain throughout a state of insatiable curiosity, genuine interest, awe, wonder, acknowledgement and appreciation. It is as much about ‘being’ AI as ‘doing’ AI.

The process: context and content

It became apparent that both the context and the content played an equally important role in the research. AI is a co-constructive process and the facilitator contributes as much to the constructive process as do the participants, and needs both to have an ‘appreciative mindset’ and ‘hold the space’ of appreciation throughout the inquiry. The context was carefully created with all communications deliberately planned, the use of positive metaphors, and the crafting of unconditional positive questions. Within this context participants were able to be appreciative and to see and talk with ease about the very best functioning in their families.

Within this context, the content flowed easily and covered a construct of optimum family functioning, what contributes to optimum family functioning, values, dreams and a variety of other threads, themes and essences.

This approach was well suited to the Asian/Chinese/Hong Kong context with everyone in the family able to contribute and interact in a harmonious and connected way.

Research Findings

The research delivered two findings:

- Identification of factors that contribute to Optimum Family Functioning and
- AI, which was used as the research methodology proved itself to be a powerful intervention for the families involved.

There is a very striking similarity in the findings of the study with the recommendations of Covey in his book “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families” (Covey 1997) The key difference between the study and Covey’s work is that Covey has the answers and is the expert giving advice, telling families what to do and how they *should* be to be effective, handing out the answers. While the AI inquiry process also finds answers, the ‘unconditional positive question’ (Wilmott 1996) is used primarily as a means of opening

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up possibilities, generating new stories, new conversations. That is what makes AI such a powerful tool for change/transformation.

The intention behind sharing the research is, however, not to report on the found factors, however interesting, and, from an expert knower standpoint, to advise and tell families what to do in order to function optimally. The intention is to convince and encourage family therapists to experiment, explore and research further this powerful OD intervention.

The research study has some limitations in that the research group was limited in socio-economic, generational and geographic terms and the Dream, Design and Delivery stages of the AI process were not fully developed. But using the Discovery process worked.

In organizations OD practices give much attention to organisational excellence, peak performance and on creating contexts which are not only effective in producing extraordinary results, but which empower, motivate, inspire and bring out the very best in people. The same impact was seen on the families studied. Through the inquiry process, the families generated meaning for themselves, 'reinterpreted their 'family story' and were empowered to take ownership of what they discovered.

Conclusion

AI does not claim to be the truth but simply a truth. It does not claim to be right, nor even that this is the only or best approach, simply that this is a possible way of approaching organizations [families]. AI is a way that may generate more hope, joy and confidence and the ability to create the future. Its current main application is in organizations but many new applications are being researched on-goingly, and frequently these are discussed on the AI listserv (Brittain 1999)

We are now moving beyond analysis, the past, pathology, problem solving to find more appropriate approaches that are constructive, generative, future oriented, and positive. Appreciative inquiry is such an approach. This article is an invitation to explore further this powerful OD intervention in its application to the therapeutic healing of families

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Also: Appreciative Inquiry Commons at <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>

Notes:

1) Re-Authoring Lives can offer training in AI to anyone interested in pursuing further research or use of this as a family intervention and is interested in becoming involved in pro bono work using AI.

2) AI was conceived by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva at Pepperdine School of Business, Case Western University as an Organisational Development (OD) intervention.