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Gervase R. Bushe¹

Abstract

Fitzgerald, Oliver & Hoaxey's paper, in my opinion, is the finest critique yet written on appreciative inquiry. They help us to think deeply and avoid simplistic notions of “positive” and “negative”, reminding us that holding too tightly to decontextualized assertions of what is positive can get in the way of the very things AI aspires to do. I comment on how AI's original intent of studying the “life giving properties” of social systems got translated into studying “the positive”. The paper also offers a new contingency for understanding why AI succeeds or fails: the extent to which dreams, aspirations and expression of positive affect are censored by the organization. I question whether all transformational change processes are inherently counter cultural and if so, would AI be useful in a positively deviant organization. Finally, the paper reminds us that superb scholarship on organizational change is most likely to come from those fully engaged in the practice of it.

Keywords

appreciative inquiry, organization development, transformational change

My first and deepest reaction to this article is gratitude. Articles like this make me hopeful that appreciative inquiry won't suffer the usual fate of organizational effectiveness processes that are snuffed out by the “fad” dynamics their initial success creates. The juxtaposition of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Shadow is a generative metaphor that opens up new conceptual possibilities for those of us interested in the what, when, and how of planned, transformational change. This article is both critical and constructive, describes both successes and failures, and offers many interesting avenues for research and practice.

Of their three ways of looking at AI and Shadow, most of the article is taken up by the section on *AI as Creating Shadow* and I want to react to some of it. First, I want to say that I think it is the most nuanced and finely textured piece I have seen yet on the negative potentials of focusing on the positive. Here we have an article whose authors' intent is not to raise a bully pulpit but to talk softly and carefully about something they love. I invite those of us who use and study AI to carefully consider what they say.

Beyond the simplistic observation (yet unfortunately real possibility) that enforcing a conversation about only what is “positive” can be just another form of oppression, they warn us to pay attention to the habits of polarizing our thinking and speaking when trying to help a group of people raise their collective awareness. This is an appropriate admonition to those who practice and write about AI since, as Pam Johnson (2010) and they observe, there has been this tendency to define AI by what it's not—or what it is different from—and

that can be traced back to the original juxtaposition of AI with problem solving. They remind us that even though it's rare for a client to wonder or question “what's the positive,” deeper thinking uncovers the ambiguities inherent in that, as adjective or noun, and the potential for one person's “positive” to be another's “negative.”

They also remind us that focusing people on “the positive” can have the paradoxical effect of bringing what is “negative” into awareness. I have certainly had that experience and, as I have described in some of my articles on using AI in teams, it can even be purposefully used to surface unspoken resentments, assumptions, and perceptions, leading to a useful clearing of the air (Bushe, 1998, 2001). The observation that people can be left hanging and perhaps worse-off when a rousing AI event doesn't result in any further action is not only true of AI. This sort of “torquing people up and throwing them against a wall” happens in any OD effort when naïve or unscrupulous consultants engage people in a participatory process without adequate sponsorship or resources to ensure it will actually result in something. What does seem peculiar to AI, in my experience, are the longings and negative self-judgments that get stirred up in appreciative interviews. Sometimes, asking people about their “best of experience,”

¹Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Gervase R. Bushe, Segal Graduate School of Business, Simon Fraser University, 500 Granville Street, Vancouver, BC, Canada
Email: bushe@sfu.ca

leaves them wondering how come it's been 10 or 20 years since my best experience? Tears can be shed from the well of longing that's been touched. I am one of those who holds others as able, and I am not worried about protecting someone from having a tearful experience in the service of increased awareness. As an OD scholar what I am interested in is what this does to people's ability to learn from their collective experience and how it might support or get in the way of planned change. That such feelings and judgments get generated during an AI process seems widely accepted among thoughtful AI practitioners. What it does for the inquiry and change processes has not, to my knowledge, been addressed. This article doesn't address it either, and it is a place where someone could helpfully step in to aid our understanding of facilitating planned transformational change.

An issue they don't address here, and not surprisingly because it seems to be part of AI's shadow, is that studying the positive or "strengths" or the "best of" was never Cooperrider's real interest. AI was first developed as a method for studying *what gives life to organizations* and that continues to be his main interest (Cooperrider & Avital, 2004; Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006). Influenced by Gergen's (1978, 1982) work on generative theory, and Morgan's (1986) work on organizational metaphors, he concluded that so little organization research was generative because organization theory and organization behavior and organization development were (and still are) too rooted in a metaphor of organization as a problem to be solved. He decided that a different view, organization as mystery and miracle, would be much more generative and that appreciation would be the appropriate form of inquiry within such a metaphor. Somehow that became translated as inquiry into the positive. I am guilty of being one of the people who did that (e.g., Bushe 1995; Bushe & Pitman, 1991), and it would be a very interesting study of how that has happened. One of the gifts of critiques like this and others (e.g., Barge & Oliver, 2003; Fineman, 2006) has been to reinvigorate our AI theories of practice around generativity and inquiry into what gives life (Bushe 2010; Bright, Powley, Fry, & Barrett, 2010; Johnson, 2010). But what gives life is spirit, and spirit seems to always be in the shadow in academia and in business, so we may find it continues to be difficult to bring that into focus.

For me, the most interesting, and underdeveloped part of this article, is the idea of *AI as Inquiry Into the Shadow*. My research has convinced me that AI's focus on the positive is not sufficient to explain most of the cases of transformational change I have studied. I have been working with the idea that it is *generativity*—the creation of ideas—for example, (a) new perceptions and options for action, and (b) the motivation to act on those, which is at the core of AI's transformational potential (Bushe, 2007, 2010). My own way of thinking about "what to do with the negative" has been to think about how to inquire into it generatively. What I think captures

the excitement of so many managers and consultants who experiment with AI is how much more generative it is to explore possibilities and dreams than to explore problems and fears. If someone says, "This organization sucks," an exploration of why it sucks and when it sucks and collecting examples of it sucking just doesn't often seem to lead to anything productive. Clearly it is questionable OD practice, and probably counterproductive, to say, "Can't talk about that, we have to stay positive"; therefore, what I have been thinking about is, how do we explore that person's experience in a way that might lead to a generative idea? Questions like, "I'm wondering what the organization would have to be like for it to not suck," may be a useful way to acknowledge the person's experience and still produce a generative conversation. But this article takes us in a different direction in providing an alternative and complementary explanation for the transformational effects of AI. At the very least, they provide a new spoke in the wheel for AI change theory.

Their idea, I think, is that in a system where discussion of what is best in us and what our dreams and aspirations really are has been absent, an inquiry into those things is an inquiry into censored images and repressed thoughts—the shadow. The implication is that the reason AI works is because it is addressing the shadow of the system—which puts AI, as a change process, on a similar footing with myriad other forms of OD that tackle what is repressed and undiscussable head on. I had a similar thought when I read Bob Marshak's book on covert processes (Marshak, 2006). I was struck by our tendency to think of those things that are unspoken but influencing human interaction as being "negative," for example, negative judgments of others, competing interests and agendas, and manipulative tactics. But Marshak and Katz's model identifies another set of unspoken yet influential dynamics—things we think are pie in the sky, up in the clouds, wants and desires "that will never happen here." Using the language of covert processes, one could argue that AI takes what is "up in the clouds" and puts it "on the table"—makes it legitimate and discussable. This may help us understand when AI does and doesn't work and ought to be included in future studies of AI. Was discussion of the positive experienced as countercultural in this organization? Perhaps that explains those cases where the change really did seem to come simply from a focus on the positive.

More generally it aligns with an idea that has been percolating in my head that transformational change processes are always "countercultural" in some way. Why is a diagnosis and action-planning approach to change producing so little change in organizations these days? I have argued that when conventional diagnostic OD processes were invented in the 1950s they were countercultural and potentially transformational, but now it is too much like the way most places do business (Bushe, 2009). The "OD is dead" narrative within the Academy (which their article discusses) may only refer

to this diagnostic form of OD and ignore new forms of “dialogic OD” that have emerged in the past 20 years. Although violating OD’s theory of practice, dialogic forms of OD, like AI, are successful in practice and their use is growing (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). I am wondering whether their success as transformational change processes rests on their being countercultural to the inquiry and change processes typically used in the target system. What this implies for appreciative inquiry is that in a system where there has been little appreciation, an AI process may be transformational, but over time as the system becomes appreciative, AI becomes less useful as a change process.

AI as inquiry into the shadow reminds us that if we are going to study the processes generated by AI interventions we need to pay close attention to the contexts in which they are embedded. That is not something we have done a great job of in OD in general, and AI in particular. Virtually none of the published cases examining AI take contextual variables into account. These are, I think, critical in untangling what kinds of changes can be attributed to the elements that are unique to AI (e.g., Bushe & Kassam, 2005) and what is more likely the result of effective (or ineffective) facilitation of any kind of participative change process. I have argued that one important context that influences the effect of AI interventions is whether members of the system identify with the system (Bushe, 2001, 2010). This article adds another: How much discussion of the organization’s positive characteristics and strengths is rare or normal in the target system? It aligns well with another recent idea developed by David Bright (2009; Bright & Cameron, 2009) in his normative equilibrium model. One of his propositions is that AI is most likely to have the most emotional impact when organizations are in a period of dysfunctional, negative deviance (and less when they are in a period of extraordinary, positive deviance).

We need a lot more of this kind of thinking, and advice that flows from it, if we are to stem the tide of “AI failure.” I was recently on a conference call with internal consultants at Hewlett-Packard who seem to be on the verge of giving up in the face of so few successes with appreciative inquiry. During the call I developed the sense that many of them understood the words but not the music of AI. They were faithfully implementing the structure of the “4Ds” but had not really grasped what a fundamentally different theory of change AI is from what Lewin started and has been worked on through to Kotter. The OD textbooks don’t seem to get it; many of them describe AI as action research with a positive question. Even some books and articles that are supposedly about AI don’t seem to get it. But this is an article by people who do “get it,” who understand that appreciative inquiry is an intervention into the social construction of reality and that such interventions are not supported by, or supportive of, rationality, and managerial control. I wish we could do a better job of articulating the theories of change embedded in AI

in a way that is accessible and useful to consultants and managers on the front lines of organizational change. Most of the important theoretical AI articles, like this one, are in fairly dense *academise*. Those concerned with the practice of AI need to translate the growing body of AI research and theory into guidelines managers and consultants can make sense of and use.

On a final note of gratitude, I am grateful that people like this can publish articles like this in outlets like this. An article like this could only be written by a seriously endangered species in the Academy of Management—the practicing scholar. Business schools used to have many people who took their theories and models and went out into the “real world,” got battered and bruised, and then retreated back to the cozy confines of academia to think deeply about their experience. The advancement of the theory and practice of OD requires this kind of scholarship. But there seem to be fewer places for such people in departments of organizational behavior at top-tier and middle-tier North American universities. Although calls from Academy leadership for more relevance and connection to practice seem to come in 6- to 8-year waves, the march away has been inexorable, most recently amplified by the narrowing funnel of B-school “rankings” and associated narrowing of approved outlets for publication. Articles like this, which are not disembodied abstraction but contain heart and spirit and cognition grappling with experience, remind me of the loss, demonstrating yet again how something “positive” can surface “negative” feelings.

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Bio

Gervase R. Bushe, PhD, is Professor of Leadership and Organization Development at the Segal Graduate School of Business, Simon Fraser University, in Vancouver, Canada. His passion is planned transformational change and clinical research. Most recently he has been working on transformation of health care in British Columbia through *Clear Leadership* (Davies-Black, 2009) and transformation of public education through Appreciative Inquiry, where he is completing work on a CDN\$150,000 grant to study that process. He recently completed a comprehensive review of Appreciative Inquiry for the *Routledge Companion to Organizational Change*.