

# The promise of Appreciative Inquiry as an interview tool for field research

*Sarah Michael*

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## Appreciative Inquiry as an interview tool for field research

It is a dilemma that every researcher undertaking interviews faces: what questions should I ask and how should I ask them? Setting out to interview the directors of 60 local NGOs in three African countries over a period of one year, I faced this same dilemma myself. I needed an interview mode that would be equally responsive to the different organisational and cultural contexts in which I found myself, and one that would help me gain a rapid and textured understanding of the organisations and issues I was encountering. Versatility, speed, depth: I suspect that my research needs were not too far removed from those of most other social scientists interviewing in the field.

Not finding an existing research tool to meet my needs, I turned to a methodology for change developed in the field of organisational management, namely Appreciative Inquiry (AI). While this had often been used as a research tool, I could find no evidence of its having been used as a stand-alone interview technique or part of any exercise in organisational change. This paper documents my experience with AI as just such a research tool, and shares this experiment with other researchers. It comprises three sections: a general overview of the philosophy of AI; a detailed account of how AI was adapted to the context of my development research; and a summary of how AI performed in the field.

## An introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry, developed by researchers at Case Western University, first made its mark in the 1980s as a tool for organisational change (Cooperrider 1990; Cooperrider and Whitney 2001; Watkins and Mohr 2001). Applied to corporations and other organisations, it was designed to help them improve their organisational structures and their competitiveness, profitability, and sustainability. AI is founded on the heliotropic principle, borrowed from biology and the common amateur gardener, which notes that plants grow towards their source of light. It believes that, in the same way, people and organisations move towards what gives them light. As such, they will be drawn towards positive images of the future and positive actions, based on the affirming, energising moments of their past and present (Cooperrider 1990; Postma 1998).

The AI process not only looks to help an organisation to create images of its future but in doing so looks to create an energy, a renewed commitment to change and a sense of hope among the groups of people working to achieve that future. The Christian Reformed World

Relief Committee (CRWRC), which uses AI with its partner NGOs around the world, sees AI as seeking

*out the very best of 'what is' to help ignite the collective imagination of 'what might be'. The aim is to generate new knowledge that expands the 'realm of the possible' and helps members of an organisation envision a collectively desired future and to carry forth that vision in ways that successfully translate images of possibility into reality and belief into practice. (CRWRC 1997:74)*

We can see in this definition the links between the past, the present, and the future, and between appreciating, learning, sharing, and enacting. These links characterise the appreciative approach and distinguish it from more traditional problem-solving approaches to organisational change that focus on identifying problems and solutions.

Instead of starting at the level of key problems, the AI framework known as 'The 4D Model' (Discovery–Dreaming–Designing–Destiny) starts by appreciating, or 'Discovery'. This first phase of the organisational project is about learning: discovering the best of the moments and memories in the history of an organisation and its people. The second stage, 'Dreaming', builds on these exceptional life moments to envision what the organisation could be in the future. The focus of the AI process then moves to 'Designing' the organisational future envisioned by the group for itself, and finally, to agreeing on each person's role in achieving that 'Destiny'. From the very first step in the AI framework, appreciating, like the light, creates the heliotropic momentum to see the whole process through to completion.

It is worth mentioning here that while the appreciative approach looks to move organisations away from the largely negative terms in which they see themselves, AI practitioners do not believe that it turns a blind eye to the negative and difficult experiences that are a part of all organisational experiences (Elliott 1999). To them, opting to use AI is to choose a starting point from which to work, rather than to choose some naïve and idealistic end point at which you will arrive. In making this choice, they agree that the resultant research will be 'partial' in some sense, though, they argue, deliberately so (Liebling et al. 1999). There is no one single truth about an organisation's history or ideal path for the future that any research methodology can uncover.

In establishing a dynamic in which people can speak freely about their experiences rather than react out of a presumed need to defend or justify their bad experiences, however, AI advocates claim that an appreciative approach can often yield a more nuanced understanding of both the positive and the negative in an experience than would a problem-solving approach starting at the level of the negative. This contention has been supported with examples from AI exercises conducted in such difficult settings as Chicago gang organisations, maximum-security prisons, and shelters for street-children (Easley et al. 2001; Elliott 1999; Liebling et al. 1999). These ideas might well still be difficult for many readers to believe or to accept on faith, so I will return to them again in the third part of this article, and reconsider them in light of the results of my field study.

## **Appreciative Inquiry as a research instrument**

The above account is similar to the introduction that I was given to AI, and so in a sense takes the reader to the point at which I found myself when I decided to adopt an appreciative approach as the research instrument for the interview-based field study I was planning. Over the span of 12 months, during 1999/2000, I would be interviewing 60 directors of indigenous NGOs in Senegal, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe as part of a research project on the power of local African NGOs. My goal was to gain a detailed understanding of the evolution of these local NGOs,

their project and programme experiences, and their relationships to their stakeholders. It would not be an easy task. The majority of the people with whom I would be speaking had never met me before and at best, our brief prior contact consisted of some correspondence and phone calls. While I had scheduled one-hour meetings with each interviewee, I knew that they would be facing considerable time pressures and that speed would often be of essence. So I needed to get detailed and often intimate information from the busy heads of a diverse range of organisations, and I had one chance in which to do it.

The AI framework usually discussed in the literature is the 4D Model, mentioned above. Yet my research differed from the traditional longer term AI exercise: mine would involve only a one-time connection with the interviewees and had a research aim, rather than one of organisational change. As such, it was impossible to transpose the standard AI framework to my work. Given my goal of understanding what made a particular local NGO tick and the experiences that had formed it, I could, however, conceive of my interviews as a mini-version of the Discovery phase of the appreciative framework. Seen in this light, the questions I included in my interview protocol would need to be centred on the key element of that phase: appreciating 'the best of what is' within that NGO. With this idea for guidance, I took the list of issues that I needed to cover in my interviews and developed them into appreciative questions.

At the time, the most difficult part of this exercise was changing my mindset to be able to conceive of stereotypically negative issues in an appreciative way. I was interested in the obstacles that NGOs faced in their work from both local and national levels of government, but what was there to appreciate in that? Similarly, I wanted to know how donor fads and frequent changes in agency personnel affected their local NGO partners, but these were commonly occurring trends about which NGOs all over the world complained, so how could they be considered appreciatively in this case? AI suggested that to appreciate the best of what is, I had to focus on the moments in the life of these NGOs when things went right, when goals seemed possible, when the future looked bright. And it suggested that these exceptional moments could even be found among an NGO's most difficult projects and most challenging relationships. So it was that my interview protocol came to ask: 'Can you tell me about the situations in which your NGO and the government have worked well together?', and 'Can you tell me about the donor organisation that you find to be the most supportive of your NGO?'

Appreciative Inquiry also makes extensive use of storytelling as a method of discovery and, in its traditional organisational applications, is said to work best when an environment of 'narrative-rich communication' is created (Cooperrider and Whitney 1999:256; Ludema 2002). This further guided the evolution of my appreciative interview protocol. Working from the tradition of pointedly direct questions, it was a challenge to create open-ended opportunities for storytelling, when there were direct answers on the same subject to which I thought I would much rather have access. Guided by AI, however, potential questions on the interaction between an NGO and its beneficiaries evolved into the much more general 'Can you tell me your favourite story about one of your clients?', while questions designed to compare directly the merits of work in the NGO sector with that of employment in government or the private sector became 'What first attracted you to work here?'. 'What's your favourite memory of working here?' became the question with which I started all of my interviews.

I must admit that despite my personal identification with the central philosophy of AI and the evidence of its effectiveness as a tool for listening and learning, when I sat down in front of my newly completed set of appreciative interview questions (see Table 1), I had a number of reservations about how well AI would work across language and cultural barriers, around sensitive issues, and with beleaguered individuals. Would the appreciative approach I was using give interviewees the impression that I understood nothing about the realities of their work and wanted only to hear the now commonplace rhetoric on the importance of NGOs and what

**Table 1:** Interview questions

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1. What's your favourite memory of working here?
  2. What makes this NGO a good place to work?
  3. What do you like best about your job?
  4. Can you tell me about the history of your organisation?
  5. What first attracted you to work here?
  6. Can you describe the work that your organisation does?
  7. What part of your work are you most proud of?
  8. What part of your work do you think your clients value most?
  9. Which of your skills are you called on to use most often at your job?
  10. How do you know when you've done a good job?
  11. Can you tell me your favourite story about one of your clients?
  12. What do you think attracts your clients to your organisation?
  13. What makes your organisation special, or different from other NGOs that you know?
  14. What do you think is at the heart of your organisation's success?
  15. Can you tell me about the groups or people that support your NGO and its work?
  16. What makes your relationship with them work?
  17. Can you tell me about the donor organisation that you find to be the most supportive of your NGO?
  18. What makes your relationship with them special?
  19. Can you tell me about situations in which your NGO and the government have worked well together?
  20. If I came back to visit you in five years, what do you think your organisation would look like?
  21. What strengths and resources will best help you to achieve these goals?
  22. If the director of an NGO that was just starting out wanted to learn from your experience, what's the best piece of advice that you could give them?
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a great job they do? Would they perceive my appreciative questions as belittling their difficulties and seeking to cast a rosy glow over them? Would my appreciative mode be met by a cynicism and suspicion which would be impossible to keep in this mode?

## Appreciative Inquiry in the field: my results

By the time I completed my interviews, only one of my prior reservations about AI, namely the ability to keep the appreciative mode going in interviews, seemed at all justified. Yet rather than being a result of the scepticism of the interviewees, it seemed to be more a factor of their curiosity. After answering questions about the best part of their job, or about how they know when they've done a good job, interviewees were often taken aback when the next question wasn't the expected follow-up designed to find out about their corresponding negative experiences. In one of my favourite interview moments in the field study, the director of a local NGO in Senegal, after answering several questions in appreciative mode, suddenly stopped me, worried that I had forgotten to ask all of my questions and that I would get into trouble with my boss if we didn't go back and retrace our steps so that I could ask the negative version of each of my questions as well.

But for the most part, staying appreciative wasn't nearly as difficult as I had thought it would be. In the majority of interviews, respondents were either happy with, or oblivious to, my appreciative framework and easily kept their answers in line with the appreciative questions they had been asked. When interviewees did drop out of appreciative mode, I let them speak uninterrupted and waited for their train of thought to reach its end before asking an appreciative question designed to bring them back on track and to supplement the information they had just related with an appreciative perspective. I found that, even in those cases where interviewees had difficulty staying appreciative at the beginning of their interviews, less and less additional

effort was required from me to keep them so as the interviews progressed. Overall, I found the drawbacks and difficulties of using AI as an interview methodology to be fairly limited, and I am convinced that with more practice in creating appreciative questions and in steering appreciative interviews, AI would become even easier for me to use in different interview settings in the future.

The impact made by AI in my research convinced me that this would be a worthwhile investment to make. There were three clear benefits to using AI that emerged as trends throughout the 60 appreciative interviews that I conducted with local NGO directors as a part of this study. Interviewees

- were eager to tell their stories;
- offered dynamic and unrehearsed information; and
- spoke more openly, with less defensiveness or fear of reprisal.

### *Interviewees were eager to tell their stories*

Everyone who has conducted research interviews knows how rare it is to truly connect with interviewees in the midst of hectic scheduling, distracting environments, and the mind-numbing boredom of asking the same questions and hearing them answered over and over again. Perhaps the most exciting benefit of using AI in these interviews was that, as time went on, people became more, and not less, interested in talking to me. Charles Elliott refers to it as 'being caught up in the process' and likens the experience to that of those great conversations with strangers which start out formally, impersonally, until something 'clicks' and before you know it, an entire evening has slipped by (Elliott 1999:26). People like to talk about their successes and, like parents eager to recount their child's every endearing move, the local NGO directors I talked to were excited and proud to have the opportunity to talk appreciatively about the organisations to which they had devoted so much of themselves. This meant that I was able to ask a number of subtly different questions, such as 'What do you think attracts your clients to your organisation?', 'What makes your organisation special, or different, from other NGOs that you know?', and 'What do you think is at the heart of your organisation's success?' without the interviewees growing bored, or simply regurgitating their previous answers.

I also benefited from the amount of time that interviewees were willing to give me. I was often told upon arrival that because of other pressing engagements, my time with the NGO director would be limited to 30–50 minutes, only to have our interview go on for two hours despite my attempts to stop at the appointed time. In a variation on this theme, I spent an hour and a half with the director of a well-established and respected NGO in Zimbabwe, never knowing that our time together was to have been limited to 15 minutes. It was only as this director was walking me to the door after our interview that she told me that while she had to meet me as a public relations exercise, she had instructed her secretary to come into the room after 15 minutes with urgent business, so that she would have an excuse to get rid of me. But when the secretary had arrived (as I remember she had, though I had thought it was to take tea orders), the director was so enjoying herself that she sent her away.

In Dar es Salaam, after weeks of pestering the secretary of a well-known NGO, I finally got an interview appointment for a month later. I arrived excitedly on the appointed morning, only to be told that the director was variously not at the office, at the office but tied up in meetings for the whole day, and at the office but due to leave any minute on important business. Through some minor miracle, I managed to cajole my way into the director's office, and found her feverish and in extreme pain with an infected left leg swollen like a log from hip to ankle. She was due for surgery at the local hospital that afternoon. She

graciously allowed me to ask my questions, but warned that she might not be able to focus on the interview or to continue on for long because of her discomfort. In the end we talked for an hour and at the end of it, she actually thanked me, saying that it was the first time in weeks that she had been able to forget about the pain in her leg. Much as I would like to be able to claim my sparkling personality as the element that made all the difference in the two anecdotes I've recounted here, I am convinced that it was AI, and the excitement and pride that it encouraged, that made these interviewees and the many others I spoke to so eager to tell their stories. Ultimately, the interviewees' engagement with the appreciative interview protocol accounted for the sheer weight of information that I was able to amass in a relatively short amount of time.

### *Interviewees offered dynamic and unrehearsed information*

One of the keys to having a great interview and to getting good information from it is keeping the interviewee interested. When interviewing in a context in which your respondents are already facing interview fatigue, this isn't an easy task. In my study, the NGO directors I was interviewing were constantly called on to answer questions about their NGO from donors, UN agencies, and the press: far more important groups than I. But it quickly became apparent to me that using AI in these interviews was almost like having a secret weapon.

Approaching these interviews from an appreciative starting point, with questions founded on the appreciative, meant that each question I asked was a surprise for my interviewees, a question they hadn't heard before. It may not have kept them on the edge of their seats, but it did keep them interested. Time and time again I had people telling me that this was the most fun they'd ever had in an interview, that this was the first interview at which they'd been unable to guess what question I was going to ask next, that I didn't ask any of the questions they were expecting me to ask. In Zimbabwe, one NGO director was so caught off guard by my first question, 'What's your favourite memory of working here?', that he wasn't entirely convinced that I wasn't playing a practical joke on him. 'That is not a serious question. You're being serious? You're asking me what's my favourite memory? What kind of questionnaire is this? Is this some serious psychological tactic?', he responded. But he was hooked, and stayed interested and alert throughout our two-hour meeting.

The rather unusual questions that made up my appreciative interview protocol, in encouraging interviewees to look at things in a new light, also encouraged them to share with me information that was candid and off-the-cuff. Across the countries in which I interviewed, 'What's your favourite memory of working here?' was often met by the sheepish faces of interviewees who could recall their worst day at a moment's notice but were hard-pressed to think of their best days. People were prepared to talk about how they knew when their projects were going wrong, but had never before been asked how they knew when they were doing a good job.

Similarly, they were regularly the recipients of advice from their government and donors, but weren't expecting to be asked about the best advice they could give others from their own experiences. In these, and many other instances like them, AI not only helped to cut through the rhetoric and pat answers which NGO directors have become accustomed to using, but also added a vitality and an excitement to our dialogue. In capturing the attention and the imagination of interviewees, and encouraging from them personal, dynamic, and unrehearsed information, AI allowed me to obtain a quality of information which surpassed even my highest expectations.

### *Interviewees spoke more openly, with less defensiveness or fear of reprisal*

How we researchers ought to represent ourselves to interviewees is a subject of great debate, and throughout my interviews it was clear that the local NGO directors I was interviewing

weren't always certain whether they could trust that I, and my intentions, were as I presented them. Despite claiming academic credentials and offering anonymity and confidentiality, none of the people I spoke with could have been 100 per cent certain of who I was working for, what my agenda was, and whether what they said to me in private would somehow reach the ears of their donors, their government, or the local press. In this context, I expected that interviewees would be guarded about their financial strengths, their organisational weaknesses, and their experiences with powerful stakeholders.

The appreciative protocol offered a means of avoiding these tensions and the prospect of being lied to, however, since there was no inherent jeopardy to my interviewees of telling me about their best experiences with donor agencies or government bodies. In the majority of cases this meant that interviewees lost their fear of having their words come back to haunt them and were willing to speak much more freely. In a small number of cases, the appreciative protocol I used in my interviews may have also ensured my safety and that of the people I was talking to. Security was a serious issue for certain NGOs in one of the countries in which I carried out interviews and several of my meetings took place in rooms that were suspected of being bugged. In these instances, the appreciative protocol, and the focus it places on appreciating 'the best of what is', allowed us a way to talk about subjects which in any other format could only have been discussed by taking a serious security risk.

In addition to reducing interviewees' fear of reprisal from external bodies, AI reduced their need to defend their weaknesses and shortcomings. This cut down on any sort of interviewer–interviewee power games and made it clear to them that I was there to hear their stories, and to learn from them; a dynamic which created a bond between me, as an interested but non-judgmental interviewer, and them as the experts whose experiences were being appreciated. Other researchers have found AI to be similarly empowering of interviewees (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003). In this type of supportive environment, people weren't actually afraid to share their shortcomings and the stories of their failed projects and struggles. On more than one occasion, interviewees broke down into tears (both when talking about their successes and their struggles), illustrating a level of openness not often achieved in more traditional interview formats.

Earlier in this paper I referred to the contention by many AI practitioners that in starting from the appreciative, they actually arrived at a much more nuanced understanding of the negatives than they might otherwise have done. My experience supports this claim. As interviewees talked about their best experiences with donors, in which they were, for example, invited to help a donor agency build its strategic plan for the coming years or entitled to evaluate donor agency policies and practices, they highlighted how these experiences differed from the norm, and how their more standard relationships with donors tended towards a lack of understanding or a loss of control. The dissertation to which these interviews contributed was much richer in its understanding of the common lack of power faced by local NGOs in Africa and their negative experiences—from government oppression to competition from better-resourced international NGOs to conflict with local elite structures—than it would have been had I had asked interviewees about these issues directly. With AI, I succeeded in conveying to each interviewee my respect for them and their organisations, and my honest desire to learn from their experiences as individuals and organisations, and not just as cost centres or project phases.

## Conclusion

Every researcher considers it a success when they are able to return home from the field with their research goals accomplished. At the beginning of my study, I set out to find a research

instrument that would get me in and out of the field quickly, would help me gain access to substantial amounts of guarded information, and would hold up equally well in three different cultural contexts and two different languages. Impressed with the ideology (and, dare I say, science) behind it, and with the increasing evidence of its usefulness as a research tool in a multitude of environments, I chose to use AI as my interview protocol. By the time I returned home from the field I was lucky enough to have a volume and quality of information which exceeded both my expectations and my needs for this study, and is still continuing to provide me with additional avenues of research to occupy my energies. Having conducted far less successful interviews in the field on other occasions, I am convinced that AI played a key role in the success of this research.

Moreover, I am convinced that AI could be equally beneficial to interviews in other development contexts and with other development stakeholders. The practical experience with AI recounted in this paper illustrates that it can be as valuable as a research tool for interviewing in the field as it has proved as a methodology for organisational change in the corporate world. Part of the original beauty of the longer term AI process has yet to be captured in its new application, however.

In my work, the Discovery stage of the appreciative framework was isolated from the 'Dreaming', 'Designing', and 'Destiny' phases of a full AI process. Yet across the interviews, it was as if the respondents were somehow being drawn towards the Dreaming stage as their interviews progressed. Future work needs to be done on adapting the AI interview process to allow it not only to create but also to maintain a momentum for change within its interviewees. Appreciative Inquiry has already shown itself to be a powerful research tool; when this future work is accomplished, AI will be an equally powerful means for interviewers to give back to their interviewees the stimulation, encouragement, and sense of momentum that their own work gains from the time and honesty invested by the people they interview.

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