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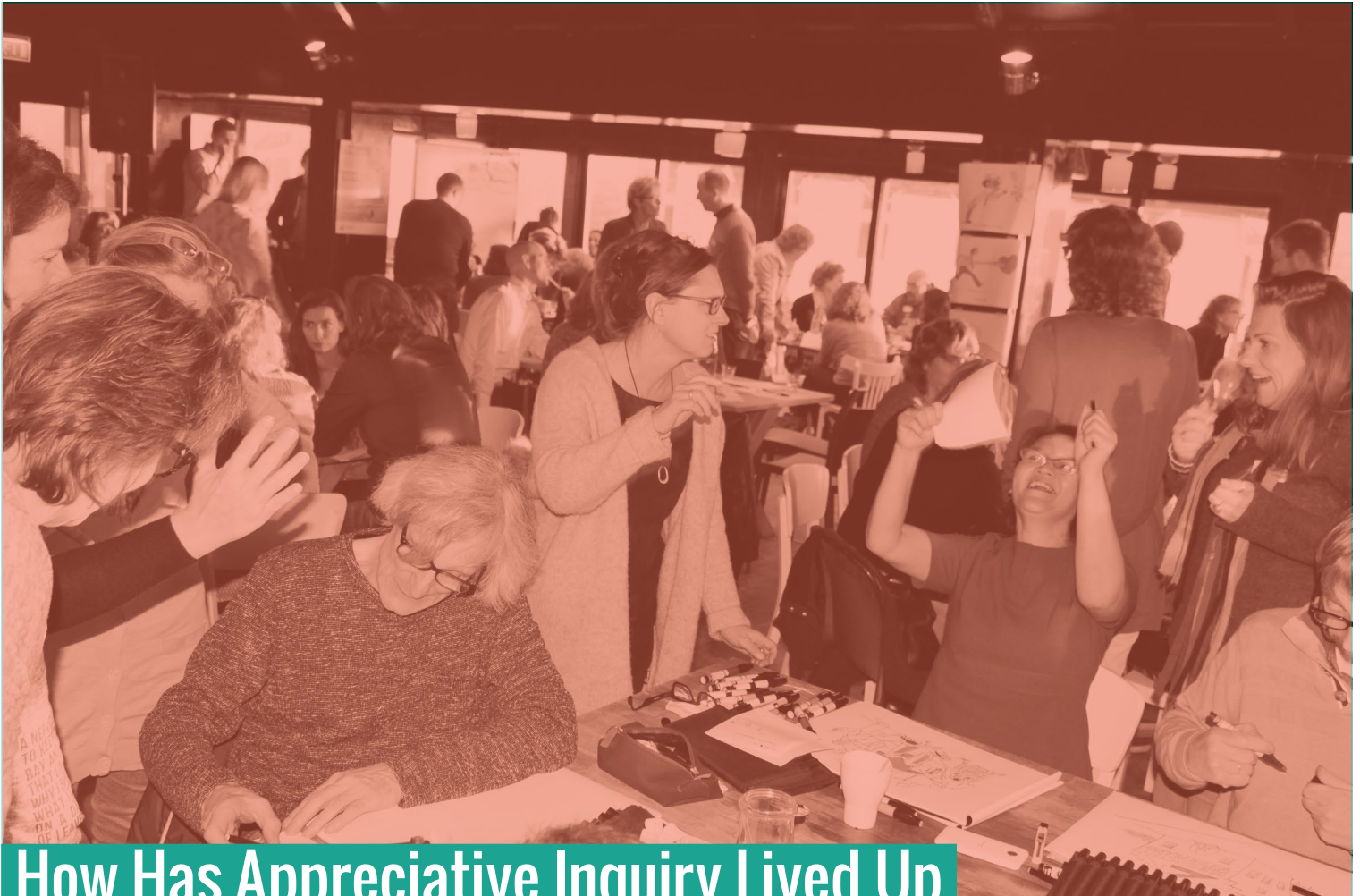
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# AI Practitioner



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## How Has Appreciative Inquiry Lived Up To its Promises? What Will the Future of Appreciative Inquiry Look Like?

Edited by

**Robbert Masselink and Wick van der Vaart**

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## How Has Appreciative Inquiry Lived Up To its Promises? What Will the Future of Appreciative Inquiry Look Like?

### Welcome to February 2016 issue of AI Practitioner

When Anne Radford asked me, about a year ago, to take over the responsibility for *AI Practitioner*, I was very enthusiastic, but I didn't realize fully what my "Yes!" really meant. And now, a year later, the first issue since Anne's retirement from the AIP is ready and I hope that you will enjoy it.

For this issue, I've invited my colleague Robbert Masselink as the guest editor. Robbert is one of the leading AI practitioners in the Netherlands and he is extremely curious: he seems to have read all the books about social constructionism and variations in this field.

We have chosen "How has Appreciative Inquiry lived up to its promises and how do we envision its future?" as the topic for this issue. AI has been around now for about 30 years. We wondered what people who have been working with an appreciative approach for

many years have discovered and what their dreams for the future are. We've also invited people who are fairly new to our field to share their thoughts with us.

Lindsey Godwin and Joep de Jong look back on their long experience working with Appreciative Inquiry. So does René Bouwen in an interview with Robbert Masselink and myself. Gervase Bushe, Ralph Stacey and Ingeborg Kooger have contributed reflective essays about the limits of AI and about new fields for AI practitioners to explore.

We've also added a new section to *AI Practitioner*, called "Nourish to Flourish", an idea that came up in a conversation with Keith Storace during the last WAIC in Johannesburg. In this section you'll find: Voices From the Field: short stories by AI practitioners

in preparation for the WAIC in Brazil, 2017; new variations on classical methods and tools; and a book review by Sarah Lewis.

I hope that you'll find this issue of *AI Practitioner* nourishing.

**Wick van der Vaart**  
Editor-in-Chief  
*AI Practitioner*



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# Appreciative Inquiry: Three decades of generative impact

*In the thirty years since Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) invited the world to reimagine action research in our organizations as a truly generative tool for social innovation, Appreciative Inquiry has become a generative force in organization development and change. After highlighting in this article some of the many impacts AI has had, horizons for the future of our work as both AI scholars and practitioners are discussed.*

“More than a method or technique, the appreciative mode of inquiry is a way of living with, being with, and directly participating in the varieties of social organization we are compelled to study” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). With this bold declaration, David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva invited the world to reimagine action research in our organizations as a truly generative tool for social innovation. Nearly thirty years and thousands of global appreciative action experiments in communities, organizations, teams and individual lives later, the generative impact of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has exceeded what was imagined when Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life was first published.

Little did we imagine then, that in his last speech at the Academy of Management, MIT’s Richard Beckhard, would say, “Appreciative Inquiry is, in my view, an exciting breakthrough, one that signals a change in the way we think about change...We are looking at something very important. AI will be of enduring consequence and energizing innovation for the field. That’s my prediction” (quoted in Watkins, Mohr and Kelly, 2011, p. xxv). Such a proclamation was perhaps hard to imagine when AI was first presented at the Academy of Management in 1984 and met with dismissive skepticism. Yet, Beckard’s words illustrate the inroads AI has made in impacting the field of organizational change over the past three decades.

Today, AI’s approach to life-centric and strength-based organizational change continues to invite scholars and practitioners around the world to shift our attention from seeing organizational life as a “problem-to-be-solved” to being a world brimming with innovation and a “universe-of-strengths” (Cooperrider, Godwin, Boland, and Avital, 2012). Social constructionist thought-leader, Ken Gergen, affirms, “The growth and application of Appreciative Inquiry over the past two decades has been

*We have now seen AI Summits used in all organizational sectors around the world*

nothing short of phenomenal. It is arguably the most powerful process of positive organizational change ever devised” (in Whitney, Trosten-Bloom and Rader, 2010, p. x). Before reflecting on the opportunities on the horizon for Appreciative Inquiry, let’s first further highlight some of the impacts that provided the inspiration for Beckhard and Gergen’s declarations.

### The AI Summit: Applications around the world

In 1987, could we have imagined that a secretary general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, would call upon the use of AI to transform the nature of a UN world summit? After the Global Compact summit in 2004, Annan wrote to David, stating, “I would like to commend your innovative methodology of AI and to thank you for introducing it to the United Nations. Without this, it would have been very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to constructively engage so many leaders of business, civil society and government.” Perhaps the most well-known methodology used by AI practitioners, the AI Summit has evolved to become a powerful tool for bringing together “whole systems” to identify the strengths that exist within the organization and to co-create the future vision for the organization. In the decade since Ludema, Whitney, Mohr and Griffin published their seminal resource on summits in 2003, there have been many experiments and evolutions with the methodology. We have now seen AI Summits used in all organizational sectors around the world: large corporations like Hewlett Packard, Fairmont Minerals, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, US Cellular, the BBC, Nextel; in government agencies like the US Navy and the Environmental Protection Agency; in national associations like the American Society for Association Executives; in industry-wide initiatives like the National Dairy Council; in school systems like Houston Independent School District; in nonprofit organizations like World Vision; and in world-wide initiatives like the United Nations and United Religions (Cooperrider, Godwin, Boland and Avital, 2012).

### A growing global AI community

In 1987, could we have imagined that a global community of AI practitioners would have blossomed with rich networks flourishing in Europe, Nepal, India, Brazil, Canada, Singapore, and elsewhere? Our global community has now gathered for World AI Conferences in the U.S., Nepal, Belgium, South Africa, and is currently planning to convene in Brazil in 2017. In addition to these global gatherings, we have also seen many regional conferences spark new conversations around the world. In 2010, AI Consulting hosted an AI Storython: Celebrating 10 Years Lifting Up Appreciative Inquiry. In 2014, the Office of Appreciative Education at the University of South Carolina convened the first Appreciative Education Conference. Also in 2014, Imagine Nepal convened their first National Conference on Appreciative Inquiry. In 2015, the Southeast Asia Interdisciplinary Development Institute convened the second Asian Appreciative Inquiry Summit on “Co-Constructing Multiple Pathways and Engagements for ASEAN Community Benefit.” These are only a few examples of the myriad of gatherings that have brought practitioners and scholars together to advance the theory and practice of AI.



World AI Conference in Nepal: On the stage with President Yadav

*In 1987, could we have imagined that there would be a “strengths revolution” happening all across our social sciences?*

### **The infusion of AI into a variety of disciplines: From coaching, to families, to education, to strategy**

In 1987, could we have imagined that there would be hundreds of published articles, chapters and books on AI and its myriad of applications, or that we would be reading Volume 18 of *AI Practitioner*? Today, our colleagues have infused an appreciative perspective into all areas of our organizational, and even personal, lives. Colleagues like Jackie Kelm have invited us to bring AI into our daily life with works like *The Joy of Appreciative Living* (2008). Hallie Preskill and Tessie Tzavaras Catsambas explored applying AI to evaluation in *Reframing Evaluation Through Appreciative Inquiry* (2006). Diana Whitney, Amanda Trosten-Bloom, Jay Cherney and Ron Fry described how to bring AI into teams with their book, *Appreciative Team Building: Positive Questions to Bring Out the Best in Your Team* (2004). The *Nonprofits' Guide to the Power of Appreciative Inquiry* (2003) by Carolyn Miller, Cristina Aguilar, Donna McDaniel, Linda Maslowski and Michael Mantel, outlined AI applications specifically for nonprofit organizations. Jeanie Cockell and Joan McArthur-Blair shared examples of AI in our colleges and universities with their 2012 book, *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force*. In 2008, Jennifer Bloom, Bryant Hutson and Ye He helped reframe advising with *The Appreciative Advising Revolution*.

With the book, *Positive Family Dynamics: Appreciative Inquiry Questions to Bring Out the Best in Families* (2008), Dawn Cooperrider Dole, Jen Hetzel Silbert and Ada Jo Mann invited us to take an appreciative stance through the myriad of seasons and situations we experience with our families. Sara Orem, Jacqueline Binkert and Ann Clancy's *Appreciative Coaching: A Positive Process for Change* (2007) has been a resource for many to bring AI into the coaching arena. Jackie Stavros, Gina Hinrichs and Sue Annis Hammond seeded our imaginations for bringing AI into strategic planning and giving us an alternative to SWOT analysis with the *Thin Book of SOAR* (2009). Thatchenkery and Metzker invited us to explore our *Appreciative Intelligence* in their 2006 book, *Appreciative Intelligence: Seeing the Mighty Oak in the Acorn*. Diana Whitney, Amanda Trosten-Bloom, and K. Rader's book *Appreciative Leadership* expanded our ideas on what effective leadership looks like. One could go on and on with titles and contributions colleagues around the world are making, as these are but the tip of the iceberg of the diffuse array of works that are redefining our approaches to human systems with appreciative frameworks.

### **The strengths revolution in the social sciences**

In 1987, could we have imagined that there would be a “strengths revolution” (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001) happening all across our social sciences, supported by a mounting database of research in fields of positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003) and positive psychology (Seligman, Steen & Peterson, 2005)? At its heart, this revolution has been fueled by the very call to re-think our approach to action research proposed by Cooperrider and Srivastva in 1987. These new advances in our social sciences are the realization of their visionary challenge to bring a

*When we deepen our inquiries into the miracles of organizational life, our appreciative eye expands to see even more good and possibility in our systems, and in ourselves.*

new vantage point to our organizational inquiry by evolving our questions from “What is wrong here to be fixed?” to an entirely new line of questions such as, “What gives life to the system when it is most alive?” Building on the strengths revolution and powered by AI, the emergence of positive organization development has invited the field to make advances in three spheres: (1) the elevation of strengths, (2) the alignment or connected magnification of strengths, and (3) the creation of strengths-based organizations to become positive institutions – vehicles for elevating, magnifying and refracting our highest human strengths outward to the world (Cooperrider and Godwin 2012).

As a result of expanding our appreciative mode of inquiry – our appreciative stance as a way of living with, being with and directly participating in the varieties of social organization we are compelled to study – we are changing not only our social systems, but also ourselves. When we deepen our inquiries into the miracles of organizational life, our appreciative eye expands to see even more good and possibility in our systems, and in ourselves. Parallel to Barbara Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) hypothesizes that positive emotions broaden the scope of attention and thought-action repertoires, let’s consider how an appreciative stance broadens our capacity for seeing the good, the better and the possible within our organizations and in ourselves. And as our social constructionist foundations remind us, what we look for, we find. Evidence of this is reflected in the multitude of advances in theory and practice briefly highlighted above.

### **Looking forward: opportunities for further development**

In 30 short years, Appreciative Inquiry has spanned the globe and touched all aspects of our approaches to human systems; it is perhaps no wonder that Beckhard, Gergen and others have called AI a transformative force. In looking backwards and discovering some of the highlights from our generative past, one cannot help but become excited to look forward and dream about what is next for advancing our theory and practice of AI. Some of the opportunities ripe for further development to expand and deepen our global AI work include:

- Further research into the dynamics that support effective AI Summit processes. Questions in this realm include: What are the stages of relational evolution during a summit? How do we best sustain the generative momentum created during a summit? How do we continue to experiment with co-located, technology-mediated participation in summits to truly engage whole systems?
- Expanded processes and tools to help us lift up strengths at all levels – individual, team and whole systems. Questions in this realm include: How do we most effectively identify and leverage the hidden potential and assets that exist in all situations and people? How can we evolve our tools, and even our language, to help us better appreciate the generative capacity in our organizations, and in ourselves, that often lies dormant for lack of discovery?

*‘AI is not a thing or a static concept, but an ongoing co-construction of reality.’  
David Cooperrider*



The dedication of the David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry at the Stiller School of Business, Champlain College

- How do we keep our focus on what is generative in our organizational lives without truncating our inquiry into only what is “positive”? As Gervase Bushe (2007) reminded us in his *OD Practitioner* article, “AI is not (just) about the positive”; it is not a blind focus on positivity that distinguishes AI, rather “AI is different because it focuses on generativity instead of problem-solving”. Questions in this realm include: How can we deepen our ability to invite inquiry into what is generative in any organizational system? How can we help build capacity within systems to discover, dream and design structures that enable them to sustain generativity at all levels?
- Stretching ourselves on both macro and micro AI applications. Questions in this realm include: How do we evolve our whole-system AI approaches (like the summit) to incorporate best practices from design-thinking and other domains to continue pushing us forward in our convening capacity at the scale of the whole? How do we also advance the daily micro-practices of AI so that our organizations become positive institutions that are indeed refractions of our best selves?

Our global community of AI scholars and practitioners will likely explore these and many other questions in the years ahead. As new discoveries are made as a result of these inquiries, AI will undoubtedly continue to be a generative force in the world because it invites us to continually reach for what is better in ourselves and our systems. As David Cooperrider wrote in the fourth volume of *Advances in Appreciative Inquiry* (2013):

“AI is not a thing or a static concept, but an ongoing co-construction of reality; it’s the result of many voices, time and circumstance, planned and unplanned experiments, new discoveries and designs, narratives and cases, and unlimited imagination. All I am certain of right now is this: AI, as long as it is constructed upon, practiced or inspired by the sense of the mystery and miracle of life on this planet, will never become inert or lifeless” (Cooperrider, 2013, p. 6).

Thirty years from now, what innovations and inspirations from our global AI community of scholars and practitioners will we be reflecting back on in awe? What generative images of tomorrow are you going to begin cultivating today?

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## Purpose of AI Practitioner

In 1998, Anne Radford founded the newsletter which became *AI Practitioner* in 2003. She was editor-in-chief of *AI Practitioner* from 2003 to 2015.



This publication, distributed quarterly in February, May, August and November, is for people interested in making the world a better place using positive relational approaches to change such as AI.

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