When Is Appreciative Inquiry Transformational?

A Meta-Case Analysis

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Twenty cases of the use of appreciative inquiry (AI) for changing social systems published before 2003 were examined to look for the presence or absence of transformational change and the use of seven principles and practices culled from a review of the theoretical literature on AI. Although all cases began by collecting stories of the positive, followed the 4-D model, and adhered to five principles of AI articulated by Cooperrider and Whitney, only seven (35%) showed transformational outcomes. Highly consistent differences between the transformational cases and the others led the authors to conclude that two qualities of appreciative inquiry that are different from conventional organizational development and change management prescriptions are key to AI's transformative potential: (a) a focus on changing how people think instead of what people do and (b) a focus on supporting self-organizing change processes that flow from new ideas.

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All indications are that appreciative inquiry (AI) is an increasingly popular organizational change method, but an almost complete lack of published research exists examining it. Only two attempts to measure its impact exist in the research literature (Bushe

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& Coetzer, 1995; Jones, 1998), and the first was at the group level. Yet, the past few years have seen an exponential growth in the number of consultants and organizations using AI, the number of graduate theses in organization development that use an AI approach, and the number of practitioner articles and books describing it. Between 1987, when the original seminal article on AI was first published (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and 2000, only a handful of articles—the rather sparse, self-published "Thin Book" (Hammond, 1996) and fairly primitive "Lessons From the Field" (Hammond & Royal, 1998)—existed. In 1999, Cooperrider finally published a short book on how to do appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999), and Elliott (1999) published the first serious, scholarly book on applications of AI in the field.

Since 2001, things have changed considerably. Five significant AI books have been published (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney, & Yeager, 2001; Fry, Barrett, Seiling, & Whitney, 2002; Ludema, Whitney, Mohr, & Griffen, 2003; Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Elsevier and Jossey-Bass have each launched a separate series of books on AI. A global consulting firm, AI Consulting, that, according to their Web site at the time of this writing had 97 members, was launched in 2002. One of the largest consulting firms in the world, Cap Gemini Ernst Young, has declared that AI is the core of their human systems consulting practice. The first international conference on AI was held in Baltimore just weeks after 9/11, and still close to 600 people flew in from all over the world to attend. Ludema et al. (2003) list more than 75 businesses, nonprofit organizations, governments, and communities that have engaged in significant AIs, and this is just from their personal experience. Even the U.S. Navy is in the game, having created a center for positive change that is leading multiple AIs. Robert Quinn (2000) of the University of Michigan recently wrote that "Appreciative Inquiry is currently revolutionizing the field of organization development" (p. 220).

What this indicates is that the practice of AI is in a time of exponential growth. This is usually a dangerous time for innovations in organizational change and development practice as the "fad" phenomenon sets in (Collins, 2000, 2003; Miller & Hartwick, 2002). In this article, we examine just what is going on in the practice of AI and the extent to which AI practice and outcomes match the prescriptions of AI theorists. We do this by systematically examining every published case study of AI we could find prior to 2003 and assess them against a set of criteria we developed from reviewing the leading prescriptions of AI theory and practice prior to 2003 (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990; Bushe 1995, 2001b; Cooperrider, Barrett, & Srivastva, 1995; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999, 2001; Fry & Barrett, 2002; Ludema, 2002; Ludema, Wilmot, & Srivastva, 1997; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). We begin by identifying the kinds of transformational outcomes that AI theorists claim for AI that make AI new and different from other change processes. We focus on transformational change as this is the most ambitious claim any change process can make and is one often made by AI.

By transformation we are referring to changes in the identity of a system and qualitative changes in the state of being of that system. Such changes have been variously defined as second-order change (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974), radical change (Nord & Tucker, 1987), and revolutionary change (Romanelli & Tushman,

1994) and contrasted with changes to a system that keep the basic nature of the system intact. The principles and processes that AI theorists propose lead to positive organizational transformation are identified. This list is compared to the set of published cases that results in a matrix that identifies, for each case, the extent to which these outcomes and processes occurred. Patterns emerge from this analysis that we discuss in our findings. In essence, we find that those cases describing transformational outcomes also describe processes that are consistent with AI theorists and that are somewhat different from conventional organizational development (OD) practice. Those cases that do not show transformational outcomes look more like successful, conventional action research efforts guided by inquiry into the positive—that is, the best of system members' experiences and aspirations—resulting in useful first-order changes.

Transformational Outcomes Claimed by AI

In examining the literature of AI we find two specific outcome claims of AI that distinguish it from other OD interventions. They are somewhat interrelated. The first is that AI results in new knowledge, models, and/or theories. The second is that AI results in a generative metaphor that compels new action.

The claim to generating new knowledge (models, theories) is perhaps the most important claim of the theory of appreciative inquiry as a method of inquiry. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) focus their critique on traditional action research and problem-solving approaches to planned change primarily by arguing that they do not lead to new knowledge but instead to (re)creating the processes they claim to be studying. They point out that action research has not been very successful at creating new models and theories of social organization and that most action research as practiced by OD consultants begins with a model of the ideal group or organization that it then assesses the system against. They state that AI emerged out of a search for methods of inquiry that have the potential to create new images, models, and theories of social organization. In their article, they convincingly argue that the most powerful force for change in social systems is a new idea and offer AI as a method of inquiry for generating new ideas.

To compare AI with OD, one is forced to construct what OD is, assured that in practice, there is an exception to any general rule; but what gets written in the papers and textbooks is more homogenous. The culture of OD emerged out of the science of psychology of the 1940s, which focused on behavior because that is what could be measured. In the core of the OD literature, there is very little focus on changing how people think and more on changing what people do—how they work together, communicate, solve problems, manage conflicts, and learn. For example, Beckhard (1969) defines OD as "planned interventions in the organization's processes" (p. 9). Porras and Robertson (1992) describe OD as a practice for "enhancing individual development and improving organizational performance, through alteration of organizational member's on-the-job behaviors" (p. 272). Cummings and Worley (2001) say that OD "moves beyond the initial efforts to implement a change program to a longer-term concern for stabilizing and institutionalizing new activities within the organization" (p. 3).

Now there are exceptions to this. Many view OD as highly concerned with "culture change" (e.g., Burke, 1993), and, to some extent, changing culture is about changing ideas. However, most of the focus of culture change practitioners, at least in their writings, is on the *behavioral* consequences of changing the normative order, much as Lewin's focus was. Argyris and Schon's (1995) focus on changing defensive routines is clearly about changing how people think, but although well respected in the OD field, it has not had much impact on actual OD practice, probably because the processes offered for eliciting and changing defensive routines are not that practical (Bushe 2001a). There are certainly OD consultants whose practice involves helping large groups change how they think—such as future search processes. We do not think inquiry into the positive is the only way to change what groups of people think, and we are open to the possibility it is not even the best way. But we do note that this is an emphasis in the literature on AI that you do not find in the literature on OD. Although new ideas may be required to solve problems and identify possibilities, helping groups or organizations create new models or theories is not a typical subsection in OD manuals. In much of OD practice, consultants bring "new ideas" in the form of knowledge, tested by practice and research, into the client system so that the focus is more on implementing externally validated knowledge than on creating internally generated knowledge.

AI theorists like to describe what they are attempting to create as a "new lens for seeing old issues." A favorite quote of AI theorists, by Marcel Proust, is "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." By new eyes, they mean that an important result of the inquiry is that people have new ways to think about and discuss their organization. This begins right from the inception of the intervention in the way in which the inquiry is framed. For example, Diana Whitney tells a story about the initial meetings to plan for AI at a large airline where a group of managers were deciding on what issues to inquire about. One person declared that one of the greatest sources of "pain" for ground staff was "recovery." *Recovery* was the term they used for how long it took to find and return missing luggage. Others in the room agreed. From the point of view of AI another inquiry into a problem that had already been a focus for lots of discussion was not going to result in new ways of thinking, so Whitney asked the managers, in small groups, to think about what recovery was symptomatic of and what they really wanted. Out of the list of ideas of what they wanted, the managers chose "exceptional arrival experiences" as a key focus for an AI, which then, in time, led to a variety of new ideas and practices about how to make customers' arrival experiences exceptional.

A specific form of new lens described by AI theorists is a "generative metaphor" (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990; Bushe, 1998). Generative metaphors are sayings or phrases that are in themselves provocative and can create new possibilities for action that people had not previously considered (Schon, 1993). Take, for example, the impact of the phrase *quality of work life* on American labor relations in the late 1970s or the impact of the phrase *sustainable development* on business and government worldwide in the late 1980s. Generative metaphors tend to consist of words whose juxtapositions evoke ways out of paradoxical dilemmas (Bushe, 1998) that are causing social systems to be "stuck" (Smith & Berg, 1987). Bushe (2001a) describes how the

phrase *sustainable development* had such a sweeping and profound change in corporate and governmental attitudes toward the ecology movement, so rapidly unfreezing the decades of *stuckness* between business leaders and environmentalists that it caused the leading eco-warrior organization in Canada to go through an identity crisis and almost dissolve.

In examining the cases, therefore, we focused on two key outcomes: (a) Did the AI intervention result in new knowledge or, as more typical of traditional OD and change management, on new ways of doing things? Did it create one or more new lenses (images, models, theories) for looking at old issues? and (b) Did a generative metaphor emerge out of the initiative?

Principles of AI

David Cooperrider purposefully avoided creating a specific method for AI for many years, preferring instead to articulate a set of principles to guide attempts to inquire appreciatively. Recently, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) have identified eight different approaches that have been used under the AI banner that they call "forms of engagement." These range from using project teams in organizations who conducted the appreciative inquiry to having everyone in an organization at an off-site location spend 2 to 4 days in an AI. Even though there is a great deal of experimentation with AI in practice, certain models and processes have come to typify AI interventions, which we will review in the next section. What all forms of engagement described in the literature share in common is adherence to the core principles of AI that we looked for in our cases.

There have been two sets of principles enunciated in the evolution of AI. The first set, in Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), is that

1. the inquiry begin with appreciation.
2. the inquiry is applicable.
3. the inquiry is provocative.
4. the inquiry is collaborative.

The first principle means that AI should look at the best of the system under examination. Cooperrider and Srivastva explicitly contrast AI with problem solving, which they describe as a deficit-based approach to change. Rather than focusing on problems that need solving, AI focuses on the examples of the system at its best, its highest values and aspirations, its noblest actions, and so on. The second principle means that the outcomes of an AI have to be applicable to the system in which the inquiry takes place and be validated in action. The third principle means that the inquiry should create knowledge, models, and images that are compelling to system members and provoke people to take action. The final principle means that system members must be part of the design and execution of the inquiry.

Students and scholars of OD will notice that Principles 2 and 4 are core to much of OD practice, whereas Principles 1 and 3 are some of what distinguishes AI from traditional OD practice. These four principles form a basis that allows for a lot of experimentation in the specifics of any instance of AI. Cases examined in this study range

from the use of small project teams who collect and work with the data on behalf of the organization to cases of whole organizations engaged simultaneously in 2 or 3 days of AI to cases where organizations continually use AI to address a host of issues.

In a recent, important theoretical statement on AI, Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) respond to concerns about the place of problems and problem solving in organizational change efforts and articulate another set of five principles for AI:

1. The constructionist principle
2. The principle of simultaneity
3. The poetic principle
4. The anticipatory principle
5. The positive principle

The constructionist principle states that how we know and what we do are closely interwoven. An important basis of AI is the sociorationalism of Gergen (1982, 1994), which argues that in social relations there are no empirical truths "out there" to discover. "The purpose of inquiry, which is viewed as totally inseparable and intertwined with action, is the creation of 'generative theory,' not so much mappings or explanations of yesterday's world but anticipatory articulations of tomorrow's possibilities" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001, p. 20). Organizations are socially, coconstructed realities, and so AI should attempt to engage as many members of the system as possible in the inquiry and focus on articulating desirable collective futures.

The principle of simultaneity is based on the belief that inquiry is intervention, that as we inquire into human systems, we change them.

> The seeds of change—that is, the things people think and talk about, the things people discover and learn, and the things that inform dialogue and inspire images of the future—are implicit in the very first questions we ask. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001, p. 20)

This principle argues against the traditional action research model where first we do the inquiry, diagnose the system, generate and select change options, and only then implement the change. Rather, AI theorists argue that questions are fateful and that change begins the moment the system begins to engage in inquiry. The OD literature has certainly acknowledged for a long time that observation changes that which is being observed. Until AI, however, this insight had not led to a change in the action research model. In AI practice, the simultaneity principle requires spending considerable time and effort to identify what the inquiry is about and paying close attention to the exact wording and provocative potential of the questions that will be asked right from the entry of the consultant into the system.

The poetic principle states that organizations are more like a book than a living organism, that organizational life is expressed in the stories people tell each other every day, and the story of the organization is constantly being coauthored. The words and topics that we choose to talk about have an impact far beyond just the words themselves. They invoke sentiments, understandings, worlds of meaning. In practice, this means that the language of the inquiry has important outcomes in and of itself. In all

phases of the inquiry, effort is put into using words that point to, enliven, and inspire the best in people.

The anticipatory principle says that what we do today is guided by our image of the future.

> Much like a movie projector on a screen, human systems are forever projecting ahead of themselves a horizon of expectation (in their talk in the hallways, in the metaphors and language they use) that brings the future powerfully into the present as a mobilizing agent. To inquire in ways that serves to refashion anticipatory reality—especially the artful creation of positive imagery on a collective basis—may be the most prolific thing any inquiry can do. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001, p. 21)

The positive principle states that momentum and sustainable change require positive affect and social bonding. Pointing to recent research on positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2000, 2001), AI theorists argue that sentiments like hope, excitement, inspiration, camaraderie, and joy are central to the change process (Ludema et al., 1997).

> What we have found is that the more positive the question we ask in our work the more long lasting and successful the change effort. . . . The major thing we do that makes the difference is to craft and seed, in better and more catalytic ways, the unconditional positive question. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001, p. 22)

In analyzing the cases of AI in practice, we looked for indications that these principles were present or absent.

Intervention Models and Processes of AI

The main intervention model that has come to be associated with appreciative inquiry is the 4-D cycle (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). The 4-D cycle is an elaboration of the principles for the practice of AI described in Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987). The cycle begins with *discovery* (appreciating what is), then goes onto *dream* (imagining what could be), which is followed by *design* (determining what should be), and then *destiny* (creating what will be). We examined the cases to look for the extent to which they followed this sequence of activities.

The process of inquiry that perhaps most defines AI practice is the collection of "stories" from system members and other stakeholders about their best experiences. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2000). This is supposed to occur during the discovery phase. People are asked for their personal experience of the "affirmative topic" (i.e., the focus of the inquiry) at its best (e.g., their best work experience, their best experience of teamwork, their best customer satisfaction experience). The importance of narrative to processes of organizing has been stressed by some AI theorists who, after Gergen (1994), describe organizational life as a narrative. Organizations make themselves understandable to their members and stakeholders through stories they tell (Ludema, 2002), and members make sense of their experience in organizations through the stories they tell each other (Bushe, 2001a). A change in the stories that are told and used for sense making can, therefore, lead to

change in the informal organization or "inner dialogue" of the organization (Bushe, 2001b). Just as important, organizational life tends to unfold like a narrative, following "story lines" that exist in the social environment in which organizations operate. Usually, dominant story line, or macronarrative, is used to understand the past, present, and future of an organization, and a change in that story line can occur as dozens of micronarratives are collected and told that allow a new dominant story line to emerge (Ludema, 2002).

The two other prescriptions for AI practice that we think distinguish AI from other organizational change and development methods were also explored in the cases. One is the idea that whereas most forms of organizational analysis make things, in the language of Gestalt therapy, figural, AI creates ground (John Carter, in Bushe, 1995). The idea is that by creating new ground, a much wider range of new possibilities emerges for the way system members think about things and do things. For example, in an early AI in an accounting firm conducted by Carter, Cooperrider, and others, they discovered when they did a word count of hundreds of appreciative interviews of employees describing their best work experiences, that the word *integrity* was used seven times more than the word *profit*. The contention is that feeding that fact back into the system where it is acknowledged and discussed has the potential to "shift the ground" on which associates of the firm stand because what is being changed are core assumptions people hold about organizational values. People discovered that their personal values of integrity over profit were widely shared. This becomes a new ground on which they can make decisions and take action. The next time a client calls one of them asking to buy something they don't really need, there is an increased possibility that rather than take the work, they will act with integrity and suggest something different. From this point of view, change happened not from an inquiry that made ethics and integrity figural but from an exploration of the "ground" of peak experiences in the company.

It is difficult to define what qualities, ideas, or processes are figural or ground in the abstract. Ground is about the substructure that influences what people think and do. In organizations, this can range from physical space to mental maps, from emotional fields to semantic fields. It does not appear that AI practitioners go into an AI process with some idea of what in the organization is ground or what about it needs to change. Rather, AI practitioners working out of this perspective focus more on uncovering and amplifying "the positive core" of the organization (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001) than on using AI to change organizational processes and structures. In examining the cases, we simply looked for indications that the intervention helped to construct new ground, that important issues emerged out of interaction that had the possibility to reorient a range of thinking and acting. The opposite would be an inquiry that stayed focused on one or more key issues from start to finish.

The second prescription that we think distinguishes AI from traditional change management and OD practice is to avoid creating plans and processes for implementing agreed-upon changes and rather to create plans and processes that encourage and nurture improvised action by system members. Early on in the evolution of the 4-D model the final phase was called *deliver.* This was changed to *destiny* as the developers of AI experienced much more transformational change the less they tried to guide it. "What we discovered, quite honestly, was that momentum for change and long-term

sustainability increase the more we abandoned "delivery" ideas of action planning, monitoring progress, and building implementation strategies" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001, p. 16). Building on Barrett's (1998) exploration of improvisational processes in organizations and theory on self-organizing systems in general (Yovits & Cameron, 1960; Jantsch, 1979; Sherman & Schultz, 1998), some AI theorists call for avoiding the creation of action plans, steering committees, action teams, and the other common practices associated with implementation of change. Instead, the first three D's of the AI should create a set of images and ideas that are so compelling to system members that they voluntarily find ways to transform their social and work processes. By allowing this transformational process to operate from the ground up, creating systems for supporting local initiatives taken without consensual or hierarchical validation, some AI theorists argue that much more change takes place much faster than can occur from any attempt to control and implement something new.

This appears to be quite a different approach from most of the OD literature that advocates implementation of consensually or centrally agreed-upon change. And it is very different from change management, which could be defined as the process of managing the implementation of changes into a population that had little say in those changes. In this study, we examined the extent to which our cases followed an improvisation versus implementation approach to spreading change through their systems. It should be noted, however, that of all the AI theory reviewed above, this is the least widespread. Indeed, it is all but absent from the work of Watkins and Mohr (2001) and Elliott (1999) and has not been described very clearly in practice in most writing on AI.

Summarizing the Variables Under Consideration

In summary, each of the cases was examined to determine the following:

1. Transformational change (yes or no). This was, in a sense, our dependent measure.
2. Outcome was new knowledge versus simply new processes (knowledge or processes).
3. Intervention created a generative metaphor (yes or no).
4. Intervention adhered to the nine principles of AI (yes or no for each principle).
5. Intervention followed the 4-D cycle (yes or no for each D).
6. Intervention began with collecting stories of the affirmative topic (yes or no).
7. Intervention focused on figure or on ground (figure or ground)
8. Intervention concluded with implementation or improvisation (implementation or improvisation).

METHOD

The literature was scanned for published cases of AI at the time the research began in 2002. In all, we found 20 cases that had enough information to be useful for this analysis (see appendix for the list). The second author analyzed each case to uncover the extent to which the theoretical properties of appreciative inquiry were present and in the process created the decision rules used to make those assessments. There were 19 cells in the matrix for each case. (In fact, there were more, but they were concerned with other issues not reviewed in this article, so we will ignore them in this analysis.)

The first author then took those decision rules and read 50% of the cases performing the same analysis without referring to the initial results. Out of the 190 cells compared, there were only 7 cells in which the authors disagreed, for an agreement rate just more than 96%. It is useful to note that at the time of this study, the second author was a student who had taken one previous course with the first author in Organization Theory. They did not have a lot of shared experiences, nor could one expect them to "think alike." This indicates that a very reliable set of decision rules were applied to these cases.

Most cases provided enough data to be able to fill in all the cells of the matrix. Of the 380 cells in the matrix, only 17 could not be filled in for a completion rate of 94%, indicating that although the cases varied greatly in length and detail, they did provide enough information for comparison purposes. In fact, 14 of these 17 empty cells were for the poetic principle, which was rarely discussed and difficult to discern. Decision rules for Categories 4, 5, and 6 above are very straightforward, so we do not review them. Below we review the decision rules used in this study for the rest of the matrix.

Transformational or Not

A case was coded as transformational when evidence was given of a qualitative shift in the state of being or identity of the system, usually reflected in patterns or organization emerging after the appreciative inquiry that were clearly different from previous patterns. A case was coded as not transformational when the changes described new processes, procedures, resources, plans, or methods that were applied without changing the basic nature of the system.

New Knowledge or New Processes

Did the intervention lead to the collective creation of new knowledge that served as a new referential base, or was the intervention primarily a means to garner consensus around a specific end? When an intervention was geared toward a specific goal that required buy-in, when all the ideas focused on reaching a particular end, we coded the intervention as concerned with creating new processes. In these cases, participants remained focused on the same realm of possibilities, constrained by the same prevailing beliefs. On the other hand, if a new way of looking at the world was accepted and employed some kind of realization that something not previously considered important was now important, or vice versa, we coded this as new knowledge. A shift to a new lens became apparent by the realms of possibilities that were now open for consideration, the ideas put forth, the new avenues for action that could not previously be considered.

Generative Metaphor Versus No Generative Metaphor

Cases that described some kind of artifact or common reference point that either guided the participants or served as memory of a key event were coded as having generative metaphors. These were symbols that held a meaning the group members agreed upon, whether that symbol was material, linguistic, or other. To be coded as

generative metaphor, the symbol had to be persistent, one that evoked a unique shared meaning held by the system members and that contained within it new lenses and/or new possibilities for action.

Figure or Ground

If the process surfaced some element of the organization for increased inspection, it was coded as Figure. If the process of inquiry was able to penetrate deep enough to change or create new background assumptions on which all the actions of an organization would be based, it was coded as Ground.

Implementation or Improvisation

A case was deemed to have pursued an implementation when the goal pursued was a specific tangible change that had been agreed upon by key decision makers or a consensus of those involved. The destiny phase was characterized as an attempt to implement, in a top-down fashion, ideas that had emerged out of the inquiry. A case that was coded as improvisation was one where there were numerous, diverse ideas for changes pursued by various actors. Whereas an implementation was focused on an end result that signified a termination to the process, an improvisation had many continuous, sometimes disparate changes that were all linked to a deeper fundamental change in how the organization was perceived. An improvisation led to tangible results that could be considered as side effects of some bigger intangible change, whereas in an implementation, a particular tangible result was the cap on the impact of the intervention.

RESULTS

Each case was considered by its author(s) to be a successful example of AI and change, although some pointed out deficiencies and opportunities for improvement. This is not surprising. The fact that almost all published cases of organizational change are success stories, and the reasons for this, has been discussed in the past (Mirvis & Berg, 1977). Notwithstanding the real contribution to scholarship that publication of failures would make, little has changed. Yet, even though these were all "successes," enough variation was found in what took place in the cases for an interesting story to emerge.

First, only 7 of the 20 cases (35%) appeared to describe what we rated as transformational change. This is interesting in itself as less than half the cases of "successful" AI do not appear to lead to change that is much different from what we might expect from any competently managed change process. For example, one of our nontransformational cases, Group Health,[1] described an improved reward and recognition system. Another, Star Island Corp, described an updated strategic plan with input from a broad base. Those cases that did describe transformational outcomes, however, described changes rarely attributable to planned change efforts. More often

they are the kind of outcomes that come as a result of adapting to turbulent external forces or experimentation in green field sites. This has led to widespread perception that transformation only occurs under such conditions (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988; Miller & Friesen, 1984; Newman, 2000). For example, the Hunter Douglas case describes an organization transformed from one filled with barriers between levels and employee alienation to an organization living participative management filled with high morale and productivity. Avon Mexico describes a transformation in an organization from one where women mainly work on the front lines and wield little influence to one acknowledged by the Catalyst Foundation in 1997 as the best company in Mexico for women to work in.

Second, there were no variations of interest in the cases on three of the categories we investigated (numbers 4, 5, 6). All but one case (Loghorn Western Riding) adhered to the 4-D cycle, and all adhered to the nine principles of AI (to the extent they could be analyzed from each case). Each involved collecting stories of the positive from organizational members, and in some cases, other stakeholders. This is, no doubt, why they can all claim to be cases of AI. Where they did vary, however, was on the outcome variables and in the intervention process variables. Table 1 displays the results of those variables for each case.

Exploring the outcomes of AI in each of our cases, most of them created new lenses for looking at old problems, but only seven of the cases described the creation of new knowledge. The rest describe the creation of new social processes. Interestingly, in all seven of those, a generative metaphor emerged to guide the change process. In only one case coded as not transformational was the emergence of a generative metaphor noted.

Shifting to look at intervention processes under investigation, only eight cases appeared to alter the "ground" of organizational members, and this occurred in all seven of the transformational cases. The majority made some issue or concern figural and stayed focused on that. In 5 out of 6 of the transformational cases, the destiny phase of the AI had an improvisational focus, whereas in the rest, only 2 out of 12 did (in two of the cases, we could not discern what took place during the destiny phase).

Looking across each of our variables and their relationship to the magnitude of change reported, the results are rather striking. Of those cases reporting transformational outcomes,

- 100% created new knowledge,
- 100% created a generative metaphor,
- 100% penetrated the ground of the organization, and
- 83% used an improvisational approach to the destiny phase.

Of those not reporting transformational outcomes,

- 0% created new knowledge,
- 8% created a generative metaphor,
- 8% penetrated the ground of the organization, and
- 16% used an improvisational approach to the destiny phase.

TABLE 1
Results of Analyzing Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Cases

Case	*Outcome of AI*	*Transformational?*	*New Knowledge or New Processes*	*Generative Metaphor*	*Figure or Ground*	*Improvisation or Implementation*
Avon of Mexico	Executive makeup changed to reflect new assumptions that women must be represented at executive levels	Yes	New knowledge	Yes	Ground	Implementation
DTE Energy Services	Building the use of AI into the culture of the company	??	New processes	??	Figure	Improvisation
Fast Food Corp	Increased store management retention 30%	No	New processes	No	Figure	Implementation
Group Health	Improved reward and recognition systems	No	New processes	No	Figure	Implementation
GTE	Several independent efforts to realign processes with positive core leading to higher levels of performance and morale	Yes	New knowledge	Yes	Ground	Improvisation
Hunter Douglas	A new social architecture created by an array of employee initiatives to realign processes with articulated positive core	Yes	New knowledge	Yes	Ground	Improvisation

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

Case	*Outcome of AI*	*Transformational?*	*New Knowledge or New Processes*	*Generative Metaphor*	*Figure or Ground*	*Improvisation or Implementation*
LeadShare	An agreed-upon method to address the challenges associated with transitional leadership change	No	New processes	No	Figure	Implementation
Little Flower Catholic School	The articulation and codification of the school's spirit	No	New processes	No	Figure	Improvisation
Loghorn Western	Forest Adventures and Loghorn now work together, creating a symbiotic relationship, increasing business	Yes	New knowledge	Yes	Ground	Improvisation
Medic Inn	Creation of several initiatives to align processes with positive core	Yes	New knowledge	Yes	Ground	Improvisation
NASA	Development of a broadly-accepted HR strategic plan	No	New processes	No	Figure	Implementation
North East Catholic	Core culture and process of school changed, to reflect "what we are like when we are at our best"	No	New processes	No	Ground	Improvisation

Sigma	Steps toward a strategic shift in operational method	No	New processes	No	Figure	Implementation
Smith Klein Beecham	Integration of disparate arms facilitated by AI process	No	New processes	No	Figure	Implementation
Southview West Agency	Processes and Positions realigned to newly created mission	Yes	New knowledge	Yes	Ground	??
Star Island Corp	Updated strategic plan, with input from a broad base	No	New processes	No	Figure	Implementation
Street Children's Home and Mother's Refuge	Assessment of organization capabilities and identification of needed changes	No	New processes	No	Figure	Implementation
Syntegra	Changed market approach and leader-follower relations	No	New processes	No	Figure	Implementation
United Religions	Establishment of a representative United Religions organization	Yes	New knowledge	Yes	Ground	Improvisation
World Vision—Bourella	Internally driven conviction that a sustainable future was possible within the village if all worked at it	No	New processes	No	Figure	??

NOTE: HR = Human Resources.

Using chi-square to test the statistical probability of these results, we find that each of them are unlikely to have occurred by chance.

DISCUSSION

Two key things emerge out of this analysis of cases of AI in practice. One is that more transformational change outcomes are associated with the more radical prescriptions for change practice by AI advocates. A focus on changing how people think, rather than what people do, is really very different from conventional OD practice. A review of the leading textbooks on OD (Cummings & Worley, 2001; French & Bell, 1999) shows that the only time changing how people think has been a sustained focus in OD theory and practice is in discussions of training and laboratory education. The idea of changing how people think lurks implicitly in the normative reeducative change model (Chin & Benne, 1976), which is a foundation of the OD field and in OD practice that focuses on culture change and mental models, but usually the focus in application of those theories is on changing group norms and accepted behaviors. Appreciative inquiry has brought the importance of ideas and of creating a social science that aids in the formation of new ideas to the forefront of our consideration. The forms of engagement that have evolved in AI practice may not, in the end, turn out to be the best way to engage collective ideation, but these cases demonstrate that doing so appears to be central to transformational change.

Perhaps even more radical is the prescription to let go of control in planned change efforts and nurture a more improvisational approach to the action phase in action research. Improvised planned change seems at first glance to be an oxymoron but in each case of transformational change that used an improvisational approach, leaders were able to accomplish their change goals and do so within time frames, way beyond what many who work at and study organizational change would expect as reasonable. Take, for example, the case of GTE that trained thousands of employees in AI and then encouraged them to make change happen.

> In just one year's time (1996 to 1997), employees' support for GTE's business direction jumped 50 percent, and their perception that information is shared openly rose nearly 140 percent. As part of continuous process improvement, a collections process team improved GTE's credit verification process, resulting in $3 million collected in 1996. The team also standardized and streamlined the payment process, saving $7 to 8 million annually. And it developed a new way to automate the insufficient funds process, saving $4 million in 1996. (Cheney & Jarrett, 1998, p. 46)

More than 10,000 innovations were attributed to the AI process, earning GTE an American Society for Training and Development award for the best organizational change program in the United States in 1997 (Shelton, 2000).

Conventional OD and change management typically rely on elaborate and formalized implementation strategies, parallel structures, and project management techniques to achieve outcomes prescribed after a period of inquiry and problem solving. Yet, there is widespread disenchantment with the actual magnitude of change that

results from such processes (Axelrod, 2000; Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990). Zackrison and Freedman (2003) estimate that upward of 80% of consulting interventions fail. One response to this is to assume that planned change is hard, takes a lot of time, and faces numerous barriers. The results in the cases reviewed here raise important questions about those assumptions. They appear to show that if we can create a collective sense of what needs to be achieved, create new models or theories of how to achieve that, and align those with the inherent motivation people have in relation to their organizational life, then a great deal of change leading to increased organizational performance can occur if people are allowed and encouraged to take initiative and make it happen. These results have important implications for more than just our understanding of AI—they inform our understanding of transformational change itself.

The second key point that emerges out of this analysis is that when AI techniques are used in more conventional change processes, more conventional change outcomes result. It appears that the 4-D process cannot be expected to result in a "revolution in change" in and of itself. Collecting "stories of the positive" may be more fun and more engaging than other forms of data collection, but this, too, does not appear to distinguish transformational change outcomes from other change outcomes. It may be that these are necessary but not sufficient to account for transformational outcomes, or it may be that they are not what is really critical to the transformations reported in some AI cases. This study cannot answer those questions. Reading the cases, however, we would assume that some of the authors would argue that collection of positive stories made implementation of the change processes more feasible and, perhaps, more effective. This is particularly salient, for example, in cases like Elliott's (1999) where Europeans are attempting to intervene in non-European cultures that value narrative forms of engagement. It has been argued elsewhere (Bushe 2001b; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001) that the act of simply sharing stories of the positive can lead to profound transformations in relationships. That may be true, but the cases studied here suggest that this is not in itself sufficient for transformation of large systems as a whole.

Not all consulting projects are meant to be transformational, and we are not intending to denigrate those cases in our sample where transformation did not take place. If practitioners want to use an AI approach for implementing new processes, we do not see any reason not to, other than the real possibility that better techniques exist for doing so. For example, the use of AI for sharing "best practices" among different groups can appear to just be sloppy benchmarking. But we are concerned that as AI attains fad status, less thoughtful practitioners and managers will go about collecting stories of the positive using a 4-D model and think that this is all there is to AI. If so, we will find many end up with the kinds of questions Golembiewski (1998) has asked, pointing out that conventional action researchers typically do ask about the positive as well as the negative, and that asking about both seems to be a fuller inquiry than just focusing on what works. We will probably find that AIs that are *not* motivated by a strategic focus on the use of narrative for evoking new worlds of meaning and that do not work with the self-organizing forces in systems to allow locally initiated changes to flourish seem to have pretty much the same kinds of results as other approaches to

action research. Six years from now, we can expect a report from Watson Wyatt or a similar organization stating that a majority of executives surveyed did not attain the changes they were seeking from use of AI.

There are a number of limitations to this study that bear noting, mainly to do with the nature of published cases themselves. There is a great deal of variation in the length, complexity, and detail provided in these cases. In each instance, those writing the cases were also consultants to the systems, and this undoubtedly introduces biases and limitations in what is seen and reported. In addition, these cases were not written with this study's categories in mind, and we cannot be sure if the lack of evidence of new knowledge or transformation in any one case is simply an artifact of how it was written. We argue, however, that the need for more empirical assessments of this burgeoning area of OD practice makes these limitations tolerable and this kind of meta-analysis timely. Moreover, whether future research confirms our findings or not, the two key findings raise important considerations for scholars and practitioners of organization development and change, regardless of whether one uses an AI approach. There are probably other frames, processes, and techniques that could be used to accomplish what our transformational cases appear to do: (a) generate new, internally validated knowledge that is meaningful to system members and provokes new actions and (b) plan for, and guide, the action phase in a way that supports local innovations without requiring a consensual or centralized approval. We believe this study supports further exploration of these two contributions to the theory of planned, transformational change.

APPENDIX
Cases in the Study

Case Name	*Author(s)*	*Source*
Avon of Mexico	Marjorie Schiller	Fry, Barrett, Seiling, & Whitney (2002)
DTE Energy Systems	Marlo Derksen & Tom Osborn	Watkins & Mohr (2001)
Fast Food Corp	David Jones	Jones (1998)
Group Health	Diane Robbins & Scott Caldwell	Watkins & Mohr (2001)
GTE	Diana Whitney, David Cooperrider, Maureen Garrison, & Jean Moore	Fry et al. (2002)
Hunter Douglas	Amanda Trosten-Bloom	Fry et al. (2002)
LeadShare	Mary Ann Rainey	Rainey (1996)
Little Flower Catholic School	William Van Buskirk	Fry et al. (2002)
Loghorn Western Riding	Marsha George & Adrian McLean	Fry et al. (2002)
Medic Inn	Frank Barrett & David Cooperrider	Barrett & Cooperrider (1990)

APPENDIX (continued)

Case Name	*Author(s)*	*Source*
NASA	Judy Darling	Watkins & Mohr (2001)
North East Catholic School	William Van Buskirk	Fry et al. (2002)
Sigma	Charles Elliot	Elliott (1999)
Smith Klein Beecham	Bernard Mohr, Elizabeth Smith, & Jane Watkins	Mohr, Smith, & Watkins (2000)
Southview West Agency	Charleyse Pratt	Fry et al. (2002)
Star Island Corp.	David Sanderson	Watkins & Mohr (2001)
Syntegra	Joep De Jong	Watkins & Mohr (2001)
Street Childrens' Home and Mothers' Refuge	Charles Elliot	Elliott (1999)
United Religions	Gurudev Khalsa	Fry et al. (2002)
World Vision Bourella	Charles Elliott	Elliott (1999)

NOTE

1. Names of all cases are the same as in original publications; some are real and some are pseudonyms.

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