

**“The use of approaches and methodologies that support and encourage participation: Benefits and implications of using Appreciative Inquiry in the processes of involvement, decision-making and collective discussion”**

“L'utilizzo di approcci metodologie che incoraggiano la partecipazione: benefici e implicazioni dell'utilizzo dell'Appreciater Inquiry nei processi di coinvolgimento, decisione e discussione collettiva”

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Durante la mobilità organizzata dal partner italiano sono stati approfonditi i legami tra gli approcci strength based e progetti di sviluppo di comunità locali e di facilitazione di processi di partecipazione. L'articolo approfondisce quest'ultimo aspetto.

**Abstract**

The Paper aims to present the potential and the applications of an approach to participation widely used in Europe, USA and in Developing Countries: Appreciative Inquiry, AI.

The theme of citizen and organizational actors' participation in decision-making and evaluation often swings between the use of bottom – up, basic and spontaneous approaches, and the application of top - down methodologies proposed by governments and decision-makers. The participation initiatives at grassroots level are often blamed of 'movementism' and of being inconclusive. At the same time participation 'induced' by the imposition of techniques and methods of consultation is seen either as artificial and unrepresentative of the requests and suggestions of the real recipients of the choices, or used in an instrumental or demagogic way by decision-makers to justify their choices.

The Paper highlights the potential that the AI has in helping to overcome this (apparent?) Dichotomy, through an approach that motivates individuals and citizens to participate by enabling conversations and effective exchanges amongst the various stakeholders of a local community: citizens, economic and cultural operators, administrators, The theoretical basis that underpinning the flexible model allows people to participate on a large scale in an active way and sharing their own experiences, perceptions and needs. Citizens in AI can be actors in a exchange of points of view that is immediately 'generative' and based on the enhancement of what has been positive and functional.

The Paper analyzes and discusses the role of the approach within the 'Spectrum of Public Participation' and offers practical examples of the use of AI in Public Participation and Community Development projects.

## **AI characteristics and potential**

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a widely used approach and methodology developed in the late 80's by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University.

In Europe, USA and in all developing countries AI has been used with a broad range of public, private, and non-profit organizations and with groups of all sizes, from small work teams to multi-national corporations.

It has been used in several Community development project as well. AI is more than a simple method to facilitate participation and people expression: it is a philosophy, an approach based on constructionist and strength base theories.

"Appreciative Inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant word around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. It centrally involves the mobilization of inquiry through the crafting of the "unconditional positive question" often-involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people. In AI, the arduous task of intervention gives way to the speed of imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design. AI seeks, fundamentally, to build a constructive union between a whole people and the massive entirety of what people talk about as past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul, and visions of valued and possible futures. Taking all of these together as a gestalt, AI deliberately, in everything it does, seeks to work from accounts of this "positive change core" - and it assumes that every living system has many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link the energy of this core directly to any change agenda, and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized" (Cooperrider, D. L and Whitney, D. 1998).

As an approach to organizational and community change, it represents a radical shift from classic organization development and public dialogue models. Typically, traditional models seek to identify cause and effect, through an action-research model focused on problem solving. They provide a progression of steps: identifying problems or deficits in the system; analyzing the causes; offering solutions; and developing an action plan to solve and "treat" the problems. Communities and organizations are viewed as sick, deficient or as "a problem to be solved", with the easily consequence of creating a culture of blame, defensiveness, lack of trust and hope.

Problem solving approach "has largely failed as an instrument for advancing social knowledge of consequence. . . . Advances in generative theory will come about for action-research when the discipline decides to expand its universe of exploration, seeks to discover new questions, and rekindles a fresh perception of the extra ordinary in everyday organizational life" (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

AI introduces a different approach to problem solving and change management, starting from examples and experiences that 'went well', from success stories and the appreciation of the

existing resources. This set the basis of a strength based action research that emphasizes all the different and positive aspects of the situation and the community:

<b>Problem based</b>	<b>Appreciative based</b>
Felt the need to identify problem	Appreciating and valuing the best of 'What is'
Analyses of causes and possible solutions	Envisioning 'What might be'
Action planning (Treatment)	Dialoguing 'What should be'
What to fix	What to grow and to feed
Underlying grammar = problem, symptoms, causes, solutions, action plan, intervention	New grammar of the true, good, better, possible
Breaks things into pieces & specialties, guaranteeing fragmented responses	Breaks open the box of what the ideal is first
Assumes organizations are constellations of problems to be overcome	Assumes organizations are sources of infinite capacity and imagination

(Adapted from Cooperrider and Whitney 1998)

People are invited to think about and share in a positive and successful interviewing process experiences about a chosen topic. Inquiry and change happen simultaneously, and questions asked determine findings, "Discovered" data create the conditions to conceive, converse about, and construct the future. Problems are not removed or denied; they are restated as 'opposite positive' and seen from a different point of view, positive and generative.

AI is based on social constructionist theories, it assumes that our knowledge, rather than coming from objective and impartial observations of a stable and durable external world, is an artifact of the culture, myths, traditions, values, and language of people in a system. As a consequence, there are multiple realities and social worlds, multiple ways of knowing, and we construct our reality through our conversations and social interactions. Therefore AI gives a great importance to stories, meanings, metaphors and conversations in constructing reality. Only by giving expression to the multiple voices and perspectives existing in a community, we can produce a realistic and acceptable description of that reality in that given context and time.

AI is in particular based on five constructionist principles:

1. *The constructionist principle.*

Human knowledge and organizational destiny are interwoven. The way we know has a direct effect on what we do. Knowing people, organizations and communities stands at the center of any and virtually every attempt to change. “Constructionism is an approach to human science and practice which replaces the individual with the relationship as the locus of knowledge, and thus is built around a keen appreciation of the power of language and discourse of all types (from words to metaphors to narrative forms, etc.) to create our sense of reality—our sense of the true, the good, the possible. (Cooperrider, D. L, Whitney, D.1998)

## 2. *The principle of simultaneity.*

Inquiry and change are not separate moments, but are simultaneous. Inquiry is intervention, change begins with the first questions we ask and the questions we ask determine what we find. “Even the most innocent question evokes change—even if reactions are simply changes in awareness, dialogue, feelings of boredom, or even laughter. When we consider the possibilities in these terms, that inquiry and change are a simultaneous moment, we begin reflecting anew. It is not so much “Is my question leading to right or wrong answers?” but rather “What impact is my question having on our lives together...is it helping to generate conversations about the good, the better, the possible... is it strengthening our relationships?” (Cooperrider, D. L, Whitney, D.1998)

## 3. *The poetic principle.*

Human organizations, groups, communities, are closer to an open book than a machine. Like a poem, the Bible, or a Shakespearean play, any human system is subject to endless interpretations. An organization’s story is constantly being co-authored.

“What constructionism does is remind us that it is not the “world out there” dictating or driving our topics of inquiry but again the topics are themselves social artifacts, products of social processes (cultural habits, typifying discourses, rhetoric, professional ways, power relations).” (Cooperrider, D. L, Whitney, D.1998)

## 4. *The anticipatory principle.*

Our human collective imagination and discourse about the future is a powerful resource for generating constructive change. Where you believe you are going is where you will end up to. Our vision of the future can determine it: a lot of researches from several different areas demonstrate the relationship between positive imagery and positive action.

“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, D. L, Whitney, D.1998)

## 5. *The positive principle.*

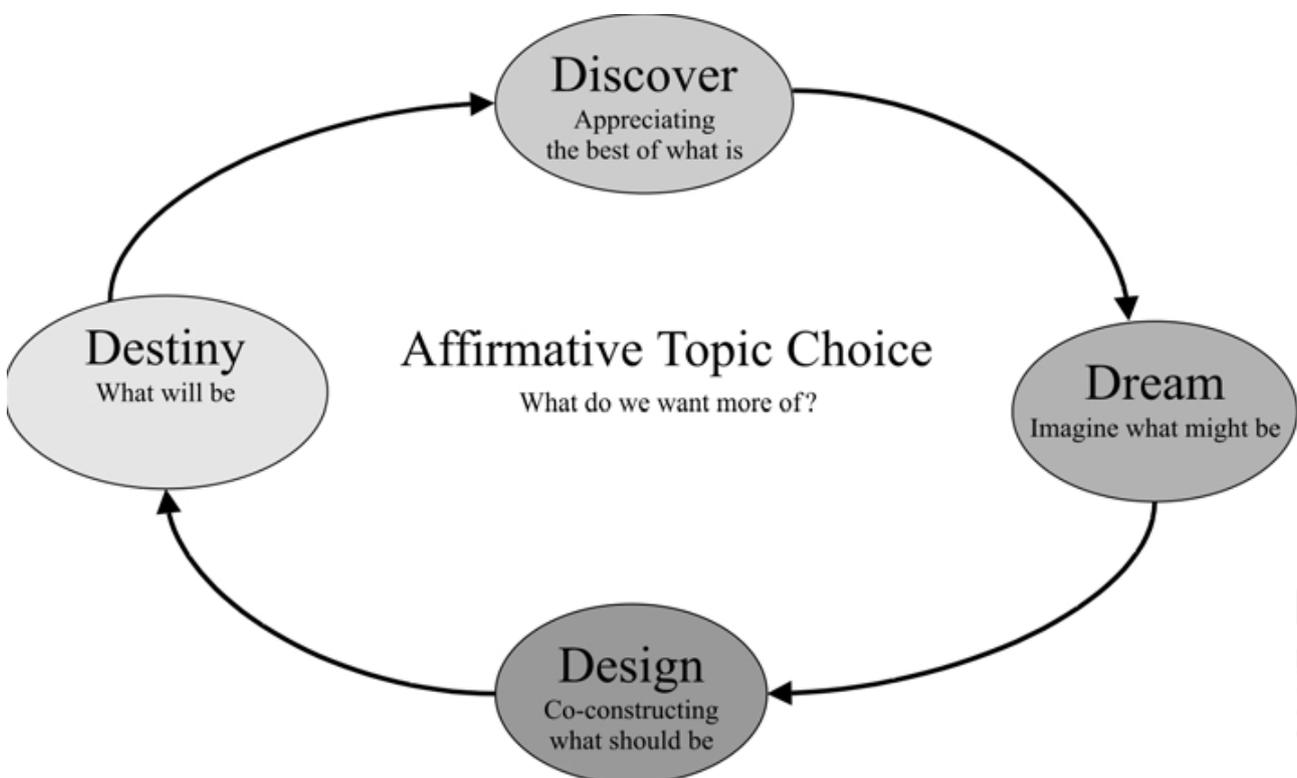
Strictly related with the previous principle, this one tells us that language matters. To build and sustain change needs “large amounts of positive affect and social bonding—things like hope, excitement, inspiration, caring, camaraderie, sense of urgent purpose, and sheer joy in creating something meaningful together” (Cooperrider, D. L, Whitney, D.1998). The use of AI in different situations shows that the more positive and generative questions there are, the longer lasting and

more successful the change effort will be. When we inquire into those times when we were at our best, we were most successful or most energized, people are drawn together and the positive data that emerges from such inquiry inspires people to form networks of collaboration, to build on their strengths and reach for their dreams.

“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, D. L, Whitney, D.1998)

## AI Process

Typically, an AI process is described by 4 Phases and a preliminary activity of defining a positive core/ Topic choice (AI 4-D Cycle, Cooperrider, D. L, Whitney, D.1998):



The first step of the process is **defining the Topic** of inquiry, usually done by a Steering Committee with experts in AI. The question at this stage is “*What do we want more of?*” According to the Simultaneity principle, is the most important task of the model: “seeds of change are implicit in the very first question we ask”.

In the first phase of **Discovery**, AI uses questions and face to face conversations to build a vision for the future of the chosen subject, tapping on past successes to focus on the potential of the future. People are invited to interview each other using positive and generative questions, and a narrative and a relational model. The questions are carefully identified to engage participants in telling stories to one another, about what gives energy and vitality to the system. The intent is not

to analyze shortcomings but rather to seek and learn from even the smallest successes. The underlying question is *“What’s going right and how do we get more of it?”*

In the subsequent Phase, **Dream**, stories are shared and themes begin to emerge that transform the current stories in a new narrative that inspires hope and possibility, to imagine a new future. The vision comes from the stories of the positive past and the richness of the dialogue. It’s grounded in people’s real experiences and therefore it is more believable and more achievable. The question is *“What might we become if our exceptional moments were the norm?”*

Once the dream has been articulated, (often with a vision of a better world, a powerful purpose and a compelling statement of strategic intent), the **Design Phase** starts. In this phase are crystalized the creation of the ideal organization, the design principles that will inspire system’s organization and policies. People through this dialogue reach a level of depth, commitment and trust designing together principles that they will be prepared to live by. The underlying question is *“What would our organization look like if it were designed in every way possible to maximize the qualities of the positive core and enable the accelerated realization of our dreams?”*

The last phase of AI Cycle has been called **Destiny** or **Delivery**. Delivery emphasizes action planning, developing implementation strategies, and dealing with challenges of sustainability. Destiny is more related to a co-construction of a future, affecting and implementing change, a new way to see own reality and to know it. In fact, going through the flow of the different AI phases allows people to read organizations or communities in a new way that considers possibilities, creates new networks and relationships, affects direction and meaning of one’s engagements and gives the opportunity to experiment a collective action.

AI Cycle could become a continuous process, whereby people never cease to appreciate their achievements, inquiry on what is working well, and look for new ways to get more of it

## **AI and Participation**

*‘Public participation’ means to involve those who are affected by a decision in the decision-making process. It promotes sustainable decisions by providing participants with the information they need to be involved in a meaningful way, and it communicates to participants how their input affects the decision. The practice of public participation might involve public meetings, surveys, open houses, workshops, polling, citizen’s advisory committees and other forms of direct involvement with the public.”*(International Association for Public Participation 2007)

According to the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), various levels of community engagement / participation can be identified and defined. In this model, participation can be viewed as a continuum that ranges from a minimum level of information to a maximum level of resolution and action:

<b>Participation level</b>	<b>Public Participation Goal</b>	<b>Promise to the Public</b>
<b>Inform</b>	To provide balanced and objective information to assist understanding of topic, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	We will keep you informed
<b>Consult</b>	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how input influenced the decision.
<b>Involve</b>	To work with the public throughout the process to ensure that concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how input influenced the decision.
<b>Collaborate</b>	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including development of alternatives and identification of preferred solution.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.
<b>Empower</b>	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.	We will implement what you decide.

(2007 International Association for Public Participation)

Due to its particular characteristics, AI within the 'Spectrum of Public Participation' has been used in community development project and change projects aiming to involve, facilitate people and citizen's collaboration and empowerment.

But how does AI work? Let see more in detail and through some examples.

During the Affirmative Topic Definition task, a Steering Committee (administrators, technician and politicians, citizens..), usually helped by facilitators, learns and applies the approach, and through it chooses the Topic and draws and designs the AI cycle. Topic definition is crucial, according to the 'Simultaneity principle': as in Cooperrider example (1998), exploring the topic 'We want to cut the incidence of sexual harassment' will lead to different results than exploring 'we want to see the development of a model of high quality cross-gender relationships in the workplace'. The presence, in the early stages of the process, of a Steering Committee, representative of all different

stakeholders should ensure that all inputs and outcomes are taken into account in the decision - making process.

In the Discovery phase data collection and narrative exploration about the chosen Topic are conducted. Topic discovery allows the involvement of several people, groups and associations through the use of different methods. You can either train individual to conduct face to face interview, or you can organize large AI summits that enable the simultaneous attendance of a high number of participants.

The aim is to facilitate the discovery of the positive, the successful, and the experiences that both individuals and the collective can be proud of. The better representation of the organization/community participant can be achieved, the more effective the process and the outcomes will be.

Interviews are not just to collect data: both the interviewers and interviewees share their experiences and history with the organization / community, as well as their values and wishes for the future, activating a reciprocal learning and generative thought process.

Some organizations / communities collect the data into a report celebrating the successes and this exceptional moment in the life of the organization, whilst others create a thematic analysis to document the complexity and richness of their stories. (Cooperrider, D. L, Whitney, D.1998)

For example in IMAGINE CHICAGO (Cooperrider 1996), a non-profit organization created in Chicago in 1992 and dedicated to cultivating hope and civic commitment in partnership with local organizations (schools, churches, community groups, cultural institutions), the “Citywide interview process” involved approximately 50 young people who interviewed about 140 Chicago citizens, represented over half of Chicago’s neighborhoods. Interviewers were given coaching in interviewing skills, and a set of questions designed by the IMAGINE CHICAGO design team. Appreciative conversations helped broaden the participants’ view of what is possible, both within themselves and within the city.

Data and narratives, arising from the positive change core Discovery, serve as an essential resource for the Dream phase. In this stage people, usually in small groups during AI summits, are asked to imagine what could be, thinking about opportunities and possibilities that they would like to see, shifting from the present to a desired future. Groups are encouraged to develop a collective vision using a ‘think out of the box’ approach. The outcome from this process is the development of a common ground between people and groups. This common ground creates the collective awareness that more than “just me” has a specific dream about the organization / community. By envisioning the community’s future in bold and specific terms, it lays the foundation for identifying development guidelines, projects and objectives.

In the Design phase the ‘social architecture’ is identified and people agree on a set of design principles to realize the desired, ideal organization.

It’s a preliminary implementation phase strictly related to the needs, values and shared vision developed in the previous phases. It’s a bottom up approach to community development and social change that offers to decision makers the opportunity to strengthen relationships with citizens and communities.

In the Destiny phase planning for action begins. Individual commitments are made, innovations team formed, strategic initiatives launched, supported by a large group dialogue. Summits can generate copious ideas for action and high commitment, making follow up important. Afterwards, a

Monitoring & Evaluation activity applies the same participative approaches to help and facilitate the execution of the Action plan.

Successful teams seek and need support and involvement from community's leader and decision makers.

Experience shows that AI can be useful to promote community participation in several, different ways:

- AI tends to *overcome the traditional dichotomy between top down and bottom up approaches*: it should involve all stakeholders keen to give their contribution to a particular subject. Both citizens and decision makers are involved in the AI cycle, give their contribution, and talk to each other face to face, in multiple small groups and large groups as well.
- It leverages specific techniques to effectively yield the *contribution of large groups of citizens*, reaching a much wider audience than ever before and allowing them to interact and vision the future together.
- AI tends to *mitigate potential conflict between groups* and *helps the change of attitudes and behaviors of individuals*, utilizing facilitators and ground rules to create a safe atmosphere for honest, productive discussion. *It facilitates positive and generative visioning* instead of failure and problem based analysis, overcoming a blaming and hiding culture potentially related to a problem solving approach.
- *Each community can develop its own response to its own situation*, not depending on an already established 'cook book' but promoting a unique process of learning and action through discovering, understanding, and fostering innovations and transformation in human social systems.
- AI can contribute to *motivate the community for interactive participation and self-mobilization*, fostering community involvement and engagement, bringing people together around shared images of the future, creating new and lasting relationships and partnerships, and strengthening the sense of belonging of groups and individuals to the community.
- It *enhances designing and project implementation*, inspiring both strategic thinking and collaborative action.

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