



A changing world, again. How Appreciative Inquiry can guide our growth

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is an interconnecting, cascading tsunami of up-rootedness and change on many levels. The global challenge we face is twofold: 1) how do we sustain our psychological, physical, social and economic capital and wellbeing in a time of great uncertainty; and 2) how do we adapt and create a new existence in an altered reality? Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a well-documented approach to helping individuals and systems move from a deficit-based paradigm to a strengths-based perspective. AI holds myriad potential benefits for individuals, communities, and macro systems to build resilience and promote growth during and after COVID-19. This article will provide an overview of AI and its relevance to the current situation, as well as provide specific strategies for how people and systems can use AI as they transition through the pandemic and afterward.

1. Introduction

This has happened before, but not like this and not to us. Across time, societies and civilizations have experienced epidemics (regional) and pandemics (global). These are difficult to predict or anticipate, however, the probability of occurrence including those of high risk and magnitude is almost certain (Felman, 2020; Sandman, 2007). Many epidemiologists believe that this modern-day pandemic is incredibly efficient in its transmission (Ferretti et al., 2020) proving COVID-19 to be of high risk and magnitude. As such, it is disrupting bio-psychosocial and economic viability insisting that we consider how to sustain our psychological, physical, social and economic capital and wellbeing. Equaled by its efficiency of transmission is the uncertainty of its impact and outcome. It is estimated that up to 80% of humans will contract the virus, many will not survive and many of those often represent the most vulnerable in our society. The long-term health impact remains unknown for those who do survive. Until there is a vaccine, the primary tool to flatten the curve is physical distancing, yet in spite of this we see creative avenues of social connection.

In the last few months, several national and global systemic challenges have been brought to light that will require attention and tenacity to overcome. We have seen evidence that social, political, economic and healthcare systems are ill-prepared for this pandemic. Economies have been brought to a virtual standstill. One's physical and existential survival are in question. The uncertainty feeds many questions related to our sense of self, mastery, competence, meaning, survival and connections.

Systems and macro-level questions have surfaced. What will be the long-term psychological impact of an exhausted and traumatized health care workforce, of depleted health care resources? What will be the long-term psychological impact of physical distancing? What will be the long-term economic impact and how will we recover and how long will it take? What will become of our educational systems?

In the United States alone, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported a national job loss of 701,000 as a result of state-mandated stay at home orders and physical distancing requirements, with an increase from 1.4 million to 7.1 million unemployed (BLS, 2020a; BLS, 2020b). Minority workers, women, and teens lost their jobs at higher rates, in part due to the sectors in which they work (e.g., service, hospitality, temporary and gig workers etc.). The existing pay gap between racial, ethnic and women workers compared to their white counterparts has also been highlighted. The lack of access to health insurance for almost 30 million Americans presents complex problems for the health care system and individual families as a pandemic threatens lives (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). Long standing academic systems (K-12 and higher education) have been forced to make immediate changes shifting to some form of digital or virtual course delivery. However, disparities in access to technology, family literacy, and other important resources have highlighted deep inequalities in our institutional systems.

Individual questions and insecurity are also prominent. How long are we going to need to distance ourselves? What will life, school, and work look like when I can return? When can our kids go back to school; will they be alright? Will I be able to find a job? Will I get sick? Will my family

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be safe? How will I get through the loss and grief? How am I going to pay the bills? Will we have to wear masks? Can we attend group functions? Can we be in close contact or touch one another? These questions naturally create anxiety and fear and they test our resolve and resilience. The impact of mitigation strategies will have consequences for mental health and wellbeing. Many believe that there will be substantial increases in anxiety and depression, substance use, loneliness, domestic violence, and child abuse. These short-term and long-term consequences will necessitate immediate efforts focused on prevention and direct intervention for individuals and entire populations (Galea, Merchant, & Lurie, 2020).

COVID-19 is an interconnecting, cascading tsunami of up rootedness, loss and change on many levels. The challenge we face is how do we sustain our psychological, physical, social and economic capital and wellbeing in a time of great uncertainty? And how do we adapt and create a new existence in an emergent and altered reality?

2. An appreciative mindset

Appreciative Intelligence and Appreciative Inquiry are models that describe a strengths-based and transformative strategic change process focused on leadership development and organizational change. Thatchenkary and Metzker (2006) describe the theory of appreciative intelligence as the ability to see the mighty oak from the acorn. In other words, the ability to adopt a growth mindset in which we can frame our perspective toward a vision of possibility and aspiration, to see what emerges from something much smaller or from a current state in people and processes. Appreciative Intelligence is, essentially, the ability to see the generative potential within any given situation. It requires a tolerance or threshold for ambiguity and uncertainty and a belief that our actions matter and requires persistence of action to achieve our goals.

Appreciative Intelligence is based upon an approach to transformational change known as Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is both a worldview and a process for facilitating positive change in human systems. The basic assumption is that in every human system something works right and contains certain elements that make it vital, effective and successful (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). Appreciative inquiry is a generative process that has been applied worldwide at micro and macro levels, from individual to large-scale cultural transformation. AI helps people to focus upon what is working well, the positive core, and identifying strengths by engaging them in inquiries and stories that highlight and then leverage those strengths. It is an evidence-based approach to change and individual, social and organizational wellbeing. The 4-D Model of AI consists of four pillars: 1) Discovery, Together identify strengths and core competencies, “map” the organizational core; 2) Dream, Collectively envision positive possibilities for the future, articulate a shared vision, and select strategic opportunities to focus on; 3) Design, Create aspiration statements for each opportunity and design processes/structures to achieve them, and 4) Destiny, Scope out a collaborative path forward and make personal commitments to contribute strengths and resources to realize shared aspirations (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

Key appreciative strategies include: 1) reframing problems into possibilities and threats into opportunities; 2) seeing the strengths and successes of individuals, groups, and organizations; and 3) increasing curiosity and removing judgment. These strategies help individuals and systems shift their paradigm from a deficit-based perspective to a growth or strength-based perspective. AI can be used in everyday practices such as improving our relational energy, creating high quality relationships, improving emotional and mental health, focusing on developing our strengths and contributing to the wellbeing of others. From an organizational perspective, it can be used for a wide range of changes including building new infrastructures, increasing and strengthening collaboration and team building, and analyses of performance data.

3. Positivity leads to generativity

AI is not about being positive all of the time; however, the primary orientation is generativity. Bushe (2007) states “It is the quest for new ideas, images, theories and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that weren’t available or didn’t occur to us before (p. 30).” When AI is successfully applied and integrated, groups and individuals are able to take action toward a better future (Bushe, 2007).

Fredrickson (2013) discusses the ratio of positive to negative talk and its impact upon flourishing. A 3–1 ratio indicates higher levels of flourishing. Fredrickson’s (2001) ‘Broaden and Build’ theory found that positive emotions not only make people more resilient and increase their ability to cope with occasional adversity, they also increase people’s openness to ideas, creativity and capacity for action. Positive emotions can be cultivated to influence wellbeing and performance. Consider one positive emotion, that of gratitude. Gratitude has been found to be a predictor of mental health, with the ability to change the circuitry of your brain, increase happiness, boost the immune system, improve relationships and increase productivity (Emmons, Froh, & Rose, 2019).

The focus on the positive in AI can increase positive feelings, the positivity ratio, and enhance the likelihood of generative thinking and acting (Bushe, 2007). AI focuses upon a mindset of abundance (what does work) versus scarcity or the problem (what does not work). However, it does not ignore the challenges, suffering or negativity recognizing that growth and learning are often outcomes of these lived experiences. Bushe (2007) describes it as, “Instead of trying to solve the problem, AI generates a collective agreement about what people want to do together and enough structure and energy to mobilize action in the service of those agreements. When that happens, many ‘problems’ get ‘solved’ (p. 35).”

4. Integrating appreciative practices during COVID-19

Appreciative practices are techniques, skills and tools embedded in social science and positive psychology. These practices change the character of interpersonal interactions including changing perspective, focusing upon and learning from past successes, and forming relationships and a common vision (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, & Rader, 2010). This article will present a selective sample and describe several techniques that can be used to integrate an appreciative practice.

Positive Psychology is the study of thriving and flourishing at the subjective level, as well as the group level (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It explores positive individual traits such as interpersonal skill, perseverance, and future mindedness; and group traits such as civic virtues, moving toward better citizenship, responsibility, nurturing and civility among other aspects. The PERMA model of wellbeing consists of: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement (Seligman, 2011). These evidence-based strategies include the ability to: 1) Recognize and express positive emotions impacting our mental health and relationships; such emotions as gratitude, hope, joy, humor and awe; 2) Live in the present moment with authenticity using our strengths thereby creating positive identities through competence and mastery; 3) Develop and sustain our relationships through emotional and social intelligence to include empathy, perspective taking, and compassion; 4) Assess strengths and interests and find meaning and purpose using them in the world; and 5) Set and achieve personal and professional goals; to challenge ourselves with new learning as well as inspire, develop and grow others so that they may reach their potential.

4.1. Reframing toward opportunity

Generative questions help to shift the tone and direction of conversations toward value added and the creation of new knowledge, shared outcomes and possibilities (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Simply put, the question becomes, “what do we want more of”? During this time of

crisis, [Torres \(2020\)](#) suggests that we ask the following: How else can we handle this? What needs to happen now? What might be possible now? What is one small action that would make a difference?

Flipping is a technique to change perspective and to reframe a conversation or a challenge from a deficit-based problem management perspective to one of opportunity management. This technique consists of: 1) **Naming it**, by stating the problem or complaint and/or the negative results or impact; 2) **Flipping it**, to the positive opposite; and 3) **Framing it**, by identifying the positive impact of the flip or the desired results ([Whitney et al., 2010](#)). Considering some of the individual and societal challenges presented by COVID-19, [Table 1](#) provides examples of how we may flip our perspective so that we can begin to work toward a generative transformation.

4.2. Discovering the positive core

A foundational premise of AI is that positive change is more likely to occur if people are able to take some of the old or familiar with them into the new ([Cooperrider et al., 2008](#)). This necessitates an exploration of what works well when we are at our best as an individual, team, community and/or organization. Through such an exploration the root cause of success is identified and carried forward into the new change. These root causes are the strengths, or positive core, of the individual, team and/or institution. According to [Whitney et al. \(2010\)](#), inquiries to explore success elements may include: 1) When are/were you at your best? 2) What are your top strengths? 3) What contributions do you make to the team? 4) When have we been at our best? 5) What are our strengths as a team? And 6) What are the root causes of our success?

Example: a school is strategizing how they can move from in person classes to a virtual environment. The inquiries above lead them to recognize their ability to develop the curiosity and creativity of students. Any change plan would then consider how they can continue utilizing that strength in an innovative learning environment.

Example: A leadership team identifies that when times are challenging, they have used humor to navigate the challenges. Moving forward they decide to make sure that they recognize and create opportunities for humor, laughter, and joy with one another and their employees.

Example: A young woman wants to do something productive so decides to learn a new language to challenge herself. She recognizes that in the past, she does best if she sets time aside in the morning and sticks to a schedule.

Finding the positive core is a process of identifying and leveraging strengths. Strength usage increases quality of life, productivity, work engagement and retention ([Rath, 2020](#)).

4.3. Curiosity

The practice of curiosity encourages us to ask more questions in our conversations instead of making advocacy statements intended to influence others. Without judgement or ego, we learn what is important to the other person and in so doing we enrich our relationships and learn new ways of approaching a situation. With understanding, we connect by asking open-ended questions and we learn the stories of people. [Seligman \(2011\)](#) refers to such a communication strategy as “Active Constructive Responding”. Curiosity leads to learning and growth, while deepening relationships and understanding. A strategy to increase self-awareness is to ask questions and actively listen. This can be done by assessing your ask-to-tell ratio (e.g., do you ask more questions to explore another’s perspective than you tell someone what to do?).

5. Meeting the future with realistic optimism

There will be a next time of large-scale disruption, whether it be naturally occurring or as a result of human behavior. A strategic response fueled by generativity, curiosity, and realistic optimism will not prevent

Table 1
Reframing challenges associated with COVID-19.

Challenge	Inspiration: The positive opposite	Desired Impact	Inquiries toward Intentional Action
Lack of access to healthcare	Equitable healthcare for all	Physical, Emotional Wellbeing	What does a system of equitable healthcare access look like? What features or aspects create such a system?
Vulnerability of citizens: i.e. socioeconomic status; aging; chronic illness & disability; racial disparities; institutional populations.	All members of society have security in housing, living wage, healthcare, nutrition. Group residential settings promote and secure physical and social wellbeing.	Community & Employment Wellbeing	How do we support and protect all members of our society? How do we develop residential, correctional institutions that support and protect all of its members?
Vulnerability of frontline workers: service, healthcare, first responders and gig workers.	Front line workers can perform their responsibilities safely.	Physical, Emotional, Career wellbeing	What does an efficient & effective healthcare system or community system look like? What are the features needed to develop such a system? How do we develop and implement a safe working environment?
Social isolation Trauma: Exposure to loss & death, extended unemployment etc.	Healthy social connections & relationships. Building resilience and mental health.	Emotional wellbeing, Increased psychological & social capital	What are the strategies to sustain social connections within a context of physical distancing? What resources would support individuals’ biopsychosocial wellbeing? How do we support the self-efficacy of all members of society?
Telecommuting: Education and Employment	Flourishing in satellite, remote environments.	Learning and Economic wellbeing	What does a thriving and quality distance educational program consist of? What does telework look like when we are at our best?
Widespread unemployment Shifting economic trends	Everyone has a job with a living wage. People have access to workforce training.	Career wellbeing, Economic wellbeing	What can we develop and implement to secure employment (micro and macrosystems)? How do we re-invent ourselves within a changing economic context?

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Table 1 (continued)

Challenge	Inspiration: The positive opposite	Desired Impact	Inquiries toward Intentional Action
Lack of social responsibility	Individual accountability & engagement	Individual and community wellbeing	How do we facilitate active engagement in health-related best practices? How do we become good citizens of our community?

such an incident, yet it can ameliorate the pervasive negative impacts on individual and system health. This experience reinforces in each of us that there is so much we cannot control, however, there are aspects of our realities that we may be able to impact. Frankl (1984) offered that although suffering is inevitable, we have the ability to choose our attitudes. We can choose to be resilient and to persevere with hope, creativity, and intentionality. We can focus upon what we can control as an adaptive practice to manage stress and increase resilience.

We have the opportunity to responsibly anticipate as yet unseen events and trajectories, to develop and implement widespread systems change including: improvements to health care practice including both access and delivery, childcare, education, employment, support for vulnerable and marginalized populations who do not have resources or face systemic and institutional racism. In our emerging world, we will see an increase in the application and versatility of technology including telehealth delivery, health testing and tracking, as well as educational and employment applications. As a country and as a world we will need to strategize our pandemic preparedness and response, separating it from the political influences that may mire it within disparate agendas that impact positive health outcomes.

We are a resilient species, co-creating our realities through our questions, stories and meaning-making. A sense of meaning and purpose come from making a difference in the lives of others; it is a result of what we contribute and of what we give (Grant, 2013; Rath, 2020). We see resilience and hope in the stories of connection and re-connection: the celebratory drive-by parades of family and friends, the simple act of waving through a window, face time chats and gatherings. We see this in the stories that have surfaced of appreciation, empathy, compassion and giving. For example, the grocery clerk who remains at work to help others, the health care workers putting others' health before their own, neighbors checking in on neighbors, signs and songs appreciating the work of health care professionals, first responders and front line workers, chefs and restaurant owners preparing food for community members at no cost, and companies re-purposing to make masks and donating them to health care workers and others. We see this resilience in a reminder or discovery of growth including new and open methods of access and learning, book circles for children, podcasts, masters sharing their talent. We also see it with creativity as people are learning new skills such as art, gardening, languages and cooking. We see ourselves, and are allowing others to see us, without the trappings of make-up, hair cuts or color, in turn exposing our authentic selves with often with humility and humor.

The AI framework provides a guide for both individuals and systems on how to change negative thinking patterns, live responsibly, affirm our life purpose and sustain our world. To recognize that positive changes

can arise out of trauma and adversity as stated by Frankl (1984) so many years ago and as seen in research in post-traumatic growth. We can move toward a model of abundance in which suffering connects to gratitude, appreciation and a bias toward intentional action. AI provides an opportunity for us to re-align our thinking and engagement in a way that will help us be more strategic, resilient, and strength-based in the future so that we may facilitate positive and sustainable change; and in so doing, emerge as better individuals, community and world on the other side of COVID-19.

Declaration of competing interest

No conflicts of interest.

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