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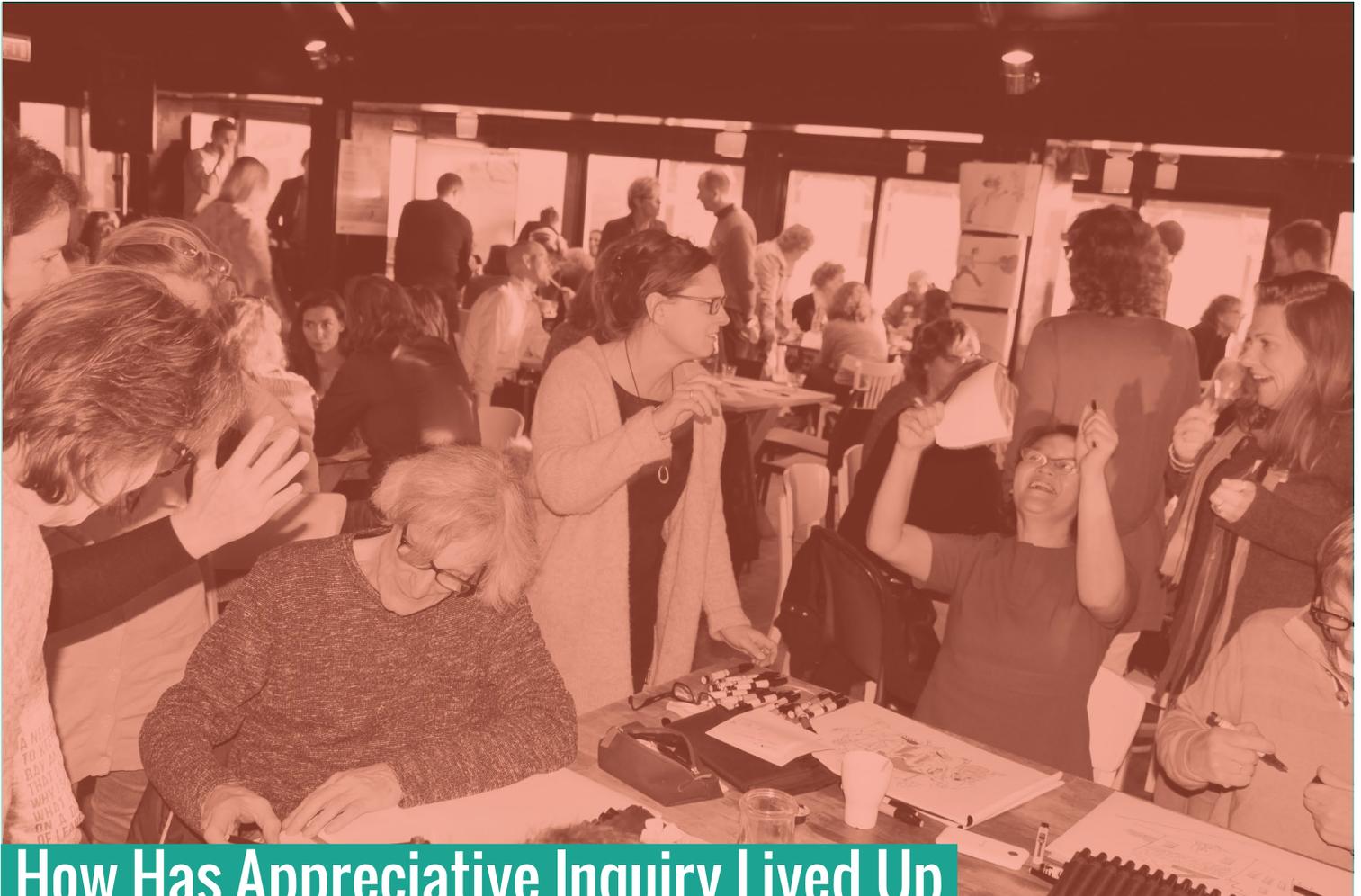
How Has Appreciative Inquiry Lived Up To its Promises? What Will the Future of Appreciative Inquiry Look Like?

Edited by

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AI Practitioner

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

Welcome to February 2016 issue of AI Practitioner

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wick van der Vaart
Editor-in-Chief
AI Practitioner

Inside this issue

Wick van der Vaart
Wick van der Vaart has master degrees in Dutch literature and social psychology. In 2005, he founded the Instituut voor Interventiekunde (Institute for Interventionism) in Amsterdam. The core of this Institute is a two-year program in appreciative interventionism. In 2016, he will become Editor-in-Chief of *AI Practitioner*.
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How Has Appreciative Inquiry Lived Up To its Promises? What Will the Future of Appreciative Inquiry Look Like?

A year ago, Anne Radford asked me whether I would take over responsibility for AI Practitioner. *I said "yes". In November, 2015, a few young men killed over 130 people in Paris. Suddenly, 'we are at war with IS'. What can AI practitioners do? What is Appreciative Inquiry really about? I haven't come to a final answer to the second question yet, but AI might be able to help our politicians, our neighbours, our clients, our students to make sense of what is happening and move forward. It is my wish that* AI Practitioner *can play a small part in that endeavour.*

"We are at war", according to Mark Rutte, our Dutch prime minister. I live in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and when I look around me I don't see any signs of the destruction I associate with war. As I write this in November, 2015, a week ago a few French, Belgian and Syrian young men killed over 130 people in Paris. This event has had a lot of impact on me and everybody around me. And suddenly, "we are at war with IS".

The words we use create the world we live in. And by using the word "war", our leaders create a world in which one party must win and another party has to lose. Because a war is something you have to win. The illusion of this "war" seems to be that, by destroying IS, a solution is created for the problems that we call fundamentalism and terrorism. It relieves us of the responsibility to look at it from another perspective, which is that many young Muslims in western Europe feel excluded, that they don't see opportunities for themselves, and that the existence of a fundamentalist and anti-western belief system has been left untouched. The notion of a war drives people even further apart.

The anxiety, the fear of many people around me, the reactions of our politicians to what they call "problems", and the presence of really urgent issues – this mix is dangerous and damaging. Terrorism, a fast growing group of refugees, lack of safety, the presence of crime, these are not "problems to be solved". Nor are they "mysteries to be embraced", as AI practitioners tend to call them. They are issues to be considered and handled with utmost curiosity and care. And this is where we, as interventionists and managers, can, and do, play our part. We can help individuals, groups, organizations and communities to make sense of what is going on and to move forward, step by step, while reflecting on every step of the way.

We have to use our skills, knowledge and networks to help people deal with important issues

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I have been a member of the AI community since 2008, when I started the AI certificate track at NTL under the supervision of Jane Magruder Watkins. I finished in 2010, and attended a number of workshops and co-trained with people like Mette Jacobsgaard, Barbara Sloan, Joep de Jong and many others.

All this time I've been asking myself the question "What is Appreciative Inquiry really about?" and I haven't come to a final answer yet. As a starting point, there is my enthusiasm for the field: training people in applied social psychology and my sense of urgency that we have to use our skills, knowledge and networks to help people deal with important issues. In addition, there is my eagerness to understand how things "really" work: I love to read the classic articles and books in the social psychology of interventions that are still perfectly current and relevant to me.

The essence of Appreciative Inquiry

So, in my view, what is Appreciative Inquiry about? It is not about moving away from solving problems. Although our questions for stories about what is working and what is important are a good start, the effect can be that in the eyes of our clients or partners we could still solve problems. That is okay, too.

An appreciative approach is a deliberate choice to focus our inquiry on what's working in the work and lives of individuals, groups and organizations. And this inquiry is always a collaborative process, in which we share our views with other people and in which we may come to a common understanding.

Appreciative Inquiry is, as a dialogical process, part of a new paradigm to do with a social constructionist way of looking at the world, as opposed to more of a logical-positivist way of looking at things. The difference being: logical-positivists belief that we can observe the world and create knowledge about what is real and important. Social constructionists would say that we constantly create the world in day-to-day conversations, and that the world doesn't exist "out there". We are co-creating what is real and important. Three different positions are possible, when the two paradigms are considered.

The first one is an either/or position. "Logical positivists do not understand what is going on in the world, and we, social constructionists, do." This can be a useful position in explaining the differences between a "new" field and an "old" paradigm. Although some AI practitioners may hold this either/or stance, maybe without realising it, most members of the AI community will agree that this does not hold. In fact, by dichotomizing, we do exactly the same as we claim that we have set aside.

The second position – and I think, the most popular among appreciative practitioners – is the both/and position. It is wonderful indeed when you can have your opinion and I can have mine: we do not have to convince each other that one of us (always me, of course) is clearly right. This position could well turn into *laissez-faire,* though: if you leave me in peace, I will leave you alone.

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The third and most difficult position is a dialectical one. It means that we take the first, positivist paradigm as the "thesis", the social constructionist way as "antithesis" and that we try then to create a "synthesis", in which the best of the two worlds is combined to create a new theory. The differences between the two paradigms are being made productive and are uplifted. The trouble is this is hard work, because we can never take things for granted when we are engaged in a dialectical dialogue.

Shelagh Aitken, the issue editor of *AI Practitioner,* came up with an example: when we move in with a new partner, both with a lot of books, we could:

1. Have an argument about whose collection is best and then throw the worst collection out;

2. Put the two collections next to each other without discussion;

3. Take all our books out and create a new collection together.

Ralph Stacey (2003), who writes about Appreciative Inquiry on page 52, makes the same distinctions and states that the second position is in line with the philosophy of Kant, and that the third position is Hegelian. Apart from these philosophical underpinnings, there has been research done in our own field that is very interesting in this respect.

The beginning of a social psychology of interventions

In the late 1930s, Kurt Lewin and some of his students, Ralph White and Ron Lippitt (read their 1960 book!), were curious to know how they could create a democratic climate in a classroom. They asked teachers to be autocratic one week and democratic the next week. Being autocratic meant: telling the kids what to do, how to do it and to answer any of their questions with the words: "Because I say so."

Being democratic proved to be more difficult. The first results of their research showed, surprisingly, that the kids did not behave differently under the two conditions: in both situations there was a lot of shouting and fighting, the kids were looking for a scapegoat, they abandoned their work as soon as the teacher left the room, they spoke with disrespect about kids in another classroom, etc.

Upon closer examination, it turned out that the teachers in the "democratic" experiment left every decision to the children in the classroom – everything the kids said and did was okay. Kurt Lewin concluded that the teachers in this condition didn't behave democratically, but that they had a laissez-faire attitude, which led to the same effects as autocratic leadership. This left Lewin and his fellow researchers with the question how to define democracy. Laissez-faire had proved to have the same effects as autocracy. Democratic leadership then had to combine the best of laissez-faire and autocratic leadership. Lewin and his colleagues concluded that both autocratic and laissez-faire behaviours are automatic responses, unconscious acts. And that every generation has to learn anew how to think and act democratically. I would

Every generation has to learn anew how to think and act democratically.

like to add: that democracy presupposes continuously considered and mindful thinking and acting. It is indeed a new paradigm.

Why is this research so essential to me and for the AI practitioner in general? Because it marks the beginning of the field of fundamental social psychology, being robust, and the start of a practical social psychology, being relevant. Its relevance not only had to do with Lewin's own personal history, as a German Jew who sought refuge in the United States, it also speaks to our present situation. Western society is in dire need of a dialogue about the question: what do we want our democracy to be and how do we make it together?

Bringing AI back to its beginnings

Inquiry in order to appreciate is a powerful start for a conversation. But I would like us, AI practitioners, to take a step back and a step further at the same time. By acknowledging on whose shoulders we as appreciative practitioners are standing, we keep ourselves grounded in practical theories. By renewing our own practices, beyond the appreciative variation of Kurt Lewin's action research model (the 5D model), we can innovate and sharpen our tools.

What were some of the promises implied in the early papers on Appreciative Inquiry?

- To bring spirit back to action research; that is, to build a bridge between relevant practices and robust research. Both this issue's Feature Choice article by Kevin Real and Research Review & Notes column by Freddie Crous address this issue.

- To create more egalitarian organisations. This has become a commonly accepted idea in many organisations and industries. Joep de Jong's and Ingeborg Kooger's articles address this idea.

- To enhance the possibility of transformational change. Robbert Masselink, Gervase Bushe, and Lindsey Godwin write about this issue.

My vision for the *AI Practitioner* is to be a platform for:

- Stories from the field;

The issues with which we are faced right now demand careful deliberation and conscious actions.

- Solid theory as a basis for our work. We could look for these theories and models in our own, sometimes forgotten, past, in academic institutions, and in the dialogical communities around us (see Bushe & Marshak for an overview);

- New exercises, conversations, methods, how to's and more to keep our practices alive.

- Book reviews of books not just in Appreciative Inquiry, but in related fields.

Enhancing possibilities for transformational change in Nepal: read more about three decades of AI in Lindsey Godwin's article on page 24

Because I think that Appreciative Inquiry is the social constructionist paradigm put into practice, I intend to invite scholars and practitioners from other disciplines, such as deep democracy, Theory U, solution-focused approach, positive psychology, complex responsive process theory and other developments. By including those voices in our journal, we will be challenged to think out loud and anew about our assumptions and practices and this may stimulate a constant cross-pollination that is already happening in organizational practice.

A new section in *AI Practitioner* will be "Nourish to Flourish". This section will contain "Voices from the Field", a series of short stories by AI practitioners from all over the world compiled by Keith Storace. These stories will build a bridge between the WAIC in Johannesburg, 2015 and the next WAIC in Brazil. It will also include a book review by Sarah Lewis.

What is at stake?

Cooperrider and Srivastva stated in their seminal 1987 article that the life and work of Kurt Lewin pointed out two important aspects of an appreciative approach: curiosity and social innovation. Those two ingredients are becoming extremely important for social scientists and practitioners. The issues with which we are faced demand careful deliberation and conscious actions.

Exclusion, war, poverty, destruction, pollution, all these issues have existed throughout history, and we will never "solve" them. What we can do though is: be mindful and thoughtful. Being curious is a good start, because it allows us to have conversations with people with whom we disagree, to get to know people we do not know and to inquire in order to appreciate. And we do need solid social practices and networks, and other social innovations.

Most of our politicians seem to have forgotten what the core of democracy is. War is not an answer to the questions we are being asked. We might be able to help our politicians, our neighbours, our clients, our students to make sense of what is happening and to move forward. It is my wish that Appreciative Inquiry can play a small part in that endeavour.

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Appreciative Inquiry's Promises and Hopes: What is coming next?

David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva could not have foreseen the enormous impact Appreciative Inquiry would have. The human side of enterprise has become central in many organizations. In this issue of AI Practitioner we want to explore the future possibilities of Appreciative Inquiry. If we were trying to make up a promising agenda for the future, what topics should be on it and why?

When David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva published their first article in 1987, "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life", they could not have foreseen the enormous impact it would have on the field of Organizational Development, on scholars and practitioners, and on organizations and society in general. Since that time, almost thirty years ago, the way people think about organizing and organizations has changed considerably. The human side of enterprise has become central in many organizations, as well as in organizational and social studies. Developments, such as strengths-based organizing, positive psychology, research in neuroscience and positive organizational scholarship, have greatly contributed to a humanly significant science of organizations and society.

Does that mean that we are done, that Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is firmly established within corporate life and has fulfilled its purpose? David Cooperrider himself believes not:

> For me, the long-term call and journey to understand the gift of AI – appreciative ways of knowing, appreciative interchange and ways of relating, and appreciative ways of designing – is still in its infancy and perhaps always will be as the numbers of AI co-authors and co-creators multiplies. AI is not a thing or a static concept, but an ongoing co-construction of reality; it's the result of many voices, time and circumstances, planned and unplanned experiments, new discoveries and designs, narratives and cases, and unlimited imagination. All I am certain of right now is this: AI, as long as it is constructed upon, practiced or inspired by the sense of the mystery and miracle of life on this planet, will never become inert or lifeless.

If we were trying to make up a promising agenda for the future, what topics should be on it and why? Is there a new agenda emerging for AI practitioners and scholars, or do and can we continue the existing one?

In this issue of the *AI Practitioner* we want to explore the future possibilities of Appreciative Inquiry. If we were trying to make up a promising agenda for the future, what topics should be on it and why? Is there a new agenda emerging for AI practitioners and scholars, or do and can we continue the existing one?

We have invited several people from the AI community, as well as from outside, in this issue to explore the possibilities for AI in the coming years. What do they notice happening in their communities and organizations? What are the upcoming and important topics, developments or possibilities that make up the AI agenda for the future? So, many of the articles in this issue are of a reflexive nature. They invite you, as a reader, to re-consider what it was that attracted you in the first place to join the AI community and in the second place what motivates you to continue or renew your "membership" for the coming years.

Original and possible promises of AI

Before we let our guest authors answer these and other questions, I want to recall some of the promises that David Cooperrider and the late Suresh Srivastva wrote about in their first article. They serve as good points of reference, with the addition of several questions that reflect my own curiosity. Not all list items are discussed in this issue and most questions will not be answered either. They are an ongoing and ever expanding invitation to you to respond to, maybe in your daily practice or by being stimulated to write a future article in this or in another magazine.

1. Transformative capacity

According to the first article on Appreciative Inquiry in 1987, practitioners of AI aim to develop organizations to a higher level, in which organizational paradigms, norms, ideologies or values are transformed from which a more egalitarian, post-bureaucratic form of organizing can emerge. Where do we see this happening and to what extend does AI constitutes this transformation? If we look at transformative organizations such as Google, Semco and Goretex, which are shining examples of democratic workplaces, what can we learn from them that expands our thinking about AI? Are there factors other than AI principles and a focus on inquiry and appreciation that are contributing towards egalitarian, post-bureaucratic cultures? There might be more to these, and other, examples that is worthwhile to learn about as they can hold the germs for the future development of Appreciative Inquiry.

2. Generativity

Real innovations that shake up a whole market, such as Airbnb and Uber, grow and develop at a great distance from established companies for a reason. Disruptive innovations can seem very scary and dangerous for companies whose successes are based on old business models and protective strategies. So how can AI help these established organizations look the devil in the face so that they dare to challenge their assumptions about themselves, their markets and customers? Are they willing to renew themselves, develop new identities,

Being able to experience mystery is in itself a transformative act.

strategies and relationships? And if so, how does AI support these kinds of transitions over longer time periods? The answers to questions like these can help make the generative potential of AI real, practical and effective.

3. Organizing as a mystery to be embraced

This still is –and may be the most promising – thought in the original article. Being able to experience mystery is in itself a transformative act. People experience it in the moment when they are most real, alive and present. Past and future merge into the here-and-now; every moment is new and fresh. How does AI help people in everyday life to marvel, to be open, curious and mindful? When they start to realize that the state of not knowing is actually more common than the state of knowing? This is especially important in those situations when people want to accomplish something, whether to escape a problem or a threat, or to move towards a goal or purpose. If AI could increase the amount of reflectiveness, contemplation and marvelling in our organizations, communities and families, what would its impact be, and what would it look like? It certainly offers a counter tendency to the fears we experience when we don't want to change, look into unfamiliar situations or when we feel that somehow our identities are threatened.

4. The power of inquiry

Did Einstein discover the Theory of Relativity by accident, a side-effect of what he was searching for, or was it a deliberate and focused act right from the beginning? From innovation theory we know that the principle of serendipity says that many discoveries come as a surprise to the researchers involved and are a by-product of what people were actually searching for. So, does it make a difference if we inquire into topics or situations with a specific purpose in mind, or just because it intrigues or frustrates us, because we are simply curious or come to the question in a state of incomprehension? Whatever triggers the inquiry process, we are never certain what will come out of it, especially when our original question snowballs and turns into an unstoppable movement. So, to what extend do our ambitions, aspirations and goals, as extensions of the past, stand in the way of or stimulate real and authentic inquiry as a process of not knowing? With this knowledge in mind we might start holding inquiry inside organizations more lightly without wanting right from the start to attain that specific goal or end result and become much more sensitive about our motivations along the way as we go.

AI is a morally relevant theory and practice: it affects the way people live their lives in relation to one another.

5. The moral potential of AI

AI is a morally relevant theory and practice: it affects the way people live their lives in relation to one another. How can we increase moral considerations and consciousness preliminary to and during the inquiry process to include as many possible of the stakeholders' concerns and interests? As the choices of topic(s), participants and process design all demarcate what and who are included or excluded, the motives and concerns of initiators, decision makers and facilitators become paramount. The way they co-produce becomes just as important as what they produce. This will not only influence the outcomes

Managers and facilitators who apply AI are part of existing power relations and, whether they are aware of it or not, use them to influence relationships in order to meet particular interests.

of the inquiry process but also its durability and of the AI intervention. So, to what extend do we want to make moral and relational concerns more central to AI – and what are those concerns?

6. AI beyond management fashion

A common complaint from people and teams who use AI often is that they, or their surroundings, have grown accustomed to the 5D steps. They have internalized or incorporated AI well, but in a way that has become routine. AI then runs the risk of practitioners approaching situations again as "problems to be solved". How do these processes of standardization work, such that as soon as people and organizations become familiar with a process, they start looking out for the next management fashion? How can we sustain and develop creativity, aliveness and curiosity amongst people and in processes to keep AI fresh and new, as if people were using it for the first time? What kind of knowledge and skills support this kind of experience? Besides stimulating AI as a philosophy or action research method in organizations and communities, we have to think about the ways in which we can make AI sustainable.

7. Incorporating notions on power and politics

Authors writing about AI have not so far paid a great deal of attention to the subject of power and politics. Possibly because what we pay attention to might grow. But organizations do pay attention to power and politics. Metaphorically, they can be described as arenas in which differences in opinions, interests and strategies are continuously negotiated and re-negotiated. One reason for this neglect might be that, as AI practitioners, we do not wish to stimulate power and politics inside organizations, although some authors on management do acknowledge its merits and value. If we do not understand the workings of power and politics as distinct features of organizations, or do not pay attention to them, the effectiveness of AI interventions might be severely hampered.

On a more fundamental level, managers and facilitators who apply AI are part of existing power relations and, whether they are aware of it or not, use them to influence relationships in order to meet particular interests. Refusing to admit, or being unaware, that Appreciative Inquiry, is in itself a power-full act, comes at a cost of not achieving generative solutions, of continuing existing power relations and not learning about the power dynamics within the organization. There is great potential in including power and political dynamics: they are indispensable elements of organizational life. This is what Ralph Stacey talks about in his article on the paradox of consensus and conflict. The writers in this issue touch upon some of these questions, and many of their own. I hope they inspire your curiosity and imagination about what AI has in store for us.

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doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/s1475-9152(2013)0000004021

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What's in AIP 2016

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About the May 2016 Issue
Bettering Sport Through Appreciative Lenses and Practices

This issue of AI Practitioner *illuminates the synergy and promising practices that emerge when Appreciative Inquiry, positive and performance psychology, together with the emerging strength-based approaches of learning through reflection, are brought together.*

This special issue revisits, broadens and re-frames some of the significant messages described in *AI Practitioner*'s groundbreaking article by Diana Whitney and Barbara Fredrickson (August 2015) called, 'Appreciative Inquiry meets Positive Psychology'.

Drawing upon examples from a wide range of sports, we constructively challenge deficit-based approaches to performance improvement and explore the gains when athletes, coaches, coach educators and sports organisations create and sustain appreciative spaces and positive relational practices. The issue illuminates the synergy and promising practices that emerge when Appreciative Inquiry, positive and performance psychology, together with the emerging strength-based approaches of learning through reflection, are brought together.

Through stories, conversations and other cameos from sports such as rugby, football, golf, cricket, netball and speed skating, the issue addresses deep-seated processes in sport such as the tendency to focus on fixing weaknesses and getting rid of what is not wanted, because knowing how to learn from our successes and amplify what is desirable is not perceived as a strength. Additionally the issue touches upon important mental and emotional states and processes such as being resilient, optimistic, hopeful and resourceful, and how these can amplify wellbeing, foster love and a sense of achievement in sports participation and nourish human flourishing.

Whether readers are active in sport or not, this issue offers plenty to reflect upon, to question, explore and apply in the pursuit of "bettering" ourselves and others.

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Purpose of AI Practitioner

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

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

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