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Appreciative, systemic and constructionist ideas and practices at work in Denmark

ABSTRACT

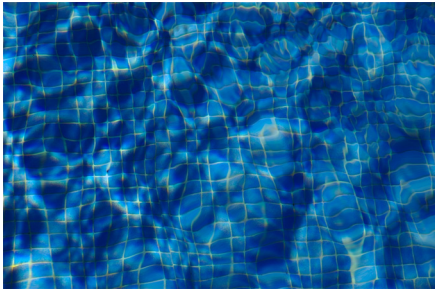
The author-practitioners in this issue have expanded their understanding and use of AI practices by re-vitalising the link to and further developing thinking and practices using systemic theory and practice. We can watch new practices appear, expand and enrich the traditional AI approach to organisational development.

Introduction

This issue of the AI Practitioner includes articles written by Danish Appreciative Inquiry practitioners – leaders and organisational consultants. It gives the reader a view of how a group of Danish organisational practitioners think about and do their leading and consulting using AI as a main inspiration.

The title of this issue 'Appreciative, Systemic and Constructionist Ideas and Practices at Work in Denmark' illustrates the different movements and sources of inspiration in AI developments in Scandinavia over the last five to ten years. A vital inspiration has come from the way AI has been described and used in Organisation Development work. Some people, seeing AI as a more or less non-reflexive use of the 4D model (Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny), do not take into account the richness of the early work of David Cooperrider and his colleagues (e.g. Cooperrider & Shrivastvas, 1987, Cooperrider et.al., 2000). Appreciation often becomes equal to looking at the positive side of organisational life and Inquiry becomes too automated – forgetting to look into the richness of organisational life.

Inspired by a traditional AI approach in the early and mid 1990s, the author-practitioners have expanded their understanding and use of AI practices by re-vitalising the link to social constructionist sources (primarily Kenneth Gergen) (Gergen, 1991, 1994 and 2009) and further developing the thinking and practices with inspiration from systemic theory and practice, among others, Gregory Bateson (1972), Humberto Maturana (Maturana and Varela, 1987; Maturana and Poerksen, 2004), and Gianfranco Cecchin and his colleagues from the Milan centre (Cecchin, 1987, Cecchin et.al., 1992). The latest steps have included inspiration from the German critical tradition in the shape of Axel Honneth (Honneth, 1992). By combining these sources of inspiration, we can watch new practices appear, expand and enrich the traditional AI approach to organisational development.



We see theories as 'tools for thinking' about organisational practice – and we believe that they are vital to leaders and other practitioners.

Photo: Thomas Johansen

The inspiration from Social Constructionism invites us to foreground AI practices as a relational activity – being aware that our use of language is fateful. Our language is seen as an active 'doer' – what we talk about and the way we talk about it becomes what we experience as our reality. This puts a strong focus on doing AI with a relational reflexivity – seeing and hearing focused on the richness and multiplicity of ideas and possibilities.

Adding elements from systemic thinking is an invitation to foreground the 'I' in AI. Systemic theory and practices have a strong focus on curiosity as a vital 'tool' in relational activity. Being curious about the ideas of other people expands our understanding and allows our collaborative capabilities to grow. A vital learning from systemic thinking is that neutrality in the traditional sense is not possible. Any statement and any question builds on some values and leaves others out – therefore neutrality is an invitation or obligation to curiosity. In other words, by systemic neutrality we invite people to inquire and be curious about the system around them. This inspires us to move from Appreciative Inquiry to inquiring appreciatively – foregrounding AI (or i-a) as a relational process which builds our capacity for relational and innovative co-creation.

Last but not least, Axel Honneth's work on appreciation. In our view his work expands our way of understanding and depth of appreciation, and his work underlines the importance of seeing appreciation as something very important when we want to grow human relations in organisations. Honneth distinguishes three different elements in growing appreciation in relationships and appreciative organisations.

- Firstly, love for the person – that we feel accepted and respected on a personal level.
- Second, esteem – our morality is honoured and our legal rights are respected.
- Third, affirmation – to appreciate the personal and professional competences and contributions each member makes to the team or organisation.

The following articles illustrate the variety of ways in which Danish practitioners are using these three sources inspiration – AI, systemic thinking and social construction – to develop both their own understanding of theories and their own practices. Practice linked with theory is a vital way to keep growing and expanding these practices. We see theories as 'tools for thinking' about organisational practice – and we believe that they are vital to leaders and other practitioners. A practice without a theoretical grounding is like a body without a head.

Taking a closer look at the different articles.

1. In the first article Carsten Hornstrup and Thomas Johansen takes a look at the ideas and theories embedded in AI. They add new understanding, arguing that it is more in line with the philosophical roots of AI to label it i-a, to underline that i-a should be understood and used as a relational process, rather than a more fixed 4D method.

2. In the next article Thomas Specht describes how we can understand and use AI as a valuable way of working with corporate values and value processes. He distinguishes between values lived and values told, and invites us to look into value-based processes by looking at what he describes as 'corporate ethical scorekeeping & score developing.' He uses a case of facilitating a value process for a group of managers as an illustration of his thinking.

3. Rask and Johansen focus on how inquiring appreciatively has been beneficial in addressing a number of staff situations in a drug rehabilitation centre. By altering the conceptual practices, the authors show how this altered conversational practices. This led to fewer stress-related problems, lower levels of fatigue, headaches and absences due to illness. It also led to an increased awareness by team members of how they are responsible for constructing the future and therefore how they look at themselves in stress-related situations.

4. In his article, Jan Henriksen uses an appreciative approach to work with what he describes as contingency (seen as possibilities, dependency, eventuality, randomness, etc.) in a Danish public school. In order to handle the contingent context as a leader, he has developed useful models and practices that help frame a contingent context, using AI as a practical theory. He presents a situation where practical theory – some simple notions and actions – led to some very inspiring results.

5. In her article Malene Skov Dinesen writes about the extensive use of evaluations with a focus on 'Are the personal and economic resources spent in the most meaningful and productive way?' She casts light on some of the challenges and dilemmas surrounding the way in which evaluation is viewed and used. A number of systemic and social constructionist theories are presented and discussed in the context of evaluation. The focus of the article is whether and how the systemic appreciative field can contribute to the development of the practice of evaluation.

6. Thomas N. Christensen writes about how doing irreverence appreciatively can be seen as a framework for working as an organisational consultant. Drawing on the concept of irreverence and the movement from 'being' to 'doing,' a future-oriented practice of doing irreverence is developed. Irreverence connected with the notions of appreciation results in an approach to organisational development that can open up possibilities and new ways of thinking.

We hope you will be inspired – as we were – by the practices as well as the theories that bring out the richness of Appreciative Inquiry and inquiring appreciatively.

Carsten Hornstrup and Thomas Johansen

Guest editors, August 2009

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For more details about the conference, please visit the conference website:
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Purpose of AI Practitioner

This publication is for people interested in making the world a better place using positive relational approaches to change such as Appreciative Inquiry.

The publication is distributed quarterly: February, May, August and November.

