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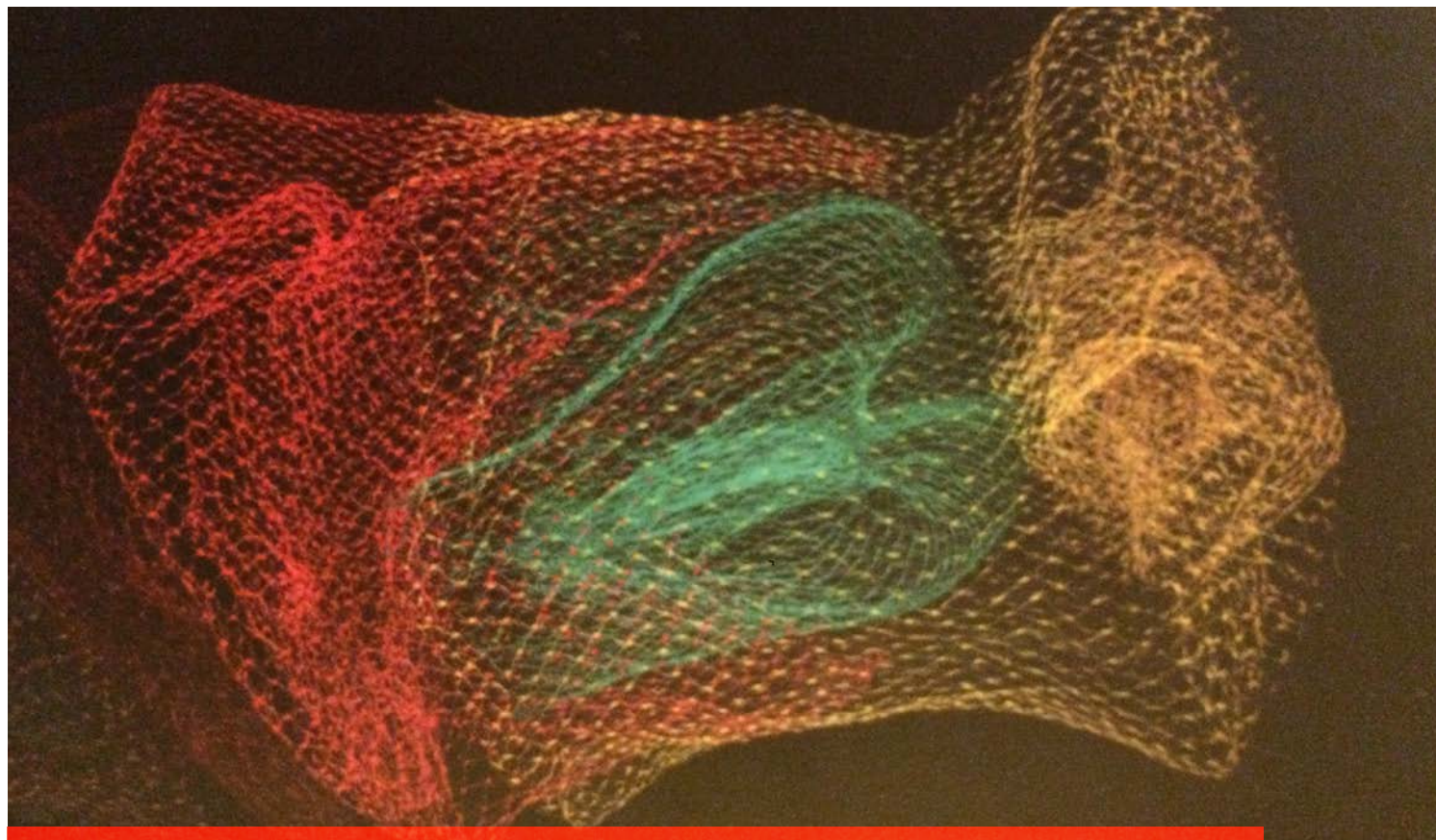
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# AI Practitioner



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**Appreciation and Generative Dialogues**

**Reflections and Appreciative Inquiry**

**Practices from Ibero-America**

Edited by

**Dora Fried Schnitman**  
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Sponsored by

**Escuela de Psicología Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez**  
**Fundación Interfas and Instituto IDEIA**



Cover photo: Descontextualización (2013) Plastic nets for packing fruit and vegetables. Artist: Dora Matta; Photographer: Marcelo Cortes

## Appreciation and Generative Dialogues: Reflections and Appreciative Inquiry Practices from Ibero-America

Inside this issue

### Welcome to February 2015 issue of AI Practitioner

Ibero-America has been a fertile ground for Appreciative Inquiry. In this special issue, there is a great richness of writing that draws on many years of experience with dialogue, social construction, and generative and appreciative perspectives and methodologies. The resulting models and practices are characterised by participation, dialogue and inclusivity. Contributions are drawn from the whole region, especially Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala and Spain.

In his Feature Choice article, *Working with Emergent Change: Applying Appreciative Inquiry to Adaptive Challenges*, Gervase Bushe discusses how complexity science can help AI practitioners improve their change practice.

In Research Review & Notes, Danielle Zandee at Nyenrode Business Universiteit in the Netherlands asks us to look again at strengthening AI as a generative process to action research.

Matthew Moehle, Roopa Nandi and Hardik Shah focus on newly uncovered general resources as well as those connected to Ibero-America, in Spanish and English.

We would like to thank Fundación Interfas, Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez and IDEIA, Institute for Dialogue and Appreciative Inquiry for sponsoring this issue.

**Anne Radford**  
Editor, AI Practitioner

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# Using Appreciative Inquiry for Work in Border Areas in Ecuador

## From Cruelty and Social Injustice to Respect and Acceptance of Diversity

This article describes a program that attempts to support a community living in one of the harshest, most violent regions of Ecuador. The hope is to gradually generate different forms of relating and interacting based on the values of respect, accountability, dignity, freedom, relational ethics – and joy.

In the town of San Lorenzo, located some 275 kilometers from Quito in the province of Esmeraldas, Ecuador, I coordinated a team of five women committed to generating social and cultural changes that would have a positive impact on local reality. San Lorenzo is the home of an Afro-Ecuadorian community where I have worked since 2010 to consolidate teams and social networks capable of tackling the problems rampant in one of the harshest, most violent and unjust pockets of society. This is a region riddled with extreme poverty, exclusion, social violence, drug trafficking, paramilitary groups, groups of Colombian guerrilla fighters, the trafficking of women, unemployment and lack of employment opportunities – that is, a reality marked by cruelty and social injustice.

Family and group therapy, as well as community workshops, brought to light the following realities:

- 85% of women who received services had been subjected to gender violence
- 75% of women who received services had been victims of sexual abuse as children or teenagers as well as in their adult relationships
- 90% of persons of Colombian origin who received services had lost at least one member of their family to violence (murder)
- 80% of people who received services have a family member with an alcohol problem
- 15% of the population who received services are economically active, that is, has a steady job
- 100% of persons who received services identify lack of employment or of a steady job for decent pay as one of the most serious and upsetting problems they face
- 35% of people of Colombian origin who received services report having experienced some form of discrimination or xenophobia in their lifetime

## There was a need to find productive alternatives to end the invisibility of violence and abuse

### The project's mission

I provided consultancy services to the International Organization for Migration from 2010 to 2013. The mission of the project was to seek effective solutions on an emergency or short-term basis to issues faced by Colombians forced to leave their homes due to conflicts in the region near the Ecuadorian border. The actions included:

- Psychosocial care and services for victims and survivors of gender-based violence (GBV)
- Strengthening of local ability to detect and prevent GBV, and to provide care and services to its victims

The program attempts to sustain a process to open up new relational possibilities through participation in training involving both professionals and the local population. The idea is to gradually generate different forms of relating and interacting based on the values of respect, accountability, dignity, freedom, relational ethics and joy.

According to the needs identified by the population we worked with at seminars and workshops, we attempted to train a large number of individuals – educators, boys and girls, partners and families – in the areas of self-awareness and awareness of their own resources, as well as social and community assets. Specific issues included: a culture of good treatment; relational ethics; the integral human rights of boys, girls and teenagers; GBV; family violence; the sexual abuse of boys, girls and teenagers; alcoholism and drug addiction; positive leadership; mediation and conflict management; assertive and appreciative communication; generative dialogues; art workshops.

Diego in the barrio of San Lorenzo, home of Afro-Ecuadorians living in the shadow of the conflict in Columbia



The training and artistic workshops with a focus on Appreciative Inquiry constitute a space – perhaps the only space – where the voices of these women are heard freely and openly.

### Finding alternatives and developing community options

Because of the painful reality facing Ecuador as a whole, but this population and its women in particular, there was a need to find productive alternatives to end the invisibility of violence and abuse, and to develop community options capable of breaking the chain of mistreatment and humiliation. The figures were (and continue to be) alarming: eight of ten women in this community are victims of violence (physical, psychological or sexual) inflicted by their partners. Four or five in every ten children are victims of sexual abuse – and 85% of abusers are relatives or individuals close to the family. Eight out of ten families have a member with an alcohol problem.

The aim of the project is to facilitate a conscious and coherent choice of genuine respect and acceptance of diversity; to evidence in daily interactions an attitude free of racial prejudice; to be open to learning and enrichment through the experiences, knowledge and resources of the local culture. We attempted to respond to the specific needs of the context and to propose a discourse that would unabashedly and thoroughly address any and all forms of GBV and the sexual abuse of children and teenagers.

### What we learned from this experience

- Using the pleasure in storytelling to generate creative spaces  
I noticed a formidable resource in the personal, familial and community relationships operative in this region: the pleasure derived from storytelling, the strength of the local oral culture, and the joy in conversing.
- Expanding relational opportunities to share dreams and options for transformation

Grupo mayo: women committed to generating positive social and cultural changes



## The faces of San Lorenzo



We witnessed how confidence and hope in the possibility of generating new alternatives was conveyed

This existing, if largely unrecognized, resource provided a positive world of alternatives to expand relational possibilities. Recognizing, valuing and legitimizing that resource as something that did, in fact, work in local relationships. This allowed us to generate creative spaces geared to artistic expressions, such as workshops exploring the local culture through storytelling and narrative, music, theater, dance, and painting. We used Appreciative Inquiry as a basis to engage the community's resources and strengths to imagine other futures and to share the dreams individuals had for their community. This enabled us to develop, in conjunction with the team of five women and then with the larger community, options for transformation.

### Surprises

1. There is an evident lack of consistent presence of public institutions, particularly in the social fabric of San Lorenzo. When those institutions do make themselves felt, they have a limited effect. There is also widespread belief amongst the population that more welfare benefits should be made available for them.
2. The culture of male mistreatment of women and children is ongoing, as is the culture of maternal mistreatment of children.
3. The training and artistic workshops with a focus on Appreciative Inquiry constitute a space – perhaps the only space – where the voices of these women are heard freely and openly. In these workshops they receive respect, empathy, understanding, acceptance and legitimation.

### Successes

Participants gradually began to trust their dialogue with me and the team of five women; we co-constructed a safe and reliable space that translated into the following figures on family and group psychosocial care and services:

- 80% of participating women and families took part in some sort of family therapy
- 50% of participating women and families recognized as a resource the possibility of sustaining productive dialogues in that therapeutic space over the three-year period



San Lorenzo puerta

Learning to build new relational and communicational possibilities together



I believe that a good question is one that engages the other person in something meaningful to them.

We witnessed how, in the different neighborhoods and communities where we provided alternatives for relational construction (such as artistic workshops for children, youth and women), positive local leaders emerged. They were infected with an attitude of renewal and the possibility of making other futures for themselves and their offspring. We also witnessed how confidence and hope in the possibility of generating new alternatives was conveyed – responsible alternatives capable of successfully tackling the communities' dilemmas. There was a collective awareness of the need to act in concert and to expand networks of family, social and institutional support to work out the complex issues facing participants' communities on the basis of clear relational ethics.

#### The unexpected: What I – and we – learned

I had not expected to encounter the courage that I saw in the basic team to confront the opposition of entrenched local leaders and to keep fighting for their beliefs “come hell or high water”.

From the team and the local population, I learned about resilience: even in conditions and a context that, in comparison with those found in the “Western world”, would not only be unthinkable but also suicidal, they were able to pursue their life projects with love, respect and a sense of the future.

We learned to build new relational and communicational possibilities together, to have faith in ourselves and to appreciate our diversity, and to accept ourselves as we are. We learned to trust our mutual resources, to be supportive in circumstances of real vulnerability, to reflect on the basis of new world views that emerged thanks to our joint social actions. Productive dialogues created an infectious sense of connection and teamwork, of becoming partners in conversations.





Flora y Marcia

Open dialogues and appreciating and valuing the local oral culture created an infectious spirit of generosity and eagerness to share, get involved and generate joint actions imbued in a sense of participation, belonging and common responsibility.

### **The theoretical basis and its enactment**

On the basis of generative processes, Appreciative Inquiry and social constructionism, guided reflection on the resources of individuals and their communities was proposed to replace the oppressive, repetitive cycle of deficiencies. The idea was that of a relational vision grounded in true respect for the other in his or her differences, and in transformative dialogue through meaningful conversations.

It was riveting, in this context, to learn from questions. We understood that questions constitute the basis of dialogue and are the fundamental tool in this work. Questions are a way to express interest in and to participate in the life of a community.

It became clear as well that the right questions surface when one delves into the world of each individual, paying close attention and expressing an interest in finding out more about what concerns or troubles each person, rather than pursuing pre-existing notions and hypotheses about “pathologies” and deficiencies. These questions make the other feel that he or she has been invited into a conversation, and create a sense of belonging. We discovered together the need to usher in a new way of thinking and to reflect differently by means of the questions we asked.

I believe that a good question is one that engages the other person in something meaningful to them. It can lead them to raise more questions and move them into new conversational spaces of hopeful possibilities and new actions.

### **Theoretical foundations reaffirmed**

Of the distinct forms of relationship, dialogue is privileged, insofar as it encourages good treatment and inclusion. We must construct a different relational ethics and a deep intimacy that implies, in the context of a transformative dialogue, total openness to the possibility that the other’s truth is capable of changing us.

Deep and joint learning processes create ties of safety and trust, and new contexts to construct comprehensive wellbeing. The willingness to question everything, first and foremost one’s own self, is essential. So too is the willingness to reflect critically on prejudices of all sorts in a dialogue capable of embracing differences, of opening up a space of legitimacy to all voices, of expanding relational possibilities, and of encouraging the construction of new stories with liberating relational and social meanings. Participating and getting involved in ongoing processes of critical reflection and generating meaningful questions and open dialogues means creating democratic contexts in which human rights are respected and social transformations fostered with creativity and imagination.

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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.

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