

## Voices from the Field

As we continue to move towards a highly anticipated WAIC Brazil 2017, “Voices from the Field” presents three more reflective stories in this issue of AI Practitioner that deeply identify with the transformative nature of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Our three contributors, Whitney Fry, Petra van Leeuwen and Enrique J. Zaldivar, share their unique experiences of how their work, and ultimately their lives, have been enriched through all that AI instils. Each story is a clear example of how AI has lived up to its promise.

**Keith Storage**

### AI: Positive Change in Unexpected Places

**Whitney Fry**

Over a decade of working in emergency relief in nine countries left me discouraged, hopeless and cynical. I had seen the effects of war, managed crises and experienced abuses of power. I struggled to see the impact of my work, to the point of noticing the detriment and potential harms of aid. Situations were bleak, and all I could see and feel was sorrow. I was on the verge of burnout.

My world turned around one day when a colleague introduced me to AI, and I subsequently began reading online posts and articles about Appreciative Inquiry, specifically applications of AI in the international aid and development context.

While explaining my doctoral dissertation ideas to a colleague in the early days of its formation, our conversation turned to AI. My dissertation focused on promoting positive male-gender socialisation among male refugees living in East Africa, as a means of preventing gender-based violence. Male-gender socialisation, the development of one’s gender identity, is a relational construct that refers to social expectations and ideals about how men are meant to behave.<sup>1</sup> In this initial AI conversation with my colleague, she encouraged me to explore AI as a possible approach to uncovering this best-case scenario amid complex environments. My research was initially an attempt to challenge my inner cynic to grasp one last chance of a tangible hope; the outcome, with AI as my method, greatly exceeded these expectations.

AI complemented my world view as a follower of Jesus, and provided a practical application of gratitude: seeing positive change in unexpected places. AI, in many ways, was the reset button to my “hope meter”, and my vision suddenly opened from a myopic perspective of deficit details to the bigger picture of possibilities.

*AI was the reset button to my 'hope meter'*

*I love seeing people's faces light up when asked what they appreciate about their community or organisation.*

Today I apply AI to global health consulting efforts in East Africa and the Middle East, challenging the status quo of needs-based programming and community problem solving to promote creative, generative thinking that links what works to achieving the dream. I love seeing people's faces light up when asked what they appreciate about their community or organisation, as well as the transformation that takes place when one tells a story and realises that the answer lies within themselves or their community. Furthermore, with each AI experience, I also learn something new: from the art of the right question to the power of storytelling to the transformative potential of dreaming.

While dreaming was a foreign concept to me before being introduced to AI, today dreaming is a way of thinking; a way of life. I recognise through AI that transformation is not only accessible for the people with whom I work, but I also have begun to thrive and flourish in all aspects of life. I have embraced the joy of working amid complexity, for possibilities for positive change are amplified by the generative power in such environments. Indeed, transformation among individuals and communities embracing the AI mindset is often palpable in these settings, restoring my own hope in the potential for positive change in complex environments.

## REFERENCE

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## AI and Strengths-based Social Work: Perfect Partners

Petra van Leeuwen

I had just turned 20 when I started working with homeless women who faced psychiatric and addiction problems. These 25 women lived together in a shelter for homeless women in Amsterdam in the Netherlands, where they secured a safe place with “bed, bath and bread”, the “3-B’s” policy at that time for the homeless sector. As a student at the Social Work Academy, I observed that assistance focused on damage control in order to keep everyone safe and prevent fights.

Together with the team, I developed a strengths-based approach to support these women within the limited time and resources we had: the Eight Steps Model (ESM). We provided more attention around women's personal well-being by using individual support plans. I was awarded first prize for our dissertation project and that gave me the confidence to scale up to national level. Policy changed at that time acknowledged that people who faced homelessness needed

*We provided more attention around women's personal well-being.*

more guidance during their rehabilitation process. The fourth 'policy B' was introduced: that of guidance (*Begeleiding* in Dutch). These new policy ambitions, in combination with the practice-based origin, led to a great success for the ESM. In 2008, about 75% of all homeless shelters in the Netherlands used the model. Later we embraced the opportunity to test the model abroad in Ukraine, the Czech Republic and Portugal.

One important aspect of the ESM is to analyse a person's strengths and challenges in all important areas of life. It was normal to report about difficulties and weaknesses, but strengths-based questions were hardly ever asked. Interests, hopes, dreams, relations and meaningfulness were not addressed. For me, the basic aim of the model is to see human beings again instead of problems. It is wonderful to see what happens when social workers experience the impact of this change in their work. They get to know their clients as complete persons.

*The way AI works with teams is exactly how social workers work with their clients in ESM.*

As the work continued, I found that some shelters that said they used the model did not share the basic principles of strengths-based work. They implemented the model according to the steps described in the handbook, but the soul was missing. It made me wonder. The handbook, although valuable, did not invite teams to use their own ideas, strengths and power. In 2013, I learned about AI. It felt – and still feels – like the perfect match for the implementation of ESM. The models share the same principles and processes are similar. The way AI works with teams is exactly how social workers work with their clients in ESM. It is about asking the right questions, involving others and building on strengths. In 2014 I was given the chance to implement ESM at two Salvation Army locations and this time I used AI. It was an exciting experience, leading to fundamental changes in the team. It really touched people's hearts; it was the only right place to start strengths-based work. It all fell in place.

Almost 20 years from the beginning of my work with the homeless women, it feels like I am still graduating... It has been a privilege to be part of such wonderful changes and chances. With my new implementation partner, AI, I hope to be involved in much more strengths-based social work. It is wonderful to see what happens in social work and care if we actually look at people as complete persons and build on their strengths.

### **The Power of an Appreciative Stance: Imagining, Stating and Creating**

**Enrique J. Zaldivar**

I am convinced leaders can become stronger creators of success conditions and organisations more effective, productive and rewarding operations. That is the social construction, in my mind, which I endeavour to manifest as I show up in my personal life as well as through my work, both as principal of Inspired-Inc.

*By holding an appreciative stance, we can create the conditions in the world in which we, and others, become capable of imagining, stating and then creating the better future reality we call "vision".*

(an international leadership and organisation development consultancy)<sup>1</sup> and Organisation Development professor (at American University, in Washington, DC). The essential message is that, by holding an appreciative stance, we can create the conditions in the world in which we, and others, become capable of imagining, stating and then creating the better future reality we call "vision". Doing so, we bring accountability to the process, enabling the creative tension between who we are (authenticity) and what we ultimately want to achieve (accountability). Finally, adding adaptability to this equation enables the agility to interact effectively.

An opportunity to practice my appreciative stance happened recently during my first time in Saudi Arabia, where I led several leadership development sessions, over a three-week period, with over 100 managers. My own mindful awareness that I – like every other human being – am perceiving the world through the filters of my unique cultural lens (which I've labelled MUCL – see 2014 AI Practitioner 16(1), pp. 9–19) in combination with my own effort, over years of exploring my own MUCL, proved enlightening. It kept reminding me that every person in front of me (virtually all of them Saudi citizens) had her or his own MUCLs. Theirs were neither better nor worse than mine; they were simply different. Such recognition fuelled my genuine curiosity to get to know each one of them, as individuals, as well as to learn and respect their culture, thus building my cultural capacity (i.e., my ability to operate effectively) in their culture. The combination of success achieved, with the expressions of appreciation I received for how that work was conducted, gives me great personal and professional satisfaction. It ended up being fun while adding significant value to the client. Plus, it is one more powerful confirmation of the value from holding an appreciative stance.

Teaching every semester, we have seen the powerful impact that inviting students to show up with an appreciative stance has on their success, within their teamwork and with their clients. It is not indispensable to be AI experts to competently embody a practice of appreciation, an appreciative stance, and reap benefits from doing so.

*Anybody interested in bringing out the best in others and self can show up with an appreciative stance.*

Anybody interested in bringing out the best in others and self can show up with an appreciative stance. It is based on the essential AI philosophical tenets, which compel us to explore more distinctions and possibilities, enriching deliberations and discernment. This empowers us to go beyond mere initial impressions and prejudices, considering the vast array of information which becomes available to us when we are genuinely curious to explore our own, and the other person's, MUCL. Without this, well meaning and appreciative individuals are at risk of bringing unwilling cross-cultural prejudice into their inquiry and subsequent behaviours.

<sup>1</sup> For more information, check Enrique's website and contact details: [ejz@inspired-inc.com](mailto:ejz@inspired-inc.com) [www.inspired-inc.com](http://www.inspired-inc.com)

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