

# Appreciative Inquiry in New Zealand: Practitioner Perspectives

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## **Abstract**

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has gained increasing popularity as a form of organisation development and action research worldwide, yet little research has been published outside of the USA and Canada. This thesis explores the application and evaluation of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in the unique context of New Zealand through the perspectives of facilitators of AI. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine experienced AI facilitators in order to understand their perspectives on how AI works, under which circumstances it is most effective and how they evaluate AI.

Facilitators tend to come from backgrounds that embrace humanistic values, a premise shared by AI. Participants in this study regard the underlying principles of AI as central, whereas they consider concrete processes, such as the 4D-cycle, to be useful but not essential. Facilitators are very concerned about the appropriate use of AI and clearly identified circumstances supportive or detrimental to AI processes. For example, AI may be inappropriate in situations where there is a pre-determined agenda or leadership is very autocratic. Facilitators are also concerned that AI as a methodology should be applied more wholesomely, acknowledging and working through negative emotions rather than suppressing them.

Facilitators face a paradox: They embrace values that put the individual centre stage and regard people as human beings rather than human resources. At the same time, they are external service providers to clients who are at times more concerned with quick fixes, and do not want to invest the time necessary to engage in deep reflection on values and transformative change.

Findings suggest that we need to reconsider our interpretation of AI towards embracing the underlying humanistic values more, rather than focusing on the concrete applications (e.g. 4D-cycle). The paradox between embracing humanistic values inherent in AI and bottom-line orientation in most organisations warrants further research.

# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Background**

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has emerged as a significant approach to fostering organisational change. Ever since its original conception in the 1980s it has gained increasing popularity, and is now being used widely to foster change in organisations and communities (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). AI has also inspired an ever-increasing number of academic publications. However, many aspects of how AI influences human systems and under which circumstances it is most effective remain unexplored.

The approaches that are commonly employed in research into the nature and effectiveness of AI tend to employ only a limited number of tools and perspectives: The majority of research published on AI is case studies, mostly representing the work of one or two contributing authors, who tend to take on the role of facilitator and evaluator at the same time. Other studies are concerned with measuring AI effectiveness in laboratory type settings, not reflecting a ‘real life’ use of AI (e.g. Bushe & Coetzer, 1995). Some primarily quantitative studies were conducted in large organizations, trying to establish tangible business results of AI (Head, 1999; Jones, 1998). However, little research is available addressing and comparing multiple facilitator perspectives (Egan & Lancaster, 2005).

The majority of published academic research on Appreciative Inquiry has been carried out in North America, by North American researchers. Little is known about the use of AI in other settings. Interestingly, AI seems to have little visibility outside of the USA and Canada. This is certainly true in New Zealand. Few cases have been published in New Zealand, and the academic community has paid little attention to how and under which circumstances AI is used in New Zealand. There are a few advocates publicly promoting AI. Nevertheless, professional facilitators offer their services to facilitate ‘inspired’ or ‘transformational’ change using AI, some universities offer courses on AI, and a notable research project examined the role of AI in creating dialogue between adversary groups (Cronin & Jackson, 2004).

## **1.2 Research question and rationale**

This thesis explores how AI is being employed in the unique New Zealand context by experienced facilitators. It investigates who uses AI, in which contexts and with what

intentions, and explores facilitators' theories of how AI influences human systems as well as their ways to evaluate its effectiveness.

The goal of this research is to uncover a unique New Zealand perspective on AI. How is AI applied and evaluated by professional facilitators in New Zealand? Who are the people promoting AI in New Zealand, and what are their backgrounds? Is there a "typical" facilitator of AI?

This thesis contributes in many ways to the practice and academic discussion of Appreciative Inquiry: It assembles the voices of a number of practitioners, as opposed to the perspective of just one facilitator. Participants remained anonymous, which gave them the opportunity to talk freely about all aspects of AI. They were not in a situation of having to 'sell' AI or their services, which they took as an opportunity to reflect critically on all aspects of AI, both of its functioning and the difficulties of applying it in certain situations.

Finally, this thesis presents one of the few works on AI which deals extensively with the use of AI in a cultural context that is different from North America, where the majority of work on AI is published.

### **1.3 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis is structured into five chapters. Chapter two introduces and discusses literature on Appreciative Inquiry. Initially, I give a brief introduction defining AI and present its underlying principles and theoretical background. Then I give an overview of the literature on AI in New Zealand. Following this I address research which examines AI effectiveness. I identify and discuss a number of studies evaluating AI in various fields. Closing the literature review, I discuss literature that addresses the question of how to evaluate AI from various paradigmatic view points, in order to identify a suitable paradigm to guide my inquiry into the practice and evaluation of AI by New Zealand facilitators.

In chapter three, I present and discuss the methodology employed in this study. First, I formulate and defend the research questions. These are based on gaps in our understanding of AI identified in the literature review. I discuss how paradigmatic choices influenced this research, then I introduce and discuss the research methods employed in this study.

Chapter four explains the findings of this study. Three core themes serve to structure the chapter: Facilitator characteristics, theory of action held by facilitators, and AI in practice.

The reporting of the findings extensively uses participants quotes, as the research is strongly grounded in the participants' perspectives.

Finally, in chapter five I discuss the findings of this study and present implications for both the academic discussion and practice of AI. Also, I address limitations of this study and point out potential areas of future research.

## **2 Literature**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In this short introduction to Appreciative Inquiry, it is my intention to provide an overview of the current literature on AI. I introduce Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and its underlying principles and theories of change. Then, an overview of the literature on AI in the New Zealand context is presented. Following this, I present a review of literature evaluating AI effectiveness, as well as a review of the theoretical discussion of how AI should most usefully be evaluated. In conclusion, I address common critiques of AI.

### **2.2 Appreciative Inquiry (AI)**

#### ***2.2.1 Definition and Process***

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to organizational change, or more generally change in human systems, which has gained increasing popularity among practitioners and sparked the interest of the academic community over the last 20 years (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). “Appreciative Inquiry” is made up of the key concepts “to appreciate” and “to inquire”. To appreciate means to value, to understand that things are worth valuing, to affirm strength and successes, but also to increase in value. To inquire means to study, to ask questions, to search, explore and investigate (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). One often cited definition is that of Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros (2003):

Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative, co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves the discovery of what gives “life” to a living system when it is most effective, alive and constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. (D. L. Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, p. 3)

AI cannot be clearly defined as merely a “method” of change in human systems. It is much more than that. Coghlan, Preskill and Catsambas (2003) describe AI as “both a philosophy and a worldview, with particular principles and assumptions and a structured set of core processes and practices for engaging people in identifying and co-creating an organization’s future.” (p. 6) Others hold that AI is “a philosophy and orientation to change that can

fundamentally reshape the practice of organizational learning, design and development” (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 21).

Changing organizations through AI has been described as involving four, sometimes five stages (where the framing of the inquiry is seen as the first stage). In the four-stage model, the first stage is *Discovery*. The questions asked are: “What gives life? What is good about our past and present?” This stage is about discovering and valuing what the organization already has. The second stage is *Dream*. It uses what has been discovered to envision what might be. The Dream step involves questions like “What might be? What is the best future we can imagine?”. The next stage is that of *Design*. Based on the Dream stage, organization members identify which ones of their stories and dreams will be transferred into reality. In the final stage, the *Destiny*, organizational members collectively commit to and set out to create what they desire (D. L. Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, pp. 5-7; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

People in organizations and communities find different ways of engaging in AI. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) coined the term ‘forms of engagement’ to describe the various ways in which an AI initiative can take shape, ranging from project teams organizing appreciative interviews to multiple day, off-site events involving the whole organization (called AI-summits).

### **2.2.2 Principles of AI**

AI is strongly based in social constructionist philosophy (Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008). Social constructionism is a school of thought which is considered part of the postmodern movement. Social constructionist thinking is essentially relativist (as opposed to realist), meaning that “an external world (including organizations) does not exist independently of our perceptions, thoughts, language, beliefs and desires” (Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008, p. 34). This means that “‘knowing’ takes place through interaction with and within social systems”. (D. L. Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008, p. 14). AI places the framework of social constructionism in a positive context.

The principles on which AI is based were first described by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) in what is now considered the “original seminal article on AI” (Bushe & Kassam, 2005, p. 162). Four propositions were described in this publication (based on Cooperrider’s Ph.D. Thesis): Research into the social potential of organizational life should (1) begin with appreciation; it should be (2) applicable, (3) provocative and (4) collaborative (D. Cooperrider

& Srivastva, 1987). In subsequent research and application, these principles were expanded and re-formulated.

Behind the first proposition is the idea that in every human system there is something that works. Therefore, the first step in an Appreciative Inquiry is to discover, describe and explain those moments in which the organisation is most alive and capable. The second proposition means that the inquiry should “lead to the generation of knowledge that can be used, applied, and validated in action” (D. L. Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008, p. 4). The proposition of the inquiry being provocative means that it compels organisation members to take action and to stir them to create the desired future they imagined. Finally, the fourth proposition of the inquiry being collaborative means the process of the inquiry and its content are closely intertwined (D. L. Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008).

The principles of AI as stated in most of the current literature are the constructionist principle, the principle of simultaneity, the poetic principle, the anticipatory principle and the positive principle. The *constructionist principle* argues that an organization’s reality is constructed by the questions people ask. How knowledge is generated in the organization will determine its future. The *principle of simultaneity* recognizes that inquiry and change cannot be kept separate but occur simultaneously. The moment questions are articulated change is initiated. Dialogue shapes images of the future which then form into reality. The *poetic principle* states that organizations are like open books, their stories being constantly co-authored by their members. The choice of topic for a story can alter the organization; stories about success will lead to a different organization than stories about failure. The *anticipatory principle* views collective imagination and discourse as the most important source for generating constructive organizational change. By changing the image of the future, the future will be changed. The *positive principle* states that the more positive a change initiative is framed, the more effective and long lasting it will be. Humans are responsive to hope, inspiration, positive stories and bonding with other people. Positive images lead to positive change (D. L. Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, pp. 8-9).

### ***2.2.3 Theories of change underlying AI***

The positive principle largely relies on the power of positive imagery. It is based partly on practical experience from AI processes, but also supported by substantive research in other areas (D. L. Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). These areas of research have been explained and discussed in depth in a seminal article by Cooperrider (2000). Here the author

presents and discusses a number of arguments underlining the power of positive imagery, such as the placebo effect, the Pygmalion effect, the positive effect, internal dialogue, positive imagery and metacognitive competence.

The *placebo effect* is a well-known concept from medical research, whereby patients feel an improvement in their condition when they think they took effective medicine, even though they did not. The *Pygmalion effect* goes back to a study carried out by Rosenthal in 1969, whereby it could be shown that a positive image held by teachers of students lead to performance improvement in those students (D. Cooperrider, 2000). However, it must be noted that both of these concepts are not undisputed (Patton, 2003). The concept of *positive effect and learned helpfulness* suggests that “positive imagery evokes positive emotions and positive emotions move people toward a choice for positive actions” (D. L. Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008).

Cognition can be seen as an *internal dialogue* going on in the individual. By extension, the conversations between members of organisations can be seen as the organisation’s internal dialogue. In a study of teams, it has been shown that if this internal dialogue is off-balance and dominated by negative imagery it can impede on the teams’ performance. In the highly functional teams, the internal dialogue was full of positive images of the future (D. Cooperrider, 2000). Appreciative Inquiry can be a powerful way to change an organisation’s inner dialogue away from being negative and impeding towards being generative and creative (Bushe, 2000).

*Positive imagery* has been suggested to be a dynamic force in shaping culture. Dutch sociologist Polak has described a positive image of the future as the most important explanatory variable for understanding cultural evolution. The same applies to culture within organisations: as long as an organisation holds a positive image of its future it will flourish (D. L. Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008).

*Metacognition* is an awareness of one’s own cognitive processes and systems. The heliotropic hypothesis suggests that human beings tend to develop towards the brightest and boldest positive future they can imagine. There is some evidence to suggest that consciously developing a positive, life-giving imagery is a skill that can be learned, i.e. developed in a metacognitive way (D. Cooperrider, 2000).



Over and above these classic explanations of AI, other ideas of how AI affects human systems are explored in more recent publications. Bushe (2000) sees addressing paradoxical dilemmas as one way in which AI can help human systems develop towards their full potential.

Paradoxical dilemmas are requirements that are mutually exclusive, e.g. the requirement to always meet deadlines while also keeping up to high quality standards. AI can invoke images that help teams to identify, address and move through such paradoxical dilemmas.

AI stands in sharp contrast to a mechanistic view of organisations. Proponents of AI claim that a mechanistic view of organisations sees them as machines, workers as cogs and management as a control process. AI on the other hand sees organisations as living human systems. On this basis, change in organisations is necessarily a conversational process, which can be facilitated through the use of an AI process (Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008). The very basis of any change is a cognitive shift, people altering their mindsets and mental models (Nilakant & Ramnarayan, 2006). The essence of AI is to bring about a cognitive shift by focusing on the positive. AI seeks to bring positive stories to the surface and change the way people think and ultimately act by asking positive questions and bringing out the positive stories.

## 2.3 AI in New Zealand

Another noteworthy fact when looking at academic, peer-reviewed publications on AI is that the majority is from North American authors, mostly describing AI initiatives carried out in North America. Little has been published on AI in other cultural contexts, even though practitioners of AI are active all over the globe. In order to address this gap, this thesis seeks to shed some light on New Zealand practitioners of AI, the circumstances in which AI is used in New Zealand and how facilitators evaluate the process and effectiveness of AI. As a starting point, a literature search was carried out.

An initial search of the online databases ProQuest and ABIInform returned few results, only one article published in academic literature (Gill, Phillips, & Farnsworth, 2006) and two mentions in trade publications ("Upfront: Drawing on collective strengths", 2005) whereas one of these is actually a basic introduction to AI by the accomplished AI researcher Ron Fry (2000). Gill, Phillips and Farnsworth's (2006) report focuses on tenancy mediation in New Zealand. While they claim to be using AI in their study, AI actually only plays a very marginal role in their mixed quantitative- qualitative methodology: "Next, responses relating to experiences of satisfaction or to effectiveness were explored. Using the method of appreciative enquiry, these responses were collated into tables according to the structure of the experience ('what?') and the focus of the experience ('how?')." (Gill, Phillips, & Farnsworth, 2006) This relates well to Bushe's (2000) concern about authors calling their methodology AI even though it is only marginally related to AI. AI was used as the inspiration for a data sorting method in this particular study. The authors' definition of AI is very clearly not the one underlying this thesis, which means this article will not be treated as contributing to the study of AI in New Zealand in the framework of this thesis.

One interesting publication not listed in international databases is a science communication project lead by Victoria University of Wellington researchers Cronin and Jackson (2004). This research, sponsored by the New Zealand Ministry of Research, Science and Technology (MORST), explored ways of creating dialogue between stakeholders in the biotechnology debate in New Zealand, with AI being one of the approaches under scrutiny. As this project paid close attention to the evaluation of approaches it will be discussed further in the next section of this literature review. Furthermore, I discovered two theoretical articles on the evaluation of AI by NZ scholars (S. Grant, 2006a; S. Grant & Humphries, 2006, discussed in the following section of this thesis). Also, courses on AI are being offered by some New

Zealand universities, indicating that there is indeed some interest in AI in the New Zealand academic community.

A closer look at practitioner-oriented literature on the Appreciative Inquiry Commons<sup>1</sup> returned only two results of AI initiatives in New Zealand or by New Zealand facilitators (Braun, 2002; Harkess, 2005). Braun (2002) argues in favor of complementing a problem-solving paradigm in rural development by adding Appreciative Inquiry to the developer's repertoire of methodologies. She gives a very thorough introduction to AI and its principles and illustrates her writing by mentioning case studies without describing them in much detail. Harkess (2005), on the other hand, reports on a project using AI to train pre-service teachers. Both articles yield some interesting insights, showing that AI can be used in such diverse contexts as agricultural development and teacher training, and both entail some reporting on outcomes of AI initiatives. However, these publications are not peer-reviewed academic publications and do not offer an independent, structured evaluation of AI.

This somewhat sparse selection of published research necessitates empirical research in order to seek answers to the questions of whether AI is being used on a notable scale in New Zealand, and if yes in what ways and in which contexts. In order to answer these initial questions, interviewing facilitators, consultants and other 'champions of AI' seemed to be the most direct and fruitful way, as they are the ones essentially defining what AI is. AI facilitators can be expected to have been part of many AI processes in varying circumstances, and will have reflected on these at a high level. All of this makes them ideal 'informants' on AI.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/research/bibPapers.cfm> last accessed 18/12/2008.

## **2.4 Empirical evaluation of AI**

### ***2.4.1 Introduction***

AI is now at a point where it risks being seen as just another ‘management fad’ unless significantly more evidence of its effectiveness is collected and published (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). However, little effort has been extended towards evaluating AI (S. Grant & Humphries, 2006). This is partly due to the nature of AI as ‘thinking style’ or ‘paradigm’, which does not lend itself easily to empirical testing due to its complex nature, with some scholars arguing AI should not be evaluated using positivist principles because it has been developed in a social constructionist context (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Others ask: “what more stringent test of a competing paradigm can one perform than [...] using an assessment paradigm congruent with the competition?” (Bushe & Coetzer, 1995, p. 14) They suggest that a positivist design is a strong test of the method’s potential as a form of action research. However, they then go on to note “the full merits of appreciative inquiry as a theory of collective action need to be assessed by methods congruent with the sociorationalist paradigm” (Bushe & Coetzer, 1995, p. 14).

Despite these critical and sometimes conflicting voices, little theorizing and only initial empirical evaluation of AI has taken place to date. A small number of authors explicitly address the evaluation of Appreciative Inquiry as a methodological issue, albeit with little or no reference to one another. Others extended efforts to evaluating AI in empirical studies. In this section I report on empirical studies evaluating AI. In the following section, I discuss publications attempting to develop a framework or at least some theoretical guidance for a meaningful evaluation of AI. This review shall serve as a guiding framework for the methodology employed in this study.

### ***2.4.2 Evaluation of AI in various settings***

This section deals with the evaluation of AI in empirical studies. The first part of this review looks at evaluation in various settings, whereas the second part focuses specifically on the evaluation of AI as team development, as tests of AI in team development emerged as a relatively large sub-group of studies in the process of this literature review.

Many authors of case studies describe some form of feedback integrated into the Appreciative Inquiry process – after all, AI is not a static, but ever evolving process of conversations. In discussing the AI process at Hunter Douglas, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) give

numerous quotes expressing the satisfaction of members of the company. Interestingly, they demonstrate an exclusive focus on the positive in their writing: No critical voice is heard, all quotes are full of praise of the AI initiative. In fact, many other published case studies of AI do the same: giving *a selected few* participants' feedback related to perceived '*positive outcomes*' of an AI 'intervention'. The question remains: Can the singular reporting of selected voices be called 'evaluation'? How useful is such an 'evaluation'? What does it say about the specific AI process? I would suggest a more systematic, theoretically grounded approach is necessary.

While there are numerous such case studies and practitioner-oriented descriptions of interventions available, I could identify only very few published studies independently evaluating AI. The majority of these were measuring the effects of AI in a quantitative, pre-test/post-test design. Interestingly, none of these studies is concerned with whole-system change, much rather they are looking at sub-groups, such as teams or a certain management level at a company. The majority of studies quoted here subscribe to a positivist view of science: they establish on the outset what changes are expected to occur within certain parameters in a specific population. They then go on to test those hypotheses using statistical methods. However, some notable exceptions are discussed here as well.

One such notable exception is the science communication project "Hands across the water", headed by Victoria University of Wellington researchers Karen Cronin and Laurie Jackson (2004). The evaluation of the usefulness of various approaches to creating dialogue about controversial issues related to genetic engineering was one explicit goal of the research. Therefore, a formal evaluation tool was introduced in all the workshops, including those based on Appreciative Inquiry (which was one of three methodological approaches to creating dialogue under scrutiny in this project). It took on the form of an 'evaluation form' which participants filled in at the end of the workshop, asking questions of what worked, what did not work and asked participants to rate the quality of dialogue generated by the workshop, and tell about things learned and attitudes changed through the workshop (Cronin & Jackson, 2004, pp. 118-121). The reporting included many comments from participants – both positive and critical. The study extensively reports participants' informal comments, and comments from completed evaluation forms, followed by a short review written by the facilitators. The reported comments shed light on a variety of different aspects of the workshop, and they are both appreciative and critical of the workshop and perceived outcomes. All this makes this evaluation largely consistent with the criteria put forth by van der Haar and Hosking (2004)

without making a specific reference to the literature on evaluating AI; the section on AI in this study is largely concerned with reporting actual events, no extensive theoretical background is given.

One of the first evaluations of AI using a quantitative methodology was that of Jones (1998). He examined the effect of AI on employee-turnover of a large fast-food chain at restaurant management level. He found that an AI intervention decreased turnover within that group by approximately 30%, thus saving the company about \$100,000 training costs for the examined sub-group alone. While this study is rather limited in its range, looking at a total of 94 locations of one fast-food chain, it was one of the first steps towards quantifying the benefits of AI and thus constitutes a significant contribution to the AI literature. Another limitation is that the author was a senior executive in the examined company at the time and the driver behind the AI intervention, which introduces a certain level of bias into the study.

### ***2.4.3 Evaluation of AI in team development***

Appreciative enquiry as a team development intervention has inspired a number of independent evaluations of AI – I could identify four studies using the microcosm ‘team’ for exploring various aspects of AI. This is a surprisingly small overall number of studies, as “teams offer an excellent microcosm for studying the effects of Appreciative Inquiry on the process of social transformation” (Bushe, 2001, p. 20).

In a controlled laboratory-type experiment, Bushe and Coetzer (1995) used a sample of students conducting group tasks over the course of one semester to compare the effects of AI and task-oriented team development (TOTD) interventions with a placebo. They found that both AI and TOTD had a significant impact on team performance. Teams receiving TOTD showed the highest increase in performance scores, giving an initial indication that it might be a more appropriate tool for team development than AI. However, sample size and scope of the intervention as well as the circumstances of a class of students participating in an experiment run by their course coordinator are all factors that limit the generalizability of these findings. It is noteworthy that this study is considered as the first study evaluating AI using a quantitative design (Peter F. Sorensen, Sharkey, Head, & Spartz, 2000), thus contributing significantly to establishing the credibility of AI as a team development method.

In his Ph.D. Thesis, Head (1999) conducted a large scale investigation into newly formed teams at the United States Postal Service in Milwaukee. 124 employees formed 18 groups across various levels of hierarchy. These were divided into three categories, of which one

received an AI intervention and another one a traditional team building intervention. The remaining category did not receive any structured intervention. Findings indicated that “groups receiving Appreciative Inquiry develop more team-oriented behaviours, perform at a higher level, and have more positive images of future interactions than groups experiencing either team-building or no structured intervention” (Head, 1999).

A study relating AI and creative problem solving (CPS) in cross-functional teams measured the effect of AI on group potency rather than an effectiveness measure directly (Peelle, 2006). Group potency has been found to have a positive correlation with performance (Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008), therefore the measure can be seen as indicative of group effectiveness. The study found that AI increased team members’ efficacy and affective responses more than CPS did. The author also suggested that AI and CPS are alternative rather than opposing approaches (Peelle, 2006).

Sekerka et al. conducted an experimental study comparing the first stages of an AI and diagnostic approach – discovery and problem identification respectively (Sekerka, Brumbaugh, Rosa, & Cooperrider, 2006). As hypothesized, groups that received the AI treatment showed a stronger positive affect towards the organization. This effect was stronger in mixed-gender dyads than in female-female or male-male dyads. Their results also indicated that problem identification appeared to lead to desired organizational results, such as a positive attitude towards the organization or increased creativity. Both approaches lead to favorable and complimentary results, leading the authors to conclude that AI and a diagnostic approach can be combined to increase the impact of an OD intervention. An obvious limitation of this study is its focus on only the first stage of an AI and a diagnostic approach (measuring the impact of a “discovery” and “problem identification” respectively), findings may vary dramatically had both approaches under scrutiny been carried through further.

Interestingly, all of the above studies used positivist, quantitative designs to measure hypothesized effects of AI on certain narrowly defined variables. Findings appear contradictory. While all of the studies cited here find AI to have some desired effect; some find other methods to be more effective as a team development intervention. These mixed findings indicate a need for further investigation into the question *how* AI works within teams. A qualitative inquiry into the circumstances under which AI is being applied and how circumstances influence the outcome of AI processes might prove to generate a much more

feasible picture of how AI works and can generate propositions which can at a later stage be tested using a quantitative study design.



## **2.5 Theoretical perspectives on evaluating AI**

### ***2.5.1 Introduction***

In order to find theoretical guidance for this research, and to ground this study in the current academic discussion about AI, I review literature exploring the theoretical and paradigmatic basis of evaluating AI. Principles deducted from the proposed methodologies for evaluating AI should be most consistent with the principles underlying AI itself and therefore will serve as the guiding framework in this research, exploring how facilitators employ and evaluate AI.

There is no one authoritative account on ‘how to evaluate AI’ or an often quoted evaluation of AI with far reaching implications. However, a number of propositions about the evaluation of AI have been put forth by a small number of scholars and practitioners, which shall be discussed in this chapter and drawn on in my own evaluation of AI in New Zealand.

Generally, four different approaches can be found in the literature: a (critical) social constructionist approach, championed above all by Dian Marie Hosking (Hosking & McNamee, 2007; van der Haar & Hosking, 2004); a critical approach, developed by New Zealand scholar Suzanne Grant (S. Grant, 2006a, 2006b; S. Grant & Humphries, 2006), with a special emphasis on the application in third-sector and school development; a practical-pragmatic approach, advanced in practitioner oriented literature (Patton, 2003; Rogers & Fraser, 2003) and finally a discourse-analytic approach, introduced by Robert Marshak and David Grant (2008), with a view to a variety of ‘New Organization Development’ practices, AI being but one of them. I discuss all four approaches here, in order to develop an understanding of the various approaches presented in the literature so far, followed by a reflection on these approaches and their relevance for my study.

### ***2.5.2 The social constructionist perspective & responsive evaluation***

One prominent writer (from both a scholarly and a practitioner perspective) is Dian Marie Hosking, who advocates for a critical constructionist philosophical stance in appreciating Appreciative Inquiry. Hosking and McNamee (2007) argue that in order to assess the merits of AI, there are certain key assumptions and arguments in critical social constructionism that have to be kept in mind. Firstly, constructions (of persons, worlds, knowledge, ethics, etc.) are local, relational realities, constantly being co-created by people interacting. Secondly, critical relational constructionist discourse does not claim to know how things ‘really’ are and “does not set out to challenge some presumed state of affairs” (Hosking & McNamee, 2007, p. 13), which means it is open to all (local) claims of knowing. The third, and very central, point

Hosking and McNamee make is that critical relational constructionism focuses on relational *processes*, by which worlds and knowledges are being constantly (re-) constructed. Rather than being focused on the *what* (which can only ever be local and emergent) it is looking at the *how* of relational processes.

Interestingly, the majority of the empirical studies I reviewed for this thesis did not adhere to this criterion. Most evaluations of AI so far were using a positivist pre-test/post-test design with a focus on ‘results’ or ‘outcomes’ of a specific AI ‘intervention’. Even this terminology seems to be at odds with a social constructionist paradigm. According to Hosking and McNamee (2007), the language in which social constructionist research is being reported focuses on ‘story telling’ or ‘text-con-text’, taking into account words, stories, body language, a range of social artifacts etc. It focuses on an ‘ontology of becoming’ rather than an ontology of being’, thus opening up new ways of relating between the researcher and the researched. All of this makes a social constructionist stance differ from ‘classical’ positivist science, even earning it the reputation of being ‘un-scientific’ (Hosking & McNamee, 2007). A focus on social process, however, is inherent in most qualitative research. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) qualitative researchers “seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning” (p. 10, emphasis in original). Since this question is at the heart of understanding how AI actually influences social systems, a qualitative approach to the evaluation of AI seems necessary.

Hosking and McNamee (2007) also assert a “changed aesthetic for inquiry and intervention” (p. 13). There is no longer a clear separation between the researcher and the researched, as all knowledge is product of a local interaction, researcher and researched are creating meaning and knowledge in their interaction. The interactions involved in the research process are an intervention into the reality of both the researcher and the researched, the researcher is not a detached expert drawing conclusions about an existing reality.

Van der Haar and Hosking (2004) propose a ‘relational constructionist perspective’ of the evaluation of AI, suggesting that AI would be most appropriately evaluated using “responsive evaluation” (p. 1017). If one is to adopt a social constructionist world view; one has to view any evaluation process as being socially constructed as well; evaluation is seen as an ongoing social process defined by its participants. The authors criticize what they term “product evaluation” (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004, p. 1028), meaning the comparison of a ‘pre’

intervention measurement to a ‘post’ intervention measurement by means of statistical analysis, as unsuitable to AI and relational constructionist principles.

[...] a ‘product evaluation’ approach does not aim to be responsive to multiple local ontologies, imposes one reality construction (in the name of science and rationality) on others, and so reproduces relations of ‘power over’. This means that *product evaluation is inconsistent with a relational approach to AI*. (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004, p. 1028, see also van der Haar 2002)

I agree with this criticism of product evaluation to some extent, but would like to caution the reader against dismissing the contribution of positivist studies of the effects of AI (for example Bushe & Coetzer, 1995; Jones, 1998; Sekerka, Brumbaugh, Rosa, & Cooperrider, 2006) altogether. These studies provide evidence of the effectiveness of AI, thus bringing AI to the awareness of a wider academic audience. If AI is to find wide application in the business community, it will have to prove that it is worth the investment of time and money required for any AI process by showing tangible outcomes, which are most effectively assessed by a positivist research design. Nevertheless, I agree with Hosking and van der Haar (2004) that a positivist design is not able to show all the complex effects and processes of an AI initiative.

Van der Haar and Hosking (2004) propose ‘responsive evaluation’ as the most suitable method of evaluating AI. Responsive evaluation (RE) “emphasizes the importance of propagating polyphony, assumes local knowledges/practices, makes use of storytelling, and embraces reflection on local-historical contexts.” (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004, p. 1029) This account of RE is largely based on Stake’s (1975) and Abma’s (1996, 2001) work. Evaluation should be oriented towards the process of AI, rather than certain pre-conceived outcomes, and it should “respond to the audience’s requirements for information” (van der Haar & Hosking, p. 1029). The design of the evaluation as well as the AI process itself should be emergent rather than being pre-determined. Reporting should reflect a multitude of voices, and include rich, textured, qualitative data (for example in the form of narratives) and “make space for others to come to their own judgment” (p. 1030). However, the responsibility of designing and conducting the evaluation remains the responsibility of the evaluator.

I see some contradiction with the requirements of the design of the evaluation being emergent, yet being the sole responsibility of a single evaluator as described by van der Haar and Hosking (2004). The design of the evaluation cannot be fully emergent from the process,

but some advance planning has to take place. While the evaluation process should be flexible enough to adapt to the ever changing nature of an AI process, there has to be a clear intention to evaluate from the very beginning of an AI process (even though ‘the beginning’ is an ambiguous term in the social constructivist paradigm as well, in this study I take it to be the beginning of the interaction between a qualified AI facilitator and an organization seeking some form of improvement or development), as well as an initial evaluation design.

Responsive evaluation seeks to understand and make explicit multiple local realities rather than trying to resolve and combine them, it is concerned with preserving diversity and propagating polyphony (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Thus, the evaluator seeks to avoid a subject-object relationship; he or she is not a distant expert, but a facilitator of polyphony. The distance between the evaluator and the evaluated is blurred. It is important to retain local contextual details, and focus on what “the locals think to be the issues” (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004, p. 1031). Storytelling and other forms of social interaction are important ways of conducting the evaluation process; the evaluation report should include stories and dialogue, without judging the value of singular accounts as better or worse, as judgment would be an expression of power relations. An essential part of the process is reflexivity: reflection upon “(implicit) assumptions and upon the active co-constructing role of the participants” (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004, p. 1031). Reflecting on and confronting local constructions, and raising participants’ awareness of their role as active co-creators of their realities makes assumptions explicit, thus opening up new possibilities.

Very importantly, from a relational constructionist perspective, evaluation is emergent from the social interactions between participants. Therefore, any evaluation can only be meaningful to a particular inquiry in its particular context. Evaluation and AI are interwoven “in co-constructive and reflexive relation” (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004, p. 1031). Whilst I agree that AI and its evaluation are closely interwoven, I disagree with the statement that it can only be meaningful to a particular inquiry in a particular context. Any evaluation will have to be seen in the light of its particular context, however, this does not equate to it being meaningless if reported to an audience not immediately involved in this context. If the reporting is complex enough and reports and reflects on both AI processes and their particular contexts, valuable learning might unfold for an uninvolved third party, who might reach what one participant of this study aptly termed a “second hand insight”, i.e. this uninvolved observer might reach an insight based on the reporting of other people’s experience.

### ***2.5.3 The discourse analytic perspective***

A recent idea has been added to the discussion by Marshak and Grant (2008). They argue for a discourse analytic approach to the analysis of ‘New Organizational Development Practices’ (or new OD, such as AI) because of common ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying both discourse analysis and new OD. To some extent, Marshak and Grant (2008) subscribe to a similar social constructionist point of view as Hosking and McNamee (2007) and van der Haar and Hosking (2004), albeit with subtle differences.

Both discourse analysis and new OD focus on changing mindsets by changing the language used in social systems, and pay attention to how mindsets shape behaviour. Both are largely based on social constructionist assumptions, acknowledging the potential existence of multiple socially constructed realities and focus on how “narratives, texts, conversations and other forms of communication influence and shape organizational processes, behaviour and change” (Marshak & Grant, 2008, p. 12).

According to Marshak and Grant (2008), there are two distinct streams in discourse analysis: One inspired mostly by a social constructionist framework, the other by a predominantly critical philosophical background. Based on the latter, the authors attest a growing awareness of how power structures influence dominant story lines to “create and endorse the prevailing way things are experienced and understood” (Marshak & Grant, 2008, p. 12). In fact, central to the authors’ argument is the question of how power dynamics shape discourse, which in turn shapes social reality of those involved. Marshak and Grant see this question implicitly recognized in the new OD, but are demanding for it to be addressed more explicitly.

Because of the areas of overlap between new OD and discourse analysis stated above, Marshak and Grant (2008) propose that discourse analysis can contribute significantly to both the theoretical base and the practice of new OD. In the case of AI, they quote Gergen in pointing out that the success of any AI process is largely influenced by the ability to shape the dialogue among participants by carefully choosing the topic to focus on and the questions to be asked.

It is interesting to see that this particular approach to understanding new OD has not yet resonated very much with the community in which this new OD is being developed, applied and researched. An article commenting on Marshak and Grant published in the same volume notes that whilst discourse analytic approaches indeed seem to be able to contribute to the

advancement of OD, the fundamental idea of organizations being able to develop, and being worth developing, nevertheless remains the same (Woodman, 2008).

#### ***2.5.4 The critical perspective***

The critical perspective of evaluating AI was advanced by New Zealand scholars Grant and Humphries (S. Grant, 2006a; S. Grant & Humphries, 2006). They criticize a lack of self-reflection and critical evaluation of the Appreciative Inquiry process as an action research method. They suggest that the apparent paradox between the critical paradigm and Appreciative Inquiry might add value to the study of Appreciative Inquiry.

However, the lack of self reflection attested by Grant was not found in most of the literature reviewed for this study. While some publications indeed are interpreting appreciation as a sole focus on what is working, most represent a more complete and complex picture of the AI process and its outcomes. I can only partly support Humphries and Grant's criticism of a complete lack of self reflection in the AI literature, and certainly not in the communities of practice. Many case studies and theoretical articles do address the issue of appreciation being more than a focus on 'what works'. However, as for the lack of a *systematic* evaluation of AI processes by *independent* researchers not directly involved in the facilitation, their criticism is very valid.

The authors suggest incorporating into evaluation an emancipatory ideal derived from critical theory. They fear that if during the AI process participants are pressured to 'appreciate' whatever is on the agenda by those in power in the AI process (i.e. the facilitators or those organizational members involved in setting the agenda), this is counterproductive as it re-creates patterns of power. Much rather, appreciation should be viewed as taking in the whole picture, which also involves allowing criticism (S. Grant & Humphries, 2006). This view slightly deviates from the social constructionist view advanced by Hosking et al. In their line of argument, the external researcher should be careful not to assume what power processes are going on in an organization as these can only ever be locally constructed and thus not known to the external evaluator.

Another point of conflict between this take on the critical approach and a social constructionist approach is that Grant (2006) proposes an evaluation of AI with an emancipatory ideal in mind, whereas van der Haar and Hosking (2004) suggest that evaluation has to be emergent from the local context.

### ***2.5.5 The practitioner oriented pragmatic perspective***

Little has been written on evaluating AI by practitioners – of course, many accounts of AI initiatives include some reflection on process and outcome, however, little thought is given to how this evaluation is conducted and how it relates with the wider AI initiative and its context. It is not surprising that the few works doing this actually come from evaluators themselves. Rogers and Fraser (2003) reflect on the evaluation of Appreciative Inquiry in evaluation – despite their focus on a very specific application of AI, some lessons for the evaluation of AI in other contexts can be learned from their account. They caution the reader that while AI “can be a useful and valuable technique” (p. 75) it is not appropriate under all circumstances and requires considerable skills and abilities to facilitate. The authors put forth three criteria, around which an evaluation should be structured. These are (1) plausibility of the theoretical base of a method (2) practicality, and (3) evidence of success. While the authors are talking about AI as an evaluation method, the same criteria can be extrapolated to apply to other applications of AI. Rogers and Fraser assert “a mixed score” to AI in all three dimensions (2003, p. 76).

They see both strength and weaknesses in AI’s theory of action: on the one hand, there seems to be clear evidence that a focus on strengths, a positively framed attitude and perception, are all likely to produce a heightened outcome, as demonstrated for example in the Rosenthal effect. However, in the same volume, Patton (2003) points out that evidence for both the Rosenthal effect and the placebo effect is patchy and scarce. The positive focus may also risk missing those factors in a process that are not working well (Rogers & Fraser, 2003). A focus on the positive – especially if initiated by those in power in an organization – may serve the purpose of sustaining power relationships and ignoring criticism. This concern is shared by Grant and Humphries (2006), who argue from a critical point of view. Thus Rogers and Fraser see clear limitations to the universal applicability of AI. They conclude that AI may best be employed in circumstances where the possibilities of deficit analysis have already been exhausted, or a strength based evaluation is needed for other reasons, or an assessment of the alignment of values and day-to-day business is needed. Patton (2003), however, argues that AI is much more likely to uncover deficits (as these will be reflected in the dreams and desires expressed by participants) than a problem-analytic approach is likely to find any real strength and development potential.

In terms of the second criterion, practicality, Rogers and Fraser (2003) find that it is hard to advice for practical guidance, as AI is based on a substantive body of literature and takes

high-level skill to facilitate. One important factor of AI often underestimated is the importance of involving the whole system, i.e. all stakeholders. Also, there is also a certain threat of some authors treating ‘appreciation’ as something solely looking at the positive, not taking into account the complexity of Appreciative Inquiry (Rogers & Fraser, 2003). The discussion around what ‘appreciation’ or ‘the positive’ really is, or is supposed to be, is an ongoing, very important part of the development of AI. Both academic publications (e.g. Barge & Oliver, 2003; Bushe, 2000; S. Grant & Humphries, 2006) and practitioner discussions<sup>2</sup> devote considerable thought to this. It will be under scrutiny in the discussion of the findings in this study. However, the ongoing discussion shows awareness in both the academic and practitioner communities that a ‘lopsided’ focus on ‘the positive’ is something undesirable, which in itself seems to lower the danger of this imbalance happening in the practice of AI.

As for the third criterion, the empirical evidence of how AI works in evaluation, Rogers and Fraser (2003) go on to note: “There are clearly limits, however, to the extent to which evaluators are willing to frankly discuss difficulties and limitations in their work, and any account that depends on only retrospective accounts by evaluators risks accusations of being self-serving.” (p. 80) In parallel, a retrospective account of an AI intervention by the facilitator, as delivered in many published case studies on various uses of AI, risks being seen as biased. This goes to illustrate that (in order to further our understanding of the Appreciative Inquiry process) not only a mindful evaluation is necessary – but also, that the evaluation by a researcher not involved in the facilitation of the specific AI process under evaluation would lend that evaluation credibility, as the “uninvolved” researcher with no stakes in the promotion of AI will be seen as less biased by an outside observer. “Ideally accounts of evaluation practice should provide more evidence of sustained benefits and corroboration *from people other than the evaluators.*” (Rogers & Fraser, 2003, p. 81, emphasis added).

### ***2.5.6 Reflection and relevance for this research***

I followed the arguments by various authors of how AI should be evaluated, trying to find an authoritative account on which to base the methodology employed in this research. Basic assumptions and the derived guidelines for evaluation are summarised in Table 1 below.

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<sup>2</sup> The AI listserv, an email discussion forum for AI practitioners has been used to advance this discussion, see “staying positive” threat, AI list vol. 69 iss. 17-25.



Paradigm	Basic assumptions	Guidance for evaluation
<b>Social Constructionism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge is locally constructed and constantly co-created by people interacting</li> <li>• The researcher does not know how things “really” are, but is open to all local forms of knowledge</li> <li>• No clear separation between researcher and researched</li> <li>• Researcher and researched are creating knowledge in interaction</li> <li>• Interactions between researcher and researched are an intervention into the reality of both</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on relational process; “how” not “what”</li> <li>• Focus on storytelling</li> </ul>
<b>Responsive Evaluation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation is socially constructed, an ongoing social process defined by its participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oriented towards process</li> <li>• Propagates polyphony</li> <li>• Assumes local knowledges/practices</li> <li>• Uses storytelling</li> <li>• Reflects on local-historical contexts</li> <li>• Is oriented towards the process of AI</li> <li>• Is emergent rather than pre-determined</li> <li>• Reporting should include multitude of voices and include rich qualitative data</li> </ul>
<b>Discourse analysis</b>	<p>Parallels between ‘new OD’ and discourse analysis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• changing mindsets through changing language, changing behaviour through changing mindsets</li> <li>• based in social constructionism, acknowledging multiple, socially constructed realities</li> <li>• focus on how narratives, texts, conversations, other communication influence and shape social process and behaviour</li> <li>• awareness of how power influences dominant story lines</li> <li>• success of AI is influenced by ability to shape dialogue by carefully choosing the focus of the inquiry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic question for evaluation: How do power dynamics shape discourse which in turn shapes social reality?</li> </ul>

Table 1: Overview of research paradigms in AI (continued on next page)

Paradigm	Basic assumptions	Guidance for evaluation
<b>Critical perspective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criticises lack of self reflection of AI</li> <li>• Fear that pressure to ‘appreciate’ furthers the agenda of those in power – thus re-creates patterns of power</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal of evaluation should be to emancipate those not in power</li> </ul>
<b>Practitioner oriented/ pragmatic perspective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caution: AI not appropriate under all circumstances and takes skill to facilitate</li> <li>• Theory of action: focus on ‘the positive’ is debatable</li> <li>• Practicality: based on substantive literature and takes high level facilitation skill</li> <li>• Evidence of success: lack of independent evaluation so far</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structure of evaluation: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Plausibility of theoretical base,</li> <li>2. Practicality,</li> <li>3. Evidence of success</li> </ol> </li> </ul>

Table 1 (continued): Overview of research paradigms in AI

In summary, a number of insights emerge from this literature review: There are a multitude of theoretical statements about the evaluation of AI, none of which have (to my knowledge) inspired empirical research relying on these theoretical views as a guiding framework. All of these contributions do not offer concrete guidance on how to evaluate AI, but focus on paradigmatic reflection, not lining out definite requirements for an evaluation of AI. However, some guidelines concerning the focus of an inquiry can be extracted.

The views on evaluating AI presented above overlap in significant ways, but there are also some tensions between these approaches. The notion of power and its (re-)creation through (local) discourse is being addressed by all the authors quoted above, albeit in various different ways. Marshak and Grant (2008) share with Grant (2006) a particular concern for power dynamics. In both papers the authors derive this concern from a critical perspective. Marshak and Grant (2008) claim that a facilitator should be aware of the organizational power dynamics and use this knowledge when attempting to change the system. Hosking, on the other hand, cautions against the assumption of any particular power dynamic by the (outsider) researcher, as power can only ever be defined locally in a social constructionist view (Hosking & McNamee, 2007; van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Marshak and Grant (2008) even suggest that the guiding question in an evaluation of AI must be concerned with how power structures shape dialogue which in turn shapes social reality.

One of the few common denominators between all of the perspectives quoted above is a certain caution against seeing Appreciative Inquiry as merely looking at the ‘good stuff’. All the authors quoted in this section on how to evaluate AI advocate for a more differentiated

view of appreciation, taking into account the importance of addressing the current issues for those participating in the particular AI process at hand. Barge and Oliver devote an entire paper in the *Academy of Management Review* (2003) to the question of what ‘appreciation’ means in managerial practice. AI scholars in particular caution against a focus on the ‘positive’ but point to a focus on what is ‘generative’ in a human system, i.e. has the potential to generate a better future (Bushe, 2007). Therefore, the question of what ‘appreciation’ means in AI practice will receive special attention in this study.

## **2.6 Open Questions and Critique of AI**

A number of open questions and criticism exist concerning AI. “AI has been accused of being naïve and idealistic in the way that it concentrates on positive experiences, which some may feel paints an unduly sanitized picture of human life.” (Reed, 2007, p. 39) Some fear the focus on the positive may distort the picture, leading to a ‘lopsided’ view of the organization (Rogers & Fraser, 2003) or the suppression of critical voices (S. Grant & Humphries, 2006). In response to these criticisms, it has been argued that negative aspects are easier to address in an appreciative environment, and that as appreciative conversations unfold people will voice criticism if they feel they need to. Moreover, AI can enable constructive criticism as it avoids ‘scapegoating’, i.e. it allows people to express concerns or dissatisfaction without putting blame on someone else (Reed, 2007).

Another criticism of AI is of it being ignorant towards power dynamics in organizations (Reed, 2007). However, power is already being expressed by the mere fact that an AI initiative is being conducted – or terminated, if the sponsor is dissatisfied with the results. Thus facilitators or organizational decision makers involved in AI are necessarily aware of power dynamics. AI initiatives are shaped by power dynamics as much as power dynamics are shaped by AI (Reed, 2007).

Bushe (2000) cautions against the indiscriminant, unreflected application of AI in every situation, calling for a disciplined and reasoned use of AI. Only in the right time and circumstances should AI be applied. However, to my knowledge little research has been carried out into what these circumstances are. Lacking in most of the literature is a clear description of the circumstances required for AI to work, or circumstances that are potentially detrimental to an AI initiative. This question is to be addressed in this thesis from the perspective of experienced facilitators of AI.

Another concern is that as AI gains popularity, every OD intervention with a focus on what works gets called Appreciative Inquiry, even though it may only marginally relate to AI and its underlying philosophy, thus corrupting the unique power of AI (Bushe, 2000). This concern warrants a closer look at how AI is being applied in practice.

## 2.7 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter shows that AI has proven its worth as an organization development and team development methodology in various studies, however open questions remain. Empirical evidence seems to suggest a mixed score for AI: While some desirable effects have been found, the evidence is scarce and in most cases methodologies employed in empirical studies are incongruent with the paradigmatic background of AI. While the evidence suggests that AI has indeed desired effects in organizations and teams, more evidence is needed to fully understand the process of how, and under which circumstances, this is achieved.

AI has been developed in North America, with mostly North American authors contributing to its continuous discussion and development. Comparatively few contributions have been published looking at AI in different circumstances. As one example of this, New Zealand literature has been reviewed. The conclusion from this review is that very little is known about the application and evaluation of AI in New Zealand. To my knowledge, no independent evaluation of AI as an OD or team development method has been published in this context (or any other context other than in the USA and Canada). This research seeks to address this gap by uncovering how AI is being applied and evaluated by AI practitioners.

Only a small number of published conceptual papers discuss the methodologies by which the study of AI should be advanced. These take on a mixture of social constructionist, critical and pragmatic perspectives and endorse methods of discourse analysis. I identified similarities and dissimilarities in these paradigmatic points of view and shall use these to focus the analysis in the further progress of this study.

Some criticism can be found in the literature towards AI as being unreflected and focused merely on the positive, as well as being ignorant towards power dynamics. This research will address this criticism. Furthermore, the concern has been raised of AI being applied unreflectedly or in inappropriate contexts by practitioners, thus corrupting the unique power of the method and its underlying philosophy. This concern will be addressed by evaluating how practitioners in New Zealand apply and evaluate AI.

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) point out that the researcher's choice of interpretive practices will depend on the type of questions asked, what is available from the context and what the researcher can actually do within a particular setting. This means, the research strategy will be dictated above all by the question it is trying to answer, but will also be strongly influenced by access to data and other situational factors, such as limited time and resources.

In this chapter, I formulate the open questions from the literature review into specific research questions, and describe and defend the data collection and analysis methods. This study is a qualitative inquiry based on in-depth interviews. Whilst a general framework of inquiry was adhered to, some questions were altered, added or dropped along the way as new insights emerged. However, I discuss the overarching and guiding questions of this research in this section.

In order to find the most suitable interpretive practice for the questions posed in this research, I turned to accounts published in academic and practitioner oriented literature addressing the question how to best evaluate AI. In this chapter, I draw propositions about which aspects to focus on and which principles to keep in mind out of this literature review. Following this, I present and discuss methods for data-collection and analysis.

Finally, this chapter describes and discusses the specifics of this research, the selection of participants, interview and data analysis processes. This chapter closes with a reflection on the methodologies employed and ethical considerations.

### **3.2 Research Questions and Rationale**

The literature reviewed in chapter two clearly indicates the necessity for further research on both the process of Appreciative Inquiry and its impact on organizational and community life. Firstly, little is known about the application of AI in contexts other than North America. This thesis seeks to address this gap by mapping out how professional facilitators of AI in New Zealand apply and evaluate AI, and which forms of engagement they find. In this thesis, I intend to draw a sketch of how AI is being lived and evaluated in New Zealand, thus adding a new perspective to the academic discussion of AI.

According to Bushe (2005), a more grounded theoretical understanding is needed as the basis for developing new ways of inquiring appreciatively. I argue that we also need an understanding of the ways in which people are already inquiring appreciatively, in order to deepen our understanding of the AI process. So in a first step, I am trying to map out how AI is being applied, in which form and under what circumstances and how this influences the people involved in the process. Therefore, the initial question and starting point of this research was: Do people in New Zealand's organizations and communities engage in AI processes? How do they do this? In which contexts do AI initiatives take place? This initial step is necessary in order to understand how AI is lived in New Zealand.

The next step leads into the evaluation of AI process and consequences. The questions posed here are: How do facilitators of AI in New Zealand evaluate AI? What is their interpretation of AI? What does their experience tell them about the circumstances in which AI is most live giving in human systems? When is AI unsuitable? Which changes does AI lead to in their experience? The theories of what AI is and how it affects human systems held by those facilitating the process are an essential part of the evaluation of the AI process.

The overarching question to which this research ultimately intends to contribute is: How does AI influence social systems? Professionals using AI in their work, consciously facilitating AI processes in human systems on a regular basis, were asked to explain their theories of how AI changes human systems.

### **3.3 From Paradigm to inquiry: Practical implications of paradigmatic choices**

The literature on evaluating appreciative inquiry reviewed in the previous chapter presented a number of different theoretical lenses through which AI can be evaluated. In this section, I discuss how this theoretical fundament influenced this study. I review central points from each of the four approaches presented above and connect it with the more concrete steps taken in this study.

#### ***3.3.1 Grounding in a social constructionist perspective***

As AI itself is largely based in social constructionist philosophy, I took many of the propositions from a social constructionist stance towards evaluation into consideration in this study. In this research, I employed elements of responsive evaluation suggested by van der Haar and Hosking (2004), which is grounded in social constructionism.

Underlying this study is the social constructionist assumption that knowledge is locally constructed and constantly co-created by people interacting. As the researcher, I do not assume to know how things “really” are, but am open to local forms of knowledge. The participants in this study and I created knowledge in our interactions, with consequences for both the participants and myself. Hosking and McNamee (2007) state that the interactions involved in the research process are an intervention into the reality of both the researcher and the researched, the researcher is not a detached expert drawing conclusions about an existing reality. This thesis subscribes to this view of research and the inseparability of inquiry and intervention, as this became increasingly apparent during the journey of this research. In fact, it has become lived experience for me as the apprentice researcher. In the course of this research, both the relation between me and the “researched” (i.e. interview partners) changed and my relation to the “subject” of AI changed. Finally, and most significantly, the relations between AI practitioners in NZ changed, underlining the fact that inquiry indeed equals intervention:

- I changed my construction of ‘research’ from a positivist to a constructionist one in numerous interactions with researchers (both through personal communication and through the study of literature) and AI practitioners (mostly through personal interaction, but also through interaction with publications).



- My interactions with AI practitioners changed their relations to AI, as they had “aha” moments whilst explaining AI to me, and some pointed out to me how they intend to *change* their practice of AI because of our interaction<sup>3</sup>.
- The relations between AI practitioners in NZ changed, as my research brought awareness to interview partners that there are others like them ‘out there’, which created a desire in some participants to engage in networking with other practitioners. I subsequently started up an online network (<http://changingconversationz.ning.com>) which found resonance among some of the participants of this study and many other practitioners. This may be the single most far reaching impact this research has had at the time I am writing this.

It is understood that any evaluation, as well as the reporting on that evaluation, has to respond to the audiences’ requirements (van der Haar and Hosking, 2004). In the case of this thesis, the audience is primarily an academic audience with very specific information needs. In this regard, this evaluation of AI complies with van der Haar and Hosking’s (2004) criteria as much as practically possible, laying open for the reader to observe and assess the methodology employed, and discussing literature, methodology, findings and conclusions in a standardized format. All of these steps are undertaken to ensure the audience’s requirements for information are met.

Whilst this thesis is taking on a social constructionist epistemological framework, some of the criteria suggested by van der Haar and Hosking (2004) and Hosking and McNamee (2007) had to be rejected in the interest of the goals of this research.

It is one explicit goal of this research to map out how, in which situations and in what ways AI is being applied by AI facilitators in New Zealand. So in this initial step, I am trying to do something that is at odds with the kind of social constructionism described by Hosking and McNamee: I try to paint a sketch of what ‘is’ (or was at the time of my interaction with the facilitators interviewed for this study). However, this is done in the full awareness that this can only be a situational (or ‘local’) snapshot, created in the interaction between me and the interview partner at the time of the interview, as well as in my later re-engagement with

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<sup>3</sup> For example, one interview partner explained during one interview how AI is an ongoing process that never stops, but immediately noticed that most of her work is done in one-off, off-site workshops. She then told me how good it was to have this conversation with me as it made her realize this paradox and told me she would in the future engage in more extensive follow-up on her workshops.

interview transcripts and summaries. However, my intention is to give a flavour of the variety of ways in which practitioners engage in AI and how they interpret it.

I do agree with the necessity to report rich, textured, qualitative data and narratives, which allow the reader of an evaluation report to come to his or her own conclusions (Hosking & McNamee, 2007; van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). A good example of such reporting can be found in Cronin and Jackson (2004). However, one should remain aware of the fact that even reporting a multitude of voices does not necessarily reflect all voices, as it is impossible to reflect every voice and every nuance of that voice in a written report. The uncommented resembling of many voices might create the false impression that all voices are represented in a neutral fashion, even though the choice of reporting style and selection of quotes represent a judgment on part of the author of that particular evaluation report. The reader of this study will find that a multitude of voices has been reported, however I make no claims of representing every nuance the entire choir of voices I heard – as this is simply neither feasible nor congruent with the goals of this research.

In this study, reflexivity played a large role (as suggested by van der Haar and Hosking (2004) and Hosking and McNamee (2007)). Not only were interviews with participants highly reflective, but also my later re-engagement with the interviews through the use of transcripts, notes and summaries was highly reflective, albeit in a different way. At any given moment, the awareness of active co-construction, as proposed by van der Haar and Hosking, was a central element of this reflexivity.

In order to find authoritative guidance on how to most usefully evaluate AI, I reviewed suggestions from various paradigms. I found that while a social constructionist paradigm seems most congruent with AI, not all its principles are applicable in the interest of pragmatism. Guidance taken from a social constructionist paradigm which this particular research adheres to is the philosophical stance that all social reality is socially constructed, the insight that all research has an impact on the reality of both the researcher and the researched and the necessity of reporting of a multitude of voices.

### ***3.3.2 Parallels and differences with a discourse analytic perspective***

In the literature review of this thesis I quoted a recent paper by Marshak and Grant (2008) suggesting discourse analysis offers a useful theoretical lens through which AI and other forms of new OD can be usefully assessed, as both new OD and discourse analysis share a common grounding in social constructionist epistemology.

However, despite the commonalities in epistemology, there are some notable differences in the suggestions made about the more concrete focus of an evaluation between Marshak and Grant (2008) and van der Haar and Hosking (2004). Commonalities include a focus on narrative and process. In this research, I remain true to this focus. Differences can be found in the stance towards ‘power’ (as explained in the previous chapter). Marshak and Grant’s (2008) take on discourse analysis is partly grounded in a critical philosophy. Taking inspiration from a critical perspective has the practical implication for this research to pay attention to how ‘power’ is conceptualized and dealt with from a practitioner perspective.

### ***3.3.3 Elements from the practitioner oriented pragmatic perspective***

Rogers and Fraser (2003) suggested that an evaluation of Appreciative Inquiry be structured around the three core themes (1) plausibility of theoretical base (or ‘theory of action’), (2) practicality, and (3) evidence of success. Whilst not a central perspective in this study, some of these criteria were considered in this evaluation of AI.

Concerning the first point, not so much the theory of action as developed in academic writing is under scrutiny in this study, but the theory of action based on which New Zealand practitioners of AI facilitate AI processes – which may or may not be the same. New Zealand professionals who apply AI in a variety of settings were asked to explain their theory of action of AI.

However, the congruence between the theory of action in academic writing and that held by ‘front line’ practitioners is in itself an interesting phenomenon worthy of close observation. It is interesting to note many academics publishing on AI are also facilitators of AI processes, and many of those primarily facilitating AI often have some affiliation with the world of academia. This may be a typical mark of a relatively new methodology. Being originally developed in academia and emanated as an increasingly accepted OD method, AI is making its way back into academia as a more and more established action research method (Reed, 2007).

The second criterion discussed earlier, the question of practicality, is also put to facilitators of AI. The third criterion, evidence of success, will also be addressed from a practitioner perspective.

### 3.4 Research Methods

#### 3.4.1 *Considering research methods*

In this section I seek to describe and reference the methodological approach taken in this study. This also includes a clear differentiation from those methods not employed in this research. As I lined out before, a social constructionist stance is central to this research; however, papers discussing the evaluation of AI from a social constructionist stance (Hosking & McNamee, 2007; van der Haar & Hosking, 2004) remain rather abstract and focused on discussing paradigmatic and philosophical background, rather than concrete methodologies which could be employed in an empirical evaluation of AI.

As there are obvious parallels in the epistemological frameworks of discourse analysis and AI, it has been suggested to employ methods associated with discourse analysis in assessing AI (Marshak & Grant, 2008). Research in organizational discourse has already created an awareness that “discourse is central to the social construction of reality” (D. Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Butnam, 2004, p. 25), a premise shared by AI philosophy. Therefore the possibility of employing some methods commonly associated with discourse analysis were considered in this research: Content analysis (CA) and grounded theory (GT) (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2003).

Content analysis is more commonly associated with a mechanistic view of social systems, and relies largely on a technological communication model, such as Shannon and Weaver (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2003). Seeing this research subscribes to a social constructionist epistemological framework, methods associated with CA were deemed inappropriate for this study.

Whenever researchers engage in qualitative research they seem to quote grounded theory (GT) as the most common reference point in qualitative methodology (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2003). In accordance, this thesis indeed draws on some of the ideas developed within the framework of GT – however, it is *not* a study relying solely on GT methodology. Strauss and Corbin give the following definition of GT:

A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationships with each other. One does not begin with

a theory and then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23).

Some elements of Strauss and Corbin's concept of GT were relevant for this study: As is typical in GT, "data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationships" (1990, p. 23); i.e. I moved between data collection, analysis and theory development for the most part of this research, adjusting research focus as new insights emerged and in the process refining and reshaping theoretical insights.

However, this study is not a purely grounded theory study, as AI is based on a solid body of theory already. Therefore I do not seek to build a grounded theory of how AI works starting with a general research interest, as the intentions and scope of this study were rather precisely defined already before engaging in field work. One of the aims of this study is to deliver a narrative, a situational snapshot of the situation of AI in New Zealand, which clearly sets it apart from a 'pure' GT study. Also, it seeks to describe and evaluate the theories held by front line practitioners about Appreciative Inquiry.

### ***3.4.2 The narrative approach and social constructionism***

The approach most consistent with the social constructionist paradigm is a narrative approach to research. Narrative approaches in management and organisation theory have inspired an ever increasing number of publications over the last few years (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). The narrative approach to research in organisations is generally characterized by a "tension between stories and science" (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 167). Narrative opens up ways of knowing that are not accessible through 'normal science'. "Narrative can provide a different, and valuable, form of knowledge that enables researchers to engage with the lived realities of organizational life – the 'truth' that people at work live through every day." (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 182)

From a narrative point of view, human systems are not seen as static and homogenous. Narrative research focuses attention to temporal issues, and can open up the paradoxes and complex relationships of change to analysis (Rhodes & Brown, 2005).

With studying the construction of organisational narratives comes the awareness that any research report is also constructed as a narrative by the researcher authoring it. The research report is one (among many) possible constructions of a narrative about the organisation being studied. Also, narrative researchers need to "be aware of different stories told in organizations

and to seek new ways of representing them that do not subsume the multiplicity of stories into a single authoritative account” (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 179). Thus reflexivity must play a large part in narrative research: The researcher must be aware, and lay open this awareness of how he or she constructs the narrative of research in co-operation with participants in the research. “When research is re-cast as a process of telling stories about stories, the means by which those stories are created is an important area for analysis and methodological reflection (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 178).

The narrative approach itself is not a formalised paradigm or field of research, but has followers in areas so diverse to include realism, formalism, pragmatism, social constructionism, and others (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). In this study, I seek to construct a narrative through a social constructionist lens, mostly in line with arguments advanced by Hosking, McNamee and van der Haar (Hosking & McNamee, 2007; van der Haar & Hosking, 2004) which I discussed in the literature review of this study.

Taking on a social constructionist stance is not undisputed (Donaldson, 2003), as is the closely related narrative endeavour. However, narrative methods have not just contributed broadly to methods and processes in organisation studies, but also had a profound impact on the “conceptualization of the research enterprise” (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 179). Narrative questions of the superiority of ‘scientific knowledge’ over other forms of knowledge. It opens up other forms of knowing, and new ways of analysing processes in organisations.

A point of criticism towards social constructionism from a positivist science point of view is the modest role of the researcher and ‘scientific knowledge’. “This role is too modest given the possibilities of discovering general causal laws that allow prediction.” (Donaldson, 2003, p. 124). Analysis from a social constructionist paradigm is considered to be too descriptive, and not predictive enough; it also lacks the potential for generalization, which is desired in a positivist science point of view. Social constructionism is considered to merely re-tell common sense (Donaldson, 2003).

The social constructionist counter-argument to such accusations is that “[t]he difference between social constructionism and common sense is that the former studies the formation of the later” (Czarniawska, 2003, p. 137). Social constructionism seeks to reveal how the “taken-for-granted becomes the taken-for-granted” (ibid.). It does not formulate laws and predictions, as these can only ever be valid as long as the world remains unchanged (which is an unrealistic assumption). Also, an author writing from a social constructionist point of view

will not try to impose on the reader his or her interpretations, but let the reader derive his or her own judgement (ibid.).

### **3.5 Generating ‘data’ – interactions with participants**

#### ***3.5.1 Interviewing approach***

Whilst this study is based on a multitude of interactions with various individuals, one of the main sources of information was individual interviews, or conversations. The approach to interviewing, or more appropriately conversations, chosen in this thesis is in many regards consistent with a social constructionist paradigm, particularly with the interpretation of Alvesson (2003), but combining it with a more pragmatic orientation (as, for example, described in Rubin & Rubin, 2005). My interpretation of the interview in research thus is not an entirely instrumentalist one, i.e. in this thesis interviews are not seen as mere ‘data collection’, but social interaction which in themselves create a particular situational meaning and influence both the interviewer and the interviewee in certain ways. Thus the stories told by interview partners are not pure ‘data’, but a reflection of both their experiences and opinions, *and* of the interview situation at hand. This is something that was kept in mind both during interviews and in the later analysis of interview transcripts and summaries. The terms “interview” and “conversations” are used interchangeably in this thesis, without any intention to steer away from the interpretation outlines above, but merely to increase the flow of the text.

Reflexivity, in the interpretation described by Alvesson (2003), plays a large part in this research. It is taken to mean “the conscious and consistent efforts to view the subject matter from different angles and to avoid [...] a single favored angle and vocabulary.” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 25). It serves to avoid the naivety that ‘data’ reveals ‘reality’, and it allows for creativity. It serves to explore multiple sets of meanings and to acknowledge the ambiguity of interpretations.

At the same time, reflexivity must be bounded by pragmatism. “Pragmatism means balancing endless reflexivity and radical skepticism with a sense of direction and accomplishment” (Alvesson, 2003). Clearly, the researcher wants to achieve a meaningful result, an insight, a tangible outcome within a setting that is limited by time, resources and other factors.

#### ***3.5.2 The practitioner interviews***

The data informing the first part of the study was generated in interaction with New Zealand based facilitators of participant-driven change with an expressed interest in Appreciative Inquiry (but not limited to AI). Interactions involved email exchanges, face-to-face



interviews, phone interviews, VOIP interviews and online chat, as well as informal conversations and, in the later stages of the study, interactions aided by the network of facilitators inspired by this study (see <http://changingconversationz.ning.com>). In some cases, also publications by the participants were taken into consideration. Participants were chosen by a snowballing technique, from initially five participants identified from the AI commons ("Appreciative Inquiry Commons") and personal contacts. All participants fulfilled one criterion: They had substantive experience in facilitating AI processes.

The core of this part of the research was formed by nine interviews conducted with AI facilitators during October and November of 2008. These conversations were mostly guided by the interview guide shown in Appendix II. However, it must be noted that few conversations actually closely followed this guide, as interview partners had their own stories to tell and were in many cases taking the lead in conversations. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, VOIP or on the phone. Where possible, these conversations were recorded and later transcribed, in other cases detailed notes were taken during the interview, summarized after the interview, and emailed to the participants for checking and editing.

	Face-to-face	VOIP (Skype)	Phone
Male	1 (transcribed)	1 (notes <sup>4</sup> )	1 (notes)
Female	1 (transcribed)	1(transcribed)	4 (2 transcribed, 2 notes)

Table 2: Participants – Overview

I developed a guide for the conversations before engaging in the first interviews. However, this guide was developed further as my engagement with participants progressed, and not strictly adhered to during interviews. Rather, I used it as a memo note to myself during interviews in order to not forget to cover areas of interest. I also introduced the topic in this manner in initial emails and when starting out with conversations: I reminded participants that I did prepare a number of questions, however over and above this I was more interested in what they thought was important, and what made AI work. This led to interesting conversations which took on a variety of shapes. In some cases, the participants took the lead and talked mostly freely using many cases as illustrations. In other cases I did ask most questions almost exactly as they were on paper. In all interviews, I was trying to keep up a curious and respectful attitude, which was essentially easy to do as I do have a genuine interest in the topic and most conversation partners were very open, friendly and talkative and

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<sup>4</sup> The interview was audio-recorded, but the recording was of very poor quality not allowing a detailed transcription.

where quite keen to share their knowledge and experiences. In some cases they even welcomed the opportunity to reflect deeply on their practice of AI and came to interesting insights during our conversations. Mostly, the professionals, facilitators and consultants I talked to were appreciative about the fact that I showed interest in AI.

The interview guide had a number of questions covering the areas mapped out in the introductory section of this methodology chapter: Firstly, I wanted to gain a broad overview of how AI is being applied by my interview partners. Thus the initial question was: *How do you use AI in your consulting/facilitation practice?* I initially used the term “consulting” until one participant pointed out to me what she was doing was not consulting, but facilitation, thus I changed it in the later versions. Whilst this was the one question on paper, I tended to follow up on this asking for case examples, but in most interviews participants would talk to this freely and extensively.

It had come to my awareness during initial, informal interactions with AI facilitators that they were not employing AI exclusively in their work, but were using a variety of approaches to facilitate change in human systems. Hence I became interested in how facilitators combined various approaches, and which approaches they were using and how this affected them and their clients. Thus I included questions like: *Does it [AI] constitute a large or a small proportion of your consulting/facilitation work? Do you usually combine AI with other methods or do you use mostly "pure AI"?*

In order to understand the theories of AI held by facilitators, a set of questions about their interpretation of AI was included, e.g. *What is AI for you? How do you define or interpret AI? Do you see AI more as a 'philosophy' or as a 'tool' with regards to its influence on social processes?*

Another question aimed at establishing the relationship that facilitators have with AI is *How long have you been using AI and what made you start using AI as a consultant?* In my conversations with facilitators this usually went on further to establish what training facilitators had had. All of these factors are a further indicator of how facilitators view AI, and what their personal relationship with AI is.

In the core, this thesis is concerned with the evaluation of AI. There are two parts to this question: Firstly, do facilitators concern themselves with evaluation? And if yes, which methods, which paradigms do they employ? Thus the question *How do you evaluate the*

*effectiveness of AI?* was included in the interview guide. Secondly, the question of *how* the AI process works was asked of the AI facilitators, who had observed and been part of numerous AI processes and had reflected on this involvement intensively. Their answers to questions such as *What do you think is it that makes AI work? Under what circumstances does AI work best? Under what circumstances doesn't it work well?* may yield valuable insights into the *how* of the AI process.

### 3.6 Analysis

I opened this methodology section with an argument by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), which stated that the choice of the researcher's interpretive practices depend above all by the questions the research is trying to answer, but will be confined by what is available from the context. From the first statement in this argument follows that the interpretive practice employed here should be capable of answering the questions: How is Appreciative Inquiry applied in New Zealand? How can AI be evaluated in a New Zealand context? From a practitioner perspective, how can the AI process be described and its outcomes evaluated?

The same guiding principles applied to interviewing were applied to my later re-engagement with interview materials in the form of transcripts, summaries and email exchanges. I took a both reflective and pragmatic approach to analyzing interview 'data'.

At the heart of analysing whole texts is coding (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Coding involves sampling, identifying themes, building systems of codes, marking texts, constructing models (i.e. identifying relationships among codes) and testing models against empirical data.

"Coding forces the researcher to make judgements about the meanings of contiguous blocks of text" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 274). This holds true for any kind of text analysis, no matter what the paradigmatic inclinations of the researcher are (ibid.), i.e. even when re-telling participants' narratives, the researcher makes choices and thus judgement cannot be avoided.

I coded thematically, taking a 'sociological view'. During this process I tried to interpret what was said by interview partners as 'information' in its own right, or a "window into experience" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 290). Themes emerged during the repeated reading of the materials (transcripts and summaries). I also paid special attention to the themes identified in the literature earlier: Power dynamics during the AI process, the question of what 'appreciation' or 'a focus on the positive' really mean for both AI facilitators and their clients.

The themes identified during the initial coding were then grouped thematically and first described in a systematic fashion and then reconnected with the initial theoretical discussion. The insights thus gained are described in the following two chapters.

### **3.7 Reflection on my involvement**

Whilst at the outset planned as a qualitative inquiry with the purpose of ‘gathering data’ and analysing it, my interactions with participants taught me that – as stated in the principle of simultaneity – inquiry indeed is intervention. Numerous interview partners pointed out how little AI practitioners in New Zealand were networked and in these interactions the idea was born to somehow connect AI practitioners in Aotearoa with one another. I then contemplated how to best do this, as a) I was aware that (even with more time and resources than available for a master’s thesis) I was not able to contact all AI practitioners myself and b) some participants had not expressed an interest in networking with other practitioners, therefore they should not be bothered with such an endeavour, as they were assured confidentiality.

These considerations led me to set up an online platform (using Ning, a well known commercial provider of networking sites), which could serve to connect those practitioners who were indeed interested in getting to know one another<sup>5</sup>. In this I saw no danger of exposing any participants, as I send out a call to sign up for the network via the AI listserv, an email discussion group – so participants of the network “Facilitators of participant-driven change in New Zealand” are facilitators from all over New Zealand, even the USA and India, and not just participants of this study. Thus my involvement with AI facilitators during this study had implications for people beyond those directly involved with this thesis. It is, one can say, an accidental action research. At the time of this writing, the online network had 21 members. One participant in particular thanked me because she had re-connected with a long-lost colleague.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://changingconversationz.ning.com>

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

As in any qualitative inquiry involving human participants, ethical considerations were an integral and important part of the research process. In the early stages of the research, the approval of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee (UC HEC) was obtained. However, as an evolving process, and changing shape over time, ethical considerations were a constant companion on the research journey. Participants invested their time and thought into this thesis and some were very helpful in offering a lot of their time and information in repeated interviews, email exchanges and offering networking opportunities, which in turn build up an obligation for me to share my time and insights with them. While I was at every stage very happy to do this, it was at times frustrating as the timeframe for this research was rather limited and the pressures of finishing on time were at times delaying my responses to participants' inquiries.

Confidentiality was assured to all participants. Of course, no single participant in this study was identified to any third party, unless participants specifically requested this. All due care was taken not to identify participants, all data was kept secure and contact data kept in a separate place from 'content' data.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This thesis follows a narrative methodology based on a combination of social constructionist thinking and pragmatism, in which reflection is a central element. The main 'data collection' method employed are semi-structured interviews, whereas the analysis of materials is based largely on thematic coding.

It became apparent through the course of the research that the researcher had a noticeable impact on the systems being researched, which warrants further reflection on the matter in the discussion of the findings. Because of this researcher impact, ethical considerations have been a constant companion on the journey of this research.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter reports the findings that emerged from the interviews conducted with nine facilitators of AI in New Zealand. As discussed in the methodology chapter, participant quotes are used extensively as the research is grounded in the reality of participant perspectives.

The reporting in this chapter is structured around a number of key themes that emerged from the analysis. These key themes are:

- 1) *Facilitator characteristics*. This section sheds a light at who are the champions of AI in New Zealand. It describes characteristics of the people facilitating AI processes. It discusses their background and explores how they learned about AI and how they connected with it.
- 2) *'Theory of action' (Rogers & Fraser, 2003)*. The theory of action held by AI facilitators in New Zealand is explored. This section describes, how –in the view of experienced facilitators of AI processes- AI influences human systems, which circumstances are favourable or obstructive, how change is brought about and which factors need to be in place for AI to have a lasting effect.
- 3) *Appreciative Inquiry in practice*. This section is concerned above all with how Appreciative Inquiry is used in practice. It explores the contexts in which AI is used, the types of clients engaging in AI and other circumstances surrounding the practice of facilitation. It also describes the 'forms of engagement' (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003) employed by New Zealand facilitators of AI.

Figure 1 gives an overview of how this chapter is organized. It must be acknowledged that the themes represent my interpretation of findings, i.e. I ordered participant quotes into themes and categories, therefore findings represent my understanding of participants' reality. However, adding this structure is necessary in order to allow a deeper engagement with the data, and to discuss the findings and draw conclusions for further investigation.

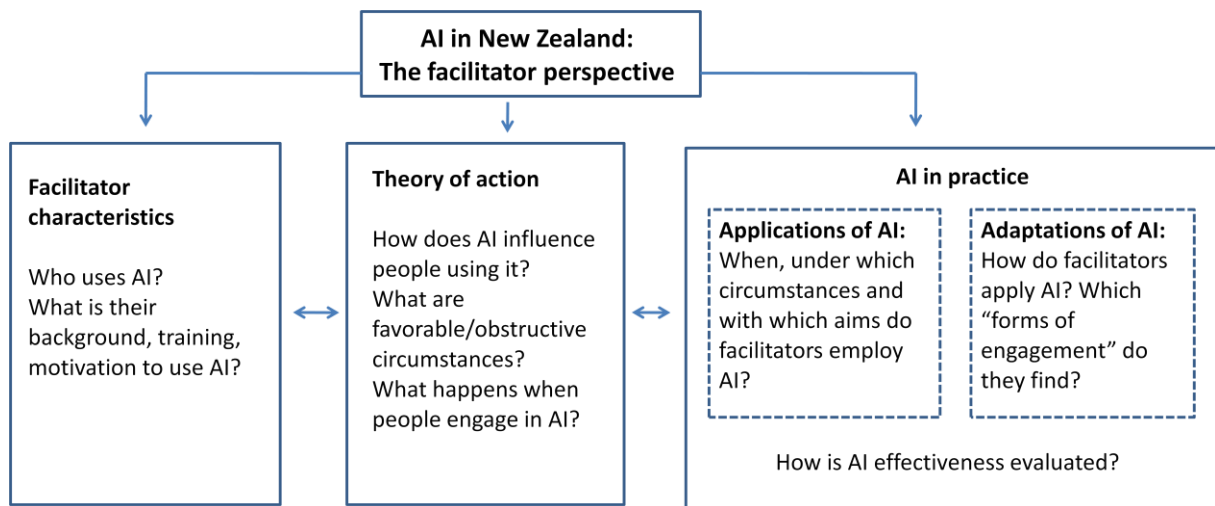


Figure 1: Overview of findings



## 4.2 Facilitator Characteristics

In this section I seek to present an overview of the people facilitating AI processes in New Zealand. For the purpose of this study, I will treat the AI facilitators interviewed in this study as a “group”. They are a group in as much as they are united by a common interest in AI. Due to the snowballing sampling technique used in this study, some of these people are connected with each other. However, not all of them know each other. Reporting on demographics has to be kept to a minimum, as the overall small number of facilitators in New Zealand could potentially make participants identifiable. Table 3 shows an overview of themes and categories that emerged during the analysis of interview data, the reporting in the following section is organized according to these categories.

Categories	Themes identified from transcripts
Engaging with AI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitator Background</li> <li>• Length of time using AI</li> <li>• Training and education</li> <li>• Circumstances and/or motivation when starting to use AI</li> <li>• Fit between previously held philosophy and AI principles</li> </ul>
Professional development over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing practice with experience</li> <li>• (Confidence from positive experience with AI)</li> </ul>
Status of AI in facilitators’ professional life and beyond	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AI as the core or philosophy of their work</li> <li>• Pragmatic professional philosophy</li> <li>• AI influence on facilitators beyond their work lives</li> </ul>
Practical aspects of facilitator work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Types of work interviewees engage in</li> <li>• Eclecticism and variety of methods used by interviewees</li> <li>• Proportion of AI in overall work</li> </ul>
Connections in the NZ AI community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of facilitator networks in NZ</li> <li>• Desire to connect to other practitioners</li> </ul>
Critique of aspects of AI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitators' scepticism about AI</li> <li>• Facilitator's disconnection with elements of AI</li> </ul>

Table 3: Overview of themes “Facilitator Characteristics”

## ***4.2.1 Engaging with AI***

### ***4.2.1.1 Facilitator background & length of time using AI***

Participants came from all parts of New Zealand (greater Auckland region, Wellington region, Canterbury, Otago and Nelson area). Most participants tended to be situated in or close to urban centres. Seven of the participants worked mostly independently, or as freelancers. One worked in partnership with another OD consultant, and one was a member of a charitable organization.

One interviewee claimed to have used AI for approximately 16 or 17 years, five of the participants had used it for around ten years, two others for eight and nine years respectively, and one participant had used AI for two years. So roughly, the average lengths of time participants had been facilitating AI processes was 9.6 years, or to put it differently: between them, they represented 86 years of AI experience.

Participants came from varied backgrounds. Four participants came from a previous facilitation background, having facilitated group (and community or organization) processes using different methodologies before they learned about AI. Two of these had done so as members of a large Church organization. Interestingly, four of the participants had come in contact with AI whilst being involved in Church organizations. Two of the participants were involved in development work, one of them in evaluation in the agricultural sector and one involved in religiously inspired charitable organizations (having held both executive and board positions in such organizations). Only one participant had a classical business career in the areas of marketing and strategy and completed an MBA before becoming facilitator of AI. One participant had an extensive background as a holistic therapist for individuals.

### ***4.2.1.2 Three Themes***

The three themes ‘training and education’, ‘motivation and circumstances when starting to use AI’ and ‘fit between previously held philosophy and AI principles’ are closely interwoven.

All interviewees came to AI on different pathways, with different motivations and past experiences. Two of the interviewees had trained in AI with the NTL. One of these had then gone on to develop a three-day training program for AI which he ran a number of times in various locations in NZ, which was the starting point into AI for two other participants of this

study. One participant described her training at the Taos Institute, whereas another one had trained with Amanda Trosten-Bloom.

Four of the participants described mentoring relationships when talking about how they learned to facilitate AI (even though only one used the term ‘mentor’). I did not ask a specific question relating to mentoring, so the absence of accounts of mentor-relationships in the other interviews is not an indicator of the absence of such relationships. Two of the participants not explicitly mentioning mentoring relationships in their learning AI trained with the NTL and one with the Taos institute, where mentoring programmes are part of the AI training, so it can be assumed mentoring by an experienced facilitator was part of their learning experience as well.

Most participants described some form of fit between AI principles or philosophical underpinnings and their own previously held belief systems. For many of them this was a large part of the motivation to take up AI as a methodology in their facilitation practice. For others, learning AI was a first step towards becoming a facilitator. However, all interview partners focused on different aspects when talking about this ‘fit’. Six of the interview partners explicitly explained this fit with previously held belief systems.

Consultants E, B and J were involved in church organizations when they first learned about AI. Consultant E was the national distance education and training coordinator with the Anglican Church of Aotearoa in the early 1990s when he first started using AI. The Anglican Church was open to AI. Over time, each of the dioceses incorporated some AI into their processes.

I had a brief 40 minute introduction when on staff for a training programme at the University of the South (Tennessee) - At the time I was looking for a healthier process for reviewing Anglican clergy performance especially when there were issues to be dealt with. AI seemed to offer an approach. I began experimenting and reading as much as I could. Then I began experimenting with other areas including change, planning and supervision/coaching.

*Consultant E (Email exchange)*

He later trained with the NTL, doing a Change Management Diploma in which he took all the AI options and formed an independent consulting company adjacent to and in co-operation

with the Anglican Church. In this context he developed a three-day AI training program which he ran multiple times (for participants from both within and outside the church).

Consultant B was also working as OD consultant in the same church organization when he was introduced to the concept of AI by Consultant E. He attended one of E's three day workshops. Consultant B instantly connected to AI because it fitted well with other beliefs he held about his profession. He described an analogy between the concept of the 'reflective practitioner' and the way AI works in organizations.

[...] I had been at that time, also using some of the work of Donald Schön, [...] he introduced into our language the concept of "reflective practitioner". [...] my colleague [name] started talking about Appreciative Inquiry. Yeah that's right! If practitioners are learning the art of their professional practice by paying attention to how things are framed then a whole organization is also determining its practice by how it is framing its life. And if we can change how an organization frames its own life then that would be more powerful than any external expertise.

*Consultant B*

Consultant B also pointed to AI facilitation being in line with his belief that any consulting intervention should build capacity within an organization rather than making the organization dependent on an external expert

So if we go in as experts we are at risk of breaking the learning and the reflective framing that happens in the organisation. So all of that became clear to me at that time. [...] And if my job is to build capacity then I must not be a kind of consultant that goes away and comes back with the results. So Appreciative Inquiry was a pathway for me to actually empower and enhance capacity. [...] that is what made it attractive to me.

*Consultant B*

Consultant J was invited to an AI summit as a member of a church organization. At this summit, she was invited to attend Taos Institute.

Four religious leaders in NZ, two Maori and two Pakeha invited me to [...] participate in the process for United World Religions Congress which was at Stanford and was called by the Bishop of San Francisco. [...] It was facilitated by David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney [...]. That was the first time I had either heard or seen Appreciative Inquiry in action. And at that David invited me to come to learn it. So I went back to Taos in New Mexico for the four

weeks of study with him.

*Consultant J*

J was above all impressed by the facilitation of David Cooperrider. She did her training at Taos Institute following a personal invitation by Cooperrider.

I was extremely impressed with both the process and the outcome and the facilitation. [...] He is a very unassuming person and very very low key. [...] listening extremely deeply and clearly going with what process, what's happening really. Very effective. Very powerful.

*Consultant J*

Consultant J initially trained in AI because she was invited to do so, but also connected to the notion of 'placebo' in AI, having trained in a medical profession previously.

I was invited to come and learn it. I went to Taos in New Mexico which is where there is an AI institute. I took with me another person from NZ who is a Maori leader and we both went for five days residential. [...] A very important part for me in becoming interested to learn it was the focus on placebos. [...] it is just interesting how effective the placebo effect is. Therefore that is quite a key part of David's training [...] the placebo effect is about "this will work" so it underlies a lot of Appreciative Inquiry. [...] I have trained medically so I've seen it work in the medical field. I was extremely interested in how David was using it.

*Consultant J*

Consultant C, on the other hand, first learned about AI around 2000/2001 when working within a network of research organizations in the area of participatory research and development as applied to natural resources management (involving the agriculture, forestry and fishery sectors). She noticed that within this research environment the dominant approach was one of 'problem solving'. Scientists were setting research agendas, developing solutions and technologies and mostly depending on extension services, NGOs and other organisations to implement them in communities in the developing world. C became involved in a programme that developed, evaluated and disseminated participatory methodologies for putting researchers in closer touch with the intended users of technologies. She noticed that people in rural communities were often looking for ways to expand their opportunities as well as 'fixing problems'.

In one instance in Indonesia, the problem-solving approach proposed was rejected by the local farmers. Rather than "fixing a pest problem", these farmers wanted to learn how to take better

advantage of market opportunities. It was about this time that C learnt about AI; she came across some of the early publications of David Cooperrider and also found the then newly-launched website “Appreciative Inquiry Commons” (<http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu>), which offers practitioner tips, case studies, literature and a networking platform for people with an interest in AI. She was initially very enthusiastic about AI, as it seemed to offer a useful extension to the current problem-fixing paradigm in her work.

Consultant F came in touch with AI as an executive officer for a development organization. He was introduced to AI by a friend and colleague, who went on to become his mentor in AI facilitation.

When I was working in the Philippines I was executive officer of a development organization. And one of our funders is Christian Reformed World Mission and the team leader for the region was Pilipino as well. And he was a friend of mine back in university days. And he was the one to introduce me to the methodology and actually he was my mentor. So he facilitated an AI meeting that went for a week. And I was part of it. And next time around I was doing the training with him and so forth... so that's how I got introduced.

*Consultant F*

F did not describe a specific fit with a previously held belief system, but described many instances in which AI achieved great results in development organizations and described himself as a “believer in AI”.

Consultants G and H both had previous facilitation experience when they first became aware of AI. Consultant G first learned about AI from the “Thin Book” in the late nineties. She has been a facilitator since 1996, and got in contact with AI around 1998. Later she trained with Amanda Trosten-Bloom in a number of workshops. Amanda was a shadow consultant to a large merger process of New Zealand organizations facilitated by consultant G. She seemed very convinced of the benefits of AI and mentioned many successful instances of applying AI. However, a specific mention of a fit with previously held belief systems did not come up during our conversation.

Consultant H was already working in OD and group facilitation when she came in touch with the concept of AI while living in an ecovillage community.

I first came across it from [name] who did a training in Findhorn in 2001. I did her course and applied it almost immediately. [...] But when I engaged in appreciative inquiry I realised that where it was coming from was a lot of different other kinds of methods and ideas and principles that I'd already been learning and thinking about and that is why it was interesting to me.

*Consultant H*

Consultant H also seemed to connect to AI principles on the basis of a previously held belief system. She describes herself as naturally coming from a constructionist epistemological framework. AI made intuitive sense to her, as it seemed to be based on a framework she already held before even learning about AI.

[...] I realized that actually the principles are fundamental spiritual principles and they are also fundamentally constructionist principles in terms of epistemological framework and I would say that I have always had an epistemological framework or approach that is kind of constructivist [...]

*Consultant H*

Consultant A was encouraged to train in AI by her business partner when starting out as an OD consultant. She quickly found a personal fit with the AI philosophy.

I needed some form of training to get into this work and I knew [her business partner] wanted me to train over at NTL which is where he did his training and he wanted to kind of diversify a bit in our knowledge and he thought AI would fit with my style and personality. [...] So I did the training then and low and behold I did feel there was a fit. And have been working with it ever since.

*Consultant A*

Consultant A connected with the notion of being a facilitator rather than a content expert, as practiced in some types of business consulting.

[...] I like being the process expert and not the content expert. Because I don't presume to know what works for someone else and I haven't been in their shoes and I haven't worked in their organisation. So for me to come in and tell them what to do doesn't fit with me. And you see some best practices out there and some of them may be helpful and some of them may not, but I actually like that fact that they generate it themselves.

*Consultant A*

Consultant K originally got in contact with AI through a workshop run by consultant E and a colleague about ten years ago. She also connected to AI based on a fit with her professional principles. Consultant K describes herself as a holistic therapist, she sees AI as a holistic way of looking at an organization, seeing both what works and what can be improved.

I did the training with him probably about 10 years ago in Auckland. But it was just the way that Appreciative Inquiry was talked about as being a creative consultative strength based tool that really drew me. [...] it seemed to connect the way I like to work therapeutically. When I'm working one on one with a person in a therapeutic setting, I'm looking at what works in their life, or what works in their body, and what doesn't. [...] It resonated with me quite deeply the way Appreciative Inquiry works. [...] It just seems to be such a more useful approach to look at the whole picture rather than what is broken.

*Consultant K*

## ***4.2.2 Professional development over time***

### ***4.2.2.1 Changing interpretations and practice with experience***

Most participants described a change in their interpretation and application of AI over time. Two themes were distinctive in these accounts: Some participants described a development from using AI as a methodology to using diverse methodologies and combining AI with other methods, such as world café, open space technology or future search. Consultants C and H in particular talked about having witnessed this process of diversifying one's methodological base not just in themselves, but also in peers. Other participants talked about a development from using applied elements of AI, e.g. the 4D or 5D-cycle, towards focusing more on underlying principles rather than concrete methods.

Consultant C underwent some development in her approach to AI. Initially she "advocated for AI"; because she saw that it exposed and filled a methodological gap. Now, she incorporates aspects of appreciation and inquiry into her work (if she perceives the situation warrants this), without necessarily using the "label" Appreciative Inquiry. C's experience in a long career in development work is that colleagues starting out in the field like to learn a specific method and follow it. As time moves on, they see every situation is different. So it makes sense to



learn a variety of techniques over time and be able to work with a variety of theoretical stances.

Consultant H stated that with experience, she realized that “when you go and inherently look at what is working in a system then that’s profoundly useful no matter what form that takes”. She described a rather drastic change in her view over time and with increasing experience. For her, AI was the way into doing large system strategic planning.

I hadn’t done a lot of large system strategic planning at the time that I was trained in AI. [...] I think the 4 D process is kind of a nice framework for doing strategic development [...] and since I hadn’t had a lot of experience in doing large scale strategic development about 8 or 9 years ago, that was a good way in. [...] As I got more experienced I realised it was kind of a blunt instrument and there was a number of other ways of doing it. And so I think at that point is when I went with the principles and applied it using a number of other applications as opposed to the traditional applications of AI, when I had a number of different other options.

*Consultant H*

Consultant H also witnessed this change around in other colleagues, i.e. starting out using a 4D process and then diversifying their methodological base, stating: “if you don’t know a number of other planning processes then the most likely thing you’ll do is use the one you know.”

Consultant A mentioned that when she first started out practicing as an AI facilitator she would have positioned herself more towards the interpreting “AI as process” end of the continuum, whereas she is increasingly moving towards the “AI as philosophy” end of the spectrum with growing experience. She pointed out that many successful practitioners do not necessarily follow the 5D-cycle when designing particular, targeted interventions. She mentioned being “increasingly comfortable with the ambiguity” of the processes that results when AI is applied as the inspiring philosophy of an intervention but the intervention itself is new or unique and not necessarily modelled along a known best practice of AI. When asked if her changing her interpretation of AI had an influence on how she uses AI in practice, she replied:

It’s just made me much more aware of those upfront things that I talked about. To make sure that there is buy in to the philosophy and to make sure there is a fit with that approach. And to make sure that is going to be able to play out. Or I’ll modify my use of AI to fit whatever their constraints are so I’ll be more aware of that. But I don’t think it’s fundamentally

changed, once I'm facilitating a group, I don't think I've changed a whole lot because of my view around the philosophy and process. I've tweaked things, little things that I see work well.

*Consultant A*

Consultant A has gained increasing confidence in using AI over time.

Yeah, I'm at the point now where I've seen it work enough times that I'm fairly confident going in. Even if at the beginning there seems to be a little bit of unrest, by the end of it it would have worked its thing.

*Consultant A*

This same increase in confidence is reflected in Consultant B's statement:

Over time I got more confident using it I think. I don't think I changed my view of it.

*Consultant B*

### ***4.2.3 Status of AI in facilitator's professional life and beyond***

#### ***4.2.3.1 AI as the core or philosophy of their work***

Six of the participants described AI as the core of their work, or the philosophy inspiring their work. However, none of the interview partners use only AI in their facilitation work.

Consultant E considers AI "a personal thing". His thinking is naturally oriented towards problem-solving, so he achieves personal growth and reassesses his own framework of thinking through AI. He does not always use straightforward AI methodology in his counselling, facilitation and supervision work, but it shapes a lot of what he does. When the question asked is switched to "where have you done really well?" more learning emerges and people are empowered to mine their personal resources more effectively. Consultant E tries to always listen with an appreciative ear and reflect back positive qualities he hears in people's stories.

I seek to ask myself the AI implication for whatever I am doing. This leads to a whole range of adaptations, sometimes quite invisible eg in a highly conflicted situation - simply in the way I listen to people as they introduce themselves to me and the way I underline signs of strength and hope in what I hear. [...] Over the last decade or so it would have influenced most of what I do and often in combination with other methods.

*Consultant E (email exchange)*

In a similar manner, Consultant B describes AI as one of his main orientations in his work, without necessarily following the more concrete methodologies, such as the 4D cycle.

I regard Appreciative Inquiry as [...] one of my main orientations when doing facilitation and consulting work. I don't think I've met anybody that really does Appreciative Inquiry in an exact recipe approach. But I find Appreciative Inquiry provides a really solid... credible I think is what I mean, a credible base for helping any group to explore its future, explore its options.

*Consultant B*

AI is the “flavour” underlying the methodologies Consultant G uses, but not the only tool in her toolbox. It provides the grounding and flavour to all of her facilitation and consulting work. She has recently discovered “The Art of Hosting” which is a more emergent, more participant driven process. She participated in trainings in the UK and Australia. She also uses world café, which is an approach that helps to see the whole picture, and open space and future search. All of these things work really well for her in a fusion of approaches.

Consultant F describes himself as a “believer in AI” and uses AI whenever the opportunity presents itself. Facilitation work is not his main occupation; rather he is board member and former executive officer in charitable/development organizations. However, he used to facilitate a lot and still does occasionally and encourages the organizations he works in to adopt AI (e.g. for strategic planning sessions). When facilitating, his main orientation is AI.

Sometimes I combine future search with appreciative inquiry. But my core methodology would be AI, I would simply insert future search some of the time.

*Consultant F*

Consultant A is familiar with a number of team development and OD practices; however, AI is central to her work, even though she does not always use “a full-blown AI” methodology in her work. She believes a sound grounding in the AI philosophy is essential to how the process works:

I would say it kind of forms the core of my philosophy and approach to this type of work. [...] I think you can practice the philosophy by just the way you behave and interact with people and the things you do without having to have a formal process but I don't think you can actually go through an AI process without being grounded in the AI principles.

*Consultant A*

Consultant K sees most of her work as inspired by AI, even though she does not always apply AI's more specific methodologies.

[...] ever since I've learnt Appreciative Inquiry it has become a philosophical approach for me. Quite a lot of my work is inspired by what I see as a strength based approach. So rather than looking at the problems I look at the bigger picture. In fact it inspires a lot of the work I do, even if I'm not specifically doing Appreciative Inquiry.

*Consultant K*

Consultants H and J did not describe AI as their central inspiring philosophy. However, Consultant H shares the epistemological framework of AI. Her work might look like being inspired by AI because it comes from the same philosophical background.

I would say that I have always had an epistemological framework or approach that is kind of constructivist as opposed to positivist. [...] So I would say that those principles underpin my work but they happen to be in common with appreciative inquiry [...]

*Consultant H*

Consultant J stated she mainly uses AI and world café when facilitating groups, without referring to either as the core of her work. Recently, she does more mentoring than facilitation work, in which she uses mainly AI approaches. Whilst she didn't name AI as the core of her work, the case examples she mentions clearly indicate that she uses AI in a variety of applications.

#### ***4.2.3.2 Pragmatic professional philosophy***

Consultant C was the only participant not describing AI as central to her work. The essence of Consultant C's approach is more pragmatic than oriented along a particular philosophical

background. She likes to have an array of theoretical frameworks and practical methods, which she applies in various combinations as she perceives to fit the local situation at hand. She likes to always be open for feedback and ask questions of participants, team members and other stakeholders in order to establish which methodologies resonate with the situation, so AI is not necessarily her first way into a new situation. In her experience, appreciative questions can be a way to move forward and overcome blockages. C may or may not use the label “Appreciative Inquiry”, depending on the situation at hand. She has noticed that there can be resistance to the methodology, particularly when those involved are convinced that a problem-solving stance is the best entry point. She likes to combine elements of AI (such as positively framed questions) with more traditional, problem-solving approaches. Her take on her job is “realist,” adaptive, and “here and now” oriented rather than strictly “narrative”, she likes to keep an open mind for feedback and have the flexibility to adapt her methodologies to the situation at hand. When asked to report her consulting methods, she prefers to describe them rather than putting labels on them. Her experience shows that in her professional field using a label such as “Appreciative Inquiry” can cause resistance.

#### ***4.2.3.3 AI influence on facilitators beyond their professional lives***

Five of the interview partners described AI as having influence on them beyond their professional lives. I did not specifically ask for this in my first interviews, but after two participants had mentioned an influence of AI beyond their work lives I included a specific question targeting this in some of the later interviews (time and interview flow permitting).

Consultant G remembered a recent discussion on the AI-listserv. Many people held – and she agreed with this- that AI is not a methodology, but a way of looking at life, a way of being. It is a different mindset, not just a methodology.

Consultant E described AI as “a personal thing”. His thinking is naturally oriented towards problem-solving, so he achieves personal growth and reassesses his own framework of thinking through AI. AI does permeate beyond his facilitation work.

Consultant H, who already had a background in facilitation before starting to use AI found an increased awareness of how she uses language through her AI training.

For example if you’ve gone through an intense AI training you notice your language much more as a result. You notice whether you’re forming your sentences more positively or not.

You notice the questions you are asking much more than you did before. I think all of that is good for people to have an insight into themselves that they didn't have previously. And you can't undo insights like that.

*Consultant H*

Consultant A noticed that she frames things differently in her own life, but also notices external events differently.

I look at things quite differently and I am constantly reframing things in my own life and thinking if I was taking an AI approach how would I be looking at this. And I notice things. I was just listening to Barak Obama's speech the other night when he was made President, just listening to that. [...] And it was just really interesting watching the Presidential debates too [...] As soon as they started talking about what they wanted to see more of, the images and visions for the future [...] the audience reaction went up. [...] People get energised by looking at what works well, the positives and inspirational stuff.

*Consultant A*

On a very similar note, consultant G pointed out that "what you focus on is what you get" and pointed to the example of the USA engaging in a "war on terror", which had as a result more war. She then asked the question what would have happened had they focused on peace instead.

Consultant J also found AI having an influence on her beyond her using it professionally.

I think the positive focus and the philosophy and obviously I've been around it quite a lot does permeate. The values become part of you.

*Consultant J*

## ***4.2.4 Practical aspects of facilitator work***

### ***4.2.4.1 Types of work interviewees engage in***

In this section I focus on the types of works interview participants engage in. Participants in this study engaged in a wide array of professional activities, ranging from OD consulting to holistic therapy and evaluation of development programs. For example, Consultant J's types of work include mentoring and facilitation, particularly large group facilitation.

Consultant A provides individual and group coaching, as well as group facilitation for public, private and not-for-profit organizations. She facilitates workshops in areas including leadership development, strategic planning and team development. She also runs workshops teaching AI to human resource professionals.

Consultant B is an organizational development consultant and group facilitator, but also a social science researcher. In his consulting business, he offers facilitation, executive and management mentoring, professional supervision, action learning groups, reflective practice in the workplace, dialogue processes for complex conversations, organisational development, change facilitation and systems methodologies as well as planning and strategy facilitation. He also runs workshops and seminars on topics relevant to organisational functioning.

Consultant E is a priest, and was involved in Christian Education and Training, later on he started his own company as OD consultant. His work includes facilitation, change management and working with conflict.

Consultant G is a facilitator “for inspired change” and a narrative practitioner. She facilitates a diverse range of organisational processes, such as post-merger integration, change management and others.

Consultant H is involved in organization development, community development, group facilitation, and mixed media art. She is a development consultant, facilitator, designer and producer. Her background includes work with grass-roots communities (in West Africa, Latin America, North East Scotland, and New Zealand), social enterprises in the UK, experimental designers and artists in Brussels, and political institutions in Europe.

The types of work consultant K engages in include supervision in the not-for-profit sector, facilitation (e.g. for strategic planning, diagnoses), professional development coaching, team development, holistic therapy (body-mind therapy), and the teaching of holistic therapy to others.

Consultants C and F are the only participants in this study who do not primarily facilitate group and organisational processes. Consultant C is an evaluator and mentor in development work, particularly in the agricultural sector. Her work takes her around the globe, having worked in Indonesia and Fiji, among other places. Consultant F was an executive officer in a development organization in the Philippines. He is a board member of a charitable

organization in New Zealand, and a facilitator, using AI and future search to facilitate capacity building and strategic planning in development and other charitable organisations.

#### ***4.2.4.2 Eclecticism and variety of methods used by interviewees***

A number of interviewees mentioned being very eclectic in their professional practice, i.e. using a variety of methodologies and applying them in various forms of work (this will be explored in more details in the section on “AI in practice”). One participant explained this the following way:

[...] I think NZ is so small, you can't have a consulting firm like in the States that is a completely AI focused consulting firm. There isn't the size of market to be niche oriented in that way. And I think my experience of practitioners, whether they be therapists or consultants in NZ is that most of them are incredibly eclectic in their practice. Because it is such a small environment, you can't really in terms of training you are kind of a bit lost if you get stuck in one way of doing something.

*Consultant H*

#### ***4.2.4.3 Proportion of AI in overall work***

Findings indicated that participants are eclectic in their practice and often combine AI with other methods, or use different methods altogether. Therefore, as interviewing progressed, I included the question in how much of their work interviewees were employing AI. This brought up the following insights.

Consultant H uses methodologies associated with AI about 60-70% of the time, but always works with an underlying intention to look for ‘what works’, so in this regard one could say she uses an AI approach all the time. Consultant A made a rather similar statement, saying that AI forms the core of her philosophy in facilitation, but concrete methodologies vary:

I would say it kind of forms the core of my philosophy and approach to this type of work and in terms of the amount of time when I'm actually working with clients, it's probably between 50 and 70% of the time [...]. So it varies depending on what is happening and I might just draw in pieces of it in certain workshops or I might build a whole programme around it. So it's quite variable but it's a big chunk.

*Consultant A*



Similarly, consultant K said she used AI in about 60 to 70 % of her work. Consultant J combines AI with other methods, thus not putting a clear “percentage” on her use of AI.

Right now... I’d put it in the middle. With groups I combine it with world café design.

*Consultant J*

Interestingly, some participants were willing to put a percentage on their use of AI, whereas others replied with more general statements.

Over the last decade or so it would have influenced most of what I do and often in combination with other methods.

*Consultant E (email exchange)*

## **4.2.5 Connections in the NZ AI community**

### **4.2.5.1 Lack of facilitator network & Desire to connect to other practitioners**

Several interview partners pointed out the importance of having input from peers in their work. Consultant G expressed the importance of having input from other people. She would not try to facilitate a large process by herself but liked to have input from other experienced facilitators. One example she mentioned was having a shadow consultant from the USA alongside in a larger merger process she facilitated. Similarly, consultant H stated:

I’m used to working in networked environments. I’ve lived that way for 10 or 15 years now. Of building networks and having peer collaborations especially in the last 10 years, I’d say that was a core part of how I developed professionally.

*Consultant H*

Despite these insights, at the time of the interviewing there was no apparent network of AI facilitators in New Zealand. Most participants were able to give me two to four names of people they thought might also be working with AI, but there were no real co-operations, or frequent exchange of ideas between these people. This became apparent during the first interviews, so in the later interviews I included questions around this phenomenon.

Most participants noted the absence of facilitator networks, but none of the participants was entirely sure as to why there would not be a network of AI facilitators.

No it's not well networked at all. I was asked myself to be working here with Vodafone and I just wouldn't do it without being part of a whole group, like the ones I was part of in the States.

*Consultant J*

Consultant A also thought that NZ facilitators are not very well networked.

I guess the fact that I don't normally work a lot with other people is an example of that.

*Consultant A*

Another participant mentioned that she was not particularly interested in forming networks around the topic of AI as such, as she does not see herself as an "AI guru". While she uses AI as a methodology, she sees her work as concerned with "transformative change" in human systems, so forming networks around this topic would make more sense to her. Some insights emerged as the interviewee and I engaged with this topic.

I'm not an AI guru so I don't seek out and engage with AI groups and network with AI people. [...] So for me I wouldn't necessarily think about forming a network with other AI practitioners but I would think about forming a network with other peers who are doing work with different types of clients.

*Consultant H*

Some participants also indicated that the lack of facilitator networks might be related to competitiveness among facilitators due to the limited overall amount of work available in the field in New Zealand.

But yea, it's true, we're not at all networked, it would be nice to get a little bit more networked. And I don't know why that is. If people feel a sense that NZ is so small, that we are more competitive. That there is not enough room for everybody.

*Consultant A*

[...] I think NZ is quite a competitive place is my experience of being back here. Unfortunately for the size of the country and the fact that it's an island [...] I think that is mainly to do with the small amount of contracts that are available and also the way funding works here. [...] And I would say that kind of peer collaboration, learning community stuff is not necessarily . . . it doesn't seem to happen much. [...]

*Consultant H*

Some facilitators expressed a desire to connect to other practitioners. Consultant H in particular came to this conclusion during our conversation.

[...] I think just talking to you, I've noticed in myself it would be good to talk or have more contact with other people. Because most people who do AI would also be people who are probably doing similar other things to me. [...] And so having some kind of network or some kind of group of peers I guess that I normally wouldn't fall over because of the other networks I have, would be quite nice.

*Consultant H*

As interviews progressed, the lack of facilitator networks on the one hand and the desire of some (not all) facilitators to engage in more networking with their peers became apparent. Therefore, after some reflection on that matter with some of the participants, I decided to start up an online community as a forum in which facilitators could engage with each other if they chose to do so. In accordance with the preliminary findings of this study, this network was not targeted at "AI facilitators" but at "facilitators of participant-driven change", and thus opens to a variety of users from related fields. I used Ning, a commercial provider of networking sites, to set up [www.changingconversationz.ning.com](http://www.changingconversationz.ning.com).

## ***4.2.6 Critique of aspects of AI***

### ***4.2.6.1 Facilitator's scepticism about AI***

In participant C's experience, AI is somewhat controversial: it draws on past successes to find a way forward. However, past difficulties can motivate learning. Difficulties and challenges tend to be great learning experiences, participant C pointed out that her personal learning has always been greatest when she made mistakes. So in a way, she "see[s] the point" of AI, but is "not convinced by it".

Consultant A's initial scepticism was concerned with how other people may react to AI:

[...] I was still sceptical in the beginning and when I went to my first training in America it almost sounded too good to be true and it took time for me to kind of move past it. I guess my scepticism is more how can you get other people to accept this. Yes I'm bought in, but how do you get other people to accept it.

*Consultant A*

Overall, little scepticism was expressed toward AI. Facilitators were concerned about the appropriate use of AI (as explained in the separate section under “Theory of Action”), but with exception of consultant C, all other participants seemed to not hold a general scepticism towards AI itself.

#### ***4.2.6.2 Facilitator’s disconnection with elements of AI***

When facilitators expressed scepticism or disconnection with elements of AI, they tended to not question the principles, but certain aspects of the appropriate use of AI.

But there are people I know of and have met as part of the AI community overseas who are kind of born again AI practitioners. This is the way, the truth and all our clients must use AI as an approach. [...] It becomes an unanalysed belief system that becomes a new jacket for people to put on as opposed to maintaining some kind of critical stance to it. And I think most of my critical stance around AI unfortunately is to do with the AI community. [...] Not necessary a problem with the method itself.

*Consultant H*

Facilitator A sees a disconnect with the emergence inherent in the process, but is becoming increasingly confident with this with growing experience.

The one element that I struggle with and I think is a bit of a personality disconnect is the fact it is so emergent and loose. I like things to be quite structured and I like to know when things are going to happen and how they are going to happen and have a lot of certainty around things and one thing that AI doesn’t have... it can be very messy and you don’t know what’s gonna come out at the end of it. So that’s one thing that I’ve had the most challenge with.

*Consultant A*

## 4.3 Theory of Action

### 4.3.1 Introduction

This section looks at the theory of action held by practitioners in New Zealand. It explores how they define AI, and what are the factors and circumstances that contribute to or hinder AI processes. Hence follows, there is also a need to consider under which circumstances AI is appropriate. The question of what “appreciation” means is explored in depth, as this is a contested point both in the academic literature and in practice. This section also sheds light onto the process of how AI influences human systems in the experience of seasoned AI facilitators. Table 4 gives an overview of the themes identified from interview transcripts and summaries.

Themes identified	Sub-Themes
<b>Defining AI</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AI as a “philosophy” or “way of being”</li> <li>Principles versus applications</li> <li>AI process as evolving and emerging</li> </ul>
<b>Circumstances supporting or hindering the AI process</b>	
<b>Circumstances supporting the AI process</b>	
Circumstances within the client system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Champions of AI as drivers in the organisation</li> <li>Importance of leadership buy-in</li> <li>Clear lines of reporting / client member of the group being facilitated</li> <li>Time &amp; commitment</li> <li>Everybody has to be involved</li> <li>Trust</li> </ul>
Facilitation related circumstances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitator grounded in AI principles</li> <li>Due Diligence</li> </ul>
<b>Circumstances restricting AI success</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Costs of AI</li> <li>Minimum time requirement for AI process, clients unwilling to invest enough time</li> <li>Leadership neglecting outcomes / lack of buy-in from key people</li> <li>Obstacles to leadership buy-in: letting go of power</li> <li>Resistance to “positive” approach</li> </ul>
<b>→ Appropriateness of AI and the meaning of “appreciation”</b>	
Appropriateness of AI	
Meaning of appreciation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledging negatives, paradoxes and moving forward</li> <li>Acknowledge where people are at</li> <li>Seeing the whole picture</li> </ul>

Table 4: Overview “theory of action” (continued on next page)

Themes identified	Sub-Themes
<b><i>How AI influences human systems</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appreciative Interviews</li> <li>• AI assures input from all key stakeholders</li> <li>• AI uncovers hidden information</li> <li>• AI as capacity building or empowerment</li> <li>• AI works through positive physiological responses</li> <li>• AI is subversive</li> </ul>

Table 4: Overview “theory of action” (continued)

### 4.3.2 Defining AI

#### 4.3.2.1 AI as a “philosophy” or “way of being”

Whilst participants were not generally giving the same definition of what AI is for them, they were united in their interpretation of AI as being “more than a method”, describing AI as “a philosophy”, “way of life” or otherwise. However, in giving these definitions, most participants also pointed out that AI does provide some tools, as well as being a philosophy.

I see AI as a philosophy, and an "approach" as well as providing a clutch of tools. In it's essential pragmatic form in colloquial language "it is it is deciding to do and doing what you most want to do with what you have"

*Consultant E (Email exchange)*

Whenever I’m asked to explain what Appreciative Inquiry really is, I think it’s about... a creative, constructivist approach to reality. [...] It’s not a method, it’s an orientation, it’s an approach, it’s a philosophy of how change happens. [...] it’s got some tools and techniques but it’s not a precise process to follow. It is a set of principles, it’s an attitude, it’s an orientation.

*Consultant B*

[...] it’s a philosophy, it’s a methodology at the same time.

*Consultant F*

So I think first and foremost it is a way of being, or a philosophy and yes there are a range of ways you can take and apply that philosophy. [...] Yeah it is a whole mind shift. Way of looking at the world. [...] But again I think that comes back to that notion of living AI or being AI and that philosophy being at the core of it.

*Consultant A*

Consultant G holds that AI is not just a methodology, but a way of looking at life, a way of being. It is a different mindset, not just a methodology.

#### ***4.3.2.2 Principles versus applications***

Five of the participants expressed that the underlying principles are more central to AI than any applications that have been developed (such as the 4D cycle). Whilst participants still occasionally used the more concrete methods associated with AI, they are more concerned about staying true to and applying the philosophy.

Consultant C prefers to think about AI and other methods in terms of their underlying principles, rather than as a strict methodology that requires a certain set of steps to be taken. When viewing AI in this light, its underlying principles are shared by other methods, for example the “most significant change stories” method.

I think you can practice the philosophy by just the way you behave and interact with people and the things you do without having to have a formal process but I don't think you can actually go through an AI process without being grounded in the AI principles. [...] As long as you apply the principles you can do the process in any way you want, in any way you can create and in any format you want.

*Consultant A*

I've come to the view that there are only a couple of principles that are quintessential, that what is quintessential is actually a matter of principle rather than a matter of practice. And as long as you are true to a couple of principles then the actual method and practicing technique might go off in lots of different directions and incorporate other consulting techniques and other facilitation techniques. [...]

*Consultant B*

[...] AI needs to be seen a little more holistically by practitioners and that the principles rather than the applications be focused on [...] I'm very concerned to focus on the principles and don't do the 4 D process at all anymore. [...] I simply use constructionist principles with a mostly positive edge in a lot of the work I do most recently [...].

*Consultant H*

I do use the specific tools from time to time but for me it's a philosophical approach. It's a strength based approach that really appeals to me.

*Consultant K*

#### ***4.3.2.3 AI process as evolving and emergent***

Three participants made statements concerning AI as an evolving, emergent or living process:

Not sure if "pure AI" has meaning in an evolving organic process.

*Consultant E (Email-exchange)*

And I mean that again is the nature of one of the principles – it's emergent. [...] So it's a living growing thing.

*Consultant A*

Because the AI is an evolving process. So it's not set in stone. You heard about the 4Ds? It's an evolving process and you would be surprised by what you are going to get from those.

*Consultant F*

#### ***4.3.3 Circumstances supporting or hindering the AI process***

Circumstances surrounding an AI process can be seen in various categories. Participants talked about circumstances favourable or supportive of an AI process in-depth, and some mentioned circumstances they regarded as necessary. The circumstances supportive of a successful AI process can be categorized as relating to either the client system or the facilitation.

Participants paid less attention to circumstances hindering AI processes. However, no participant mentioned circumstances that would prevent AI processes altogether, much rather some participants pointed out that even under hindering circumstances, the AI process would still have some effect (even though this effect would have been stronger under more favourable circumstances).

The description of circumstances desirable or hindering to an AI process points to the question of appropriateness of AI. Participants saw it as central that their facilitation style and methods employed were appropriate to the clients' situation, which could mean bending concrete methodologies within an AI approach or even not using AI in specific situations.



	<b>Supportive circumstances</b>	<b>Hindering circumstances</b>
<b>Client system</b>	Champions of AI as drivers in the organisation Importance of leadership buy-in Clear lines of reporting / client member of the group being facilitated Time & commitment Everybody has to be involved Trust	Leadership neglecting outcomes / lack of buy-in from key people Obstacles to leadership buy-in: letting go of power Costs of AI Minimum time requirement for AI process, clients unwilling to invest enough time Resistance to “positive” approach
<b>Facilitation</b>	Facilitator grounded in AI principles Due Diligence	

Table 5: Circumstances supporting or hindering the AI process

#### **4.3.3.1 Circumstances supporting AI: Client system**

One factor mentioned by three participants was the necessity of one or more people within the clients system to be willing to engage in and drive the process of AI forward.

But someone has to be in there driving it and ideally you generate enough energy that that will start the process [...]

*Consultant A*

And because of the person who was their president who was a very deep thinking person they were willing to engage in this process and found it incredibly valuable.

*Consultant K*

AI has to be worth the investment. It takes someone visionary to start the process.

*Consultant G*

Consultants A, E and H pointed to the importance of leadership buy-in.

You have to have the buy in from the leader. The leader has to know that they will potentially be giving up some of their authority by using this method. So I'll always gauge that and make sure that people are clear about that. [...] But if a leader has real issues with that then they shouldn't be using AI because the whole point of it is to generate creativity and looking at new ways of doing things.

*Consultant A*

I'd say if the ownership is grounded at a senior level and there is understanding systemically of the approach, I think that helps.

*Consultant H*

Likewise, consultant E pointed to the importance of leadership buy-in, saying that leaders have to ask themselves the question: "Can I afford to let my employees loose and be vulnerable"?

[...] I almost always work with a sub group so what we actually do is negotiated, the system needs to be committed to the outcome so having a CEO negate the outcomes at the end is disastrous so there needs to be clear agreement about the field within which the AI can be applied.

*Consultant E (Email exchange)*

Consultant E prefers that whoever hires him is also part of the system he facilitates. According to consultant E, "those lines are really important in any facilitation work". Who do you report to? Who do you work with? Consultant E's preference is that the people he works with are also the people he reports to. In one instance, he was contracted in by the leadership of an organization to facilitate an AI intervention in a particular group whose work was encumbered by a high level of conflict within the group. The leaders of the organization wanted E to work with this particular group, but report back to them. The situation was rather desperate; they had already tried many different methods to diffuse the conflict which did not work. E made them agree that he would be working with and reporting to that particular team, the team then was reporting back to their organizational leaders.

People also need to be willing to commit sufficient time to an AI process.

People need to be willing to give time, [...]

*Consultant E (Email exchange)*

I'd say that if there is enough time given it works. I'd say that if the timing is right organisationally or in the system itself then it works.

*Consultant H*

Consultant G holds that AI has to start where the energy is. Three days are required for an AI summit, and all participants "have to be in the energy" (i.e. engaged in the AI process with their full attention) all the time.

According to consultant G, AI requires having everyone involved: leadership, middle management, all members (consultant G). It is absolutely essential that all voices are in the room. If people are not personally present, their voices can be brought in through quotes, stories, letters, photographs, etc.

There appears to be a ‘critical mass’ when change starts to take place in large organisations using AI. The rule of thumb arising from Consultant G’s experience with AI (and other participatory approaches) is that for things to start moving, at least one third of the people in an organization have to be touched by AI. However, in the end AI has to touch the whole system to achieve significant results. AI relies on human dynamics – not on tick-boxes. Trust is very important, and can easily be lost

#### ***4.3.3.2 Circumstances supporting AI: Facilitation***

Relating to the previously presented discussion of “Principles vs. Applications” in defining AI, some participants held that it was essential for an AI process that the facilitator have a thorough grounding in the AI principles rather than applying AI as a 4D process model.

So it’s not really something you can say, here is the five step model, hand it over to somebody, go do that. I don’t think that would work. It has to really be grounded in the philosophy for it to work.

*Consultant A*

[...] fundamentally I think if you embody AI principles or the philosophy or ideas behind and understand the epistemology behind it, then there is a level of congruence which really assists the work you are doing.

*Consultant H*

I can’t tell you how useful it is to have unassuming facilitators who never the less are following a process.

*Consultant J*

Consultant G explained, that you have to move out of “I know” to “what if?” whilst believing that the wisdom is in the group and it is not yourself alone who has all the answers.

Participants identified a number of favourable circumstances for AI processes that are related to the facilitation itself. The overarching theme is “due diligence”, which includes being clear

about the boundaries of an AI intervention, and planning and preparing well in advance. “Due diligence”, or a thorough preparation, was identified as a key success factor by three participants. The theme of due diligence can be seen in two sub-themes: one is creating clarity about the boundaries and desired outcomes of the AI (including assuring the buy-in of key people in the organisation); the other theme is the actual processual preparation of the work with a particular group.

I think the key to a good AI intervention is doing a lot of thinking and planning up front. [...] you have to allocate enough time for it but you have to be very clear in what it is you’re inquiring about and what your strategy is for doing that. [...] getting a few key people on board with that before you actually go into the process. There is a lot in that preliminary phase where you are defining what you are going to do and how you are going to do it. And I think the more due diligence you do in that phase the more likely you are to come up with a successful outcome.

*Consultant A*

I think that it works best when you can define the field of inquiry clearly enough and probably if you can’t, spending the time getting that clear is time well spent. [...] you need some process, some pre-process to even work out what the questions are, where is the place to start.

*Consultant B*

I always insist on a briefing meeting of at least an hour depending on who I’m talking to and the size of the organisation and the size of the job. And preferably a couple of hours. And I have to work out very carefully who is paying me, what is the agenda and what the outcomes are. So that is probably the key aspect of the way I work is sussing out the job first.

*Consultant K*

Consultant E likes to be clear about the boundaries within which he can work in a particular organization. He used an anecdote to illustrate this: The Australian Navy used an AI process once. As people were getting excited about the possibilities they saw, one of the admirals got up and said “On Friday I’m back in charge”. This goes to illustrate you really have to be clear which areas you can touch on with an AI process.

The second sub-theme to due diligence is related to the preparation of specifics of an AI workshop or summit.

So like the person who would do an AI, say for example myself, it would take preparations by doing protocol questions, and it’s a process as well, it’s a skill to create protocol questions and

protocol questions are designed to target the topic that's being inquired.

*Consultant F*

[...] there almost always needs to be a preparatory process to help people tune into a 'different' approach [...]

*Consultant E (Email exchange)*

#### **4.3.3.3 Circumstances restricting AI success**

##### *Costs of AI*

There are a lot of costs involved in an AI process: time, financial and emotional costs. This has been identified as an obstacle to organisations engaging in AI by most facilitators interviewed in this study.

But to do it well and properly takes time and money and there are not that many organisations that have the time or investment to actually really put into doing it well. It becomes a day workshop here a two day workshop here. In order to imbed it in you have to make it an ongoing process.

*Consultant A*

There is a lot of financial and emotional cost involved. [...] Normally organisations are not willing to take that much time. That is one of the problems with AI is that if you want to go through the whole process from beginning to end it's quite tough to get through it in a day and most people say they only have half a day. [...] And half a day is not long.

*Consultant K*

More that people don't want to spend longer than a half day. It's more a time thing than the process itself.

*Consultant J*

Consultant E stated that AI is expensive on time, money and other resources. Many people are unwilling to commit the necessary time and resources; E illustrated this by jokingly quoting "we want some strategic change, and we want it from 9 to 10 on Thursday, please."

He also illustrated the point of AI achieving some success, yet not quite achieving all of the desired outcomes with the example of a research project on dialogue on biotechnology and genetic modification (GM). Because of the limited time allowed for the workshop, the majority of it was spent getting participants into the mindset of AI rather than on the actual

discussion on GM. This left participants wanting more, but a follow-up was not planned (or funded) in the larger framework of the overall research project. Still, interesting outcomes were achieved. Participants were opposed to being put in a box, things started happening but participants felt that they were left with an unfinished dialogue.

Consultant G said her main challenge as an external facilitator in a merger process she facilitated was to get people to “stick with it long enough”. AI is a deep process, and a real culture change takes three to five months. Asking questions can make a really profound change, but mostly people ask too small questions and are not prepared to stick with the question long enough. Humans get frightened of what happens when they do stick with a question long enough to achieve real change.

Consultant F holds that a minimum of two days are required for an AI workshop (in a relatively small setting), a time commitment which not every organisation is willing to make.

Consultant B finds ways to work around time constraints, however this means sometimes departing from traditional ways of facilitating AI, e.g. doing small group interviews instead of interviewing in dyads.

#### *Leadership neglecting outcomes & lack of buy-in from key people*

The leadership neglecting outcomes is detrimental to the AI process. However, even under detrimental circumstances AI initiatives tend to produce outcomes:

I think that the key leadership didn't really embrace the outcome so what we ended up with was a little bit of a disappointment to me, but what I saw happen was because I had so many participants, they were empowered or much more positive about what difference they could make. And so in the long term some really positive changes did come about, but it would have been much better if the leadership had actually [...] it as much as the other people had.

*Consultant B*

Consultant E told an interesting case story illustrating this point. A school wanted to achieve a culture change through an AI workshop. The board of trustees agreed to attend this workshop, but cancelled at the last minute and did not attend. The board of trustees not showing up at the workshop was a major problem, as it reflected that they wanted to do their own strategic planning without involving other parts of the system. In E's experience, this is not unusual. It can be a major problem to any AI process when the management or other relevant decision

makers subvert the process. However, changes and new ways will still happen, they just will not be as substantial as they otherwise could be. For a real strategic inquiry, the whole system has to be engaged; if it is not, the outcome is heavily restricted. In the case of the school described above, the board of trustees had been “tagging along doing their own thing” without really being actively involved in the AI process.

One of the factors restricting AI success is a lack of buy-in by key people in the process, i.e. leadership or even facilitators.

And I think in areas where it doesn't work it's either the leader or senior people within the group you are working with don't really model or buy in to the principles underlying Appreciative Inquiry and often they don't understand them because it takes a bit of time to actually get that information across. Or it might be situations where you have a facilitator even who doesn't really model the principles themselves [...].

*Consultant A*

#### *Obstacles to leadership buy-in: letting go of power*

Leadership buy-in can be prevented by various factors. Consultant C told the story of a process she facilitated, where leadership was reluctant to give up power. It took a lot of convincing to get them to buy into some of the steps of the program (e.g. the CEO wanted to cut the summit to one day, but was convinced by the merger manager that they should stick to the planned three days). A lot of political undercurrents were shaping the process of how the AI developed.

In consultant E's experience, obstacles to the use of AI in the New Zealand business environment are “I'm in charge stuff”, i.e. the unwillingness of leaders to allow participatory processes. It is the unwillingness of organizational leaders to “let go and listen to some of the smart things your employees say”. There is also some reluctance to the idea that someone lower in the hierarchy could be smarter than oneself. Essentially, for organizational leaders to introduce AI they have to be comfortable to let go of control, which takes a certain level of maturity.

#### *Resistance to “positive” approach*

In answer to my question if she ever encountered resistance to AI, Consultant G could recall

only one person in her long career who refused to ‘buy into it’. Consultant B has encountered resistance on some, but not many, occasions.

Yes, the main difficulty is, the most common difficulty I think is that people challenge the process as being too positive. [...] So I have to coach people, but one of the big difficulties is that people think it’s a false way of working because you’re only asking for positive experience. [...]

*Consultant B*

Consultant A on the other hand sees different levels of receptiveness, but has not experienced AI not working at all.

I mean there are different levels of it. Some people might just come in with a resistant mindset and say they are not buying into that. I can’t think of any really strong examples but I think there is a continuum of whether or not you see this really positive energy or not. [...] I’ve never had a situation where I’ve gone in and it’s just bombed and people have said it’s a waste of time.

*Consultant A*

Consultant B has also on occasion experienced a lack of buy-in to a narrative approach:

Sometimes I’ve had, and not very often, somebody in the room who has wanted to go straight to a kind of survey or questionnaire about facts, in other words to bypass narrative. [...] And not everyone buys it. I remember one group where there was a scientist [...] and she could not get her head around the idea we were using stories. [...] So what she couldn’t accept is that by shifting the imagination of a group it’s a valid intervention. She wanted someone to go away and diagnose the problem and come back with a prescription for the intervention.

*Consultant B*

Consultant C also encountered resistance to an AI approach once, which lead her to change her approach and only use AI selectively.

#### ***4.3.4 Appropriateness of AI and the meaning of “appreciation”***

##### ***4.3.4.1 Appropriate use of AI***

Participants in this study were very concerned about the appropriate use of AI. From the themes discussed above – circumstances hindering of supporting the AI process- follows that the appropriate use of AI is a question of concern for most participants in this study. As



discussed earlier, many participants are eclectic in their practice and chose which methods to use depending on the situation, and are very aware of the appropriateness of methods used in specific situations. They don't see AI as "the one best method" (consultant H) or a "panacea" (consultant A). An overview of the situations in which AI is appropriate or not is given in Table 6.

<b>AI appropriate</b>	<b>AI inappropriate</b>
Ownership at senior level	Underlying unpleasant tension in the room
Understanding of approach in system	No understanding why it is done
Enough time for process	No leadership buy-in
Right timing	Client wants a quick fix
Intent to overcome blockage or sense of failure	No interest in looking at the bigger picture and deeply engaging with values
	Client system not open for radical change
	No integrity – "window dressing"
	Oppressed/authoritative systems

Table 6: Circumstances in which AI is appropriate or not

Consultant H mentions a number of conditions that have to be in place for AI to be an appropriate method:

I'd say if it is appropriate as a method, if the applications are appropriate in the context, [...] if the ownership is grounded at a senior level and there is understanding systemically of the approach, I think that helps. I'd say that if there is enough time given it works. I'd say that if the timing is right organisationally or in the system itself then it works. If any one of those things is not right then I think AI can be not the best thing to be using in its applied sense. I wouldn't get people to do strategic positive questioning if there was huge amounts of underlying unpleasant tension in the room or they didn't understand why it was being done or the leadership wasn't into it. I think there are a number of things that cannot work very well.

*Consultant H*

AI as a method has to be in line with the desired outcomes the client wants.

Normally what we'll do is talk about what it is [the clients] want to achieve and what do they know about AI and what do they like about it and then we talk about is that the best fit and maybe we need to go with another approach. [...] I would never promote it as a panacea and say this is going to work for everyone all of the time. I'm always very careful about finding out what is going on and how receptive the people are going to be to it.

*Consultant A*

Consultants K and J noted that AI is not appropriate as a “quick fix”, i.e. if people are unwilling to invest enough time in the process. Consultant K specifically point deep reflection on values as an appropriate use of AI.

In situations where people want a quick fix or want a more quantitative approach or they are not interested in looking at deep change or looking at values, I wouldn't ever use it in those contexts. If they want to fix a specific problem and not look at the big picture, they are not interested in values and they're not interested in change. But where it does work is where an organisation wants to deeply reflect on itself and look at values and the big picture and is quite open to quite radical change.

*Consultant K*

Only if people are not interested and don't want to put some time into it because it's not a short quick fix. But then I'm not involved in short quick fixes.

*Consultant J*

Consultant C thinks AI is appropriate as a method specifically in circumstances where there is blockage, for instance a sense of failure. In this case, it can be very useful to use appreciative questions to help people to look forward rather than dwell on perceived past failures.

Consultant G sees AI as inappropriate if the senior team does it as window dressing. It does not work if there is no integrity or in very oppressed organizations. Consultant G refuses to take on a facilitating role in these cases.

#### ***4.3.4.2 The meaning of appreciation***

Appreciation does not refer to merely looking at an abstract “positive”. It means finding what you can grow from within an organisation.

I don't think I've put it so well about what I'm meaning about positive energy. It's the pieces you can build and grow from.

*Consultant J*

Consultants E and A specifically pointed out that, even taking an appreciative stance, one has to acknowledge where people are at and make them feel heard if they are dealing with negative emotions. It takes a particular process to move people past negatives.

Consultant E mentioned the example of a Hui held as a closing ceremony for a largely AI

based workshop with an organisation supporting abused women and children, were participants lit candles to remember those who suffered abuse. In the end, “it’s life we’re after”. Wishes are often redeemed regrets. One should turn them into the question “what are you hoping for”, rather than ignoring them. In consultant E’s experience, some facilitators put up a rule of exclusively talking about the positive, but he does not think this is realistic; one has to be aware of the ‘whole picture’ in order to achieve lasting change. Consultant A’s view is rather similar:

The other thing, too, is to acknowledge where people are at. So if you are going into a system where things are very negative and they are having a lot of problems you can’t just go straight in and say, “Right we are going to take this positive focus,” and move people into it. You have to first get people moved to feel heard for the process to be legitimate. So you have to meet them where they are at before moving them into the next phase.

*Consultant A*

Consultant A also gave an example of a situation where the appropriate use of AI required moving a group of people past resentment.

There was a group I did work with. Basically, there was an organisation that was merging into a larger organisation [...] and there was a lot of negative energy around this movement because they felt unwanted and they didn’t feel there was a good match. It was like squishing a square peg into a round hole and there had been a lot of miscommunication and misunderstanding. So for me to go in at the beginning of the day and say, “Hey we’re going to do all these positive things,” they probably would have just rolled their eyes.

*Consultant A*

### 4.3.5 How AI works

In this category, I summarize the means through which AI works as explained to me by interview partners. These are factors and processes inherent in AI which are the mechanism through which AI influences human systems. These are described in this chapter, mostly in the words of participants, following the themes laid out in table 7 below.

Themes	Sub-themes & description
Appreciative Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Key mechanism through which AI works</li><li>• One-on-one vs. group interviews</li><li>• Interviews require respect and integrity</li></ul>
AI assures input from all key stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Brings together different people</li><li>• Levels the playing field</li><li>• Establishes ownership over ideas</li></ul>
AI uncovers hidden information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People discover surprising information through a shift away from deficit thinking</li><li>• Facilitator delivers outsider view</li><li>• Getting to know the other person is a powerful intervention</li><li>• Positive affirmation of each other</li></ul>
AI as capacity building or empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Through making the organisation visible to itself and highlighting strengths and capacity</li></ul>
AI works through positive physiological responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feeling good about their work enables peoples' creativity</li><li>• AI makes people feel good</li></ul>
AI is subversive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Addresses issues through establishing common ground rather than naming problems</li></ul>

Table 7: How AI influences human systems

#### **4.3.5.1 Appreciative Interviews**

Participants identified appreciative interviews as a key mechanism through which AI influences human systems.

I would say the most important phase, and probably critical phase that you can't miss out is the interviews. AI interviews are at the heart of it. You can't really call it AI unless you're doing appreciative interviews in some shape or form, but beyond that there are an infinite number of ways that you can move through those other phases and bring as much or as little structure to it as you see fit. [...]

*Consultant A*

Participants held differing opinions about one-on-one interviews being key, or engaging small groups of people in conversations with an appreciative focus. Consultants K and A believed that the one-on-one situation is a key element. According to consultant A, the key factor inducing change is that participants interview each other one-on-one. This means, everybody gets heard but also everybody listens to each others views and ideas. Those voices that are easily overheard because they are quiet get heard as well, which is something that does not always happen in everyday work situations.

I think one on one is pretty key [...]. There is a sort of intimacy that you create when it is just one person and that one person is really listening to you and you're really connecting with that one other person. And some people just aren't comfortable sharing information about themselves and they are much more likely to do that with one other person with whom they are getting the same information back than they are with a larger group. So I think one on one is pretty key. [...].

*Consultant A*

Consultant K also holds that the one-on-one situation in appreciative interviews makes it easier for people to trust each other (or have enough trust to share their ideas in the specific situation).

And I think it is to do with engaging one on one with each other with those interviews and engaging with values and getting to a core value.

*Consultant K*

Consultant B, on the other hand, prefers to work with small groups instead:

I quite often had been working in short spaces of time and instead of doing structured interviews or getting people to do cascading interviews which are good ideas in the

Appreciative Inquiry world. I've more often used group work and so I've had maybe a day, a group for a whole day and we've worked through story telling in triads or small groups, it depends on how much time I've got.

*Consultant B*

Consultant J suggested, that conversations can change the culture in an organisation.

Well one thing I learnt was the power of interviews right through organisations. Respectful interviews with really good questions. That in itself can change the culture as people start to think about times when things have gone well [...]

*Consultant J*

According to Consultant G Stories hold responsibility. When someone shares their (personal) story with you, you have to respect and honour this. At the core of AI are respect and integrity. As a role model for an AI interview, one could see the conversation between a grandchild and a grandparent: An "AI-interviewer" has to listen to the interviewee with the same intensity and curiosity with which a grandchild listens to the much-loved grandparent. If both parties of the AI interview do this, something different will happen and they will get unexpected results. In a project about the dreams and aspirations of New Zealanders the following happened: In an evening workshop in Northland, a 50-year old Pakeha man and a 17-year old Maori girl engaged in an AI interview. The young Maori girl found her own dreams in that interview to her own surprise.

#### ***4.3.5.2 AI assures input from all key stakeholders***

According to consultants G, F and A, AI brings different people together who otherwise wouldn't interact, and assures that everybody has an input in the process. Consultant F especially thinks that it is important that people come together at eye level on such occasions, while consultant A holds that AI helps making time for meaningful conversations.

According to consultant G, AI works with the power of opposites. When people are matched up in contrasting dispute pairs, they learn a lot. This means ideally very different people engage in interviewing each other, e.g. the human resource manager and the controller or the CEO and the caretaker. Getting to know the other person is a very powerful intervention.

Consultant F also pointed to the importance of people from different hierarchical levels of the organisation interacting during an AI workshop.

But then even the low level staff benefit from that because they are able to provide an input and the board member or the CEO benefits from it because they are able to see what's happening in the front line because normally generalists don't understand what's going on in the front line so that way they are able sit down together [...].

*Consultant F*

Consultant A also pairs up people who usually do not work together in appreciative interviews.

[...] when I do the interviews I pair people up with others they don't usually work with. Just to start to bring those different perspectives together.

*Consultant A*

AI not only connects contrasting people, but also brings them together on an equal level, or as consultant F said "AI levels the playing field".

So this is the beauty of AI, because you can sit on a table, because you would be grouped into small groups and you don't wear your ranks, because you provide input based on your capacity, based on your role in the organization. [...] Because one of the things with AI is you gather data from small groups and everybody is the same, just a participant

*Consultant F*

Because everybody has an input, AI establishes ownership over ideas.

And to me appreciative inquiry is very effective in terms of really establishing ownership of key stakeholders. [...] it's not difficult to implement a program if the implementers are part of the decision making. [...] if all the stakeholders are able to come together and able to contribute then the data for decision making is derived from there, [...] I have the assurance, when [...] it's time for me to do what I have to do, within my role, I would know that I have contributed the thing that I'm going to do. I am part owner in that. And I think that's the powerful component of appreciative inquiry. [...]

*Consultant F*

According to consultant A, AI creates meaningful conversations above all by removing people from the every day stresses of their work environment.

I think it creates open honest meaningful conversation and I think that is the foundation. I think a lot of the time in organisations you don't get to that level of having [those conversations] on a day to day basis. You're putting out fires; you're doing this that and the other thing. You don't actually sit down and talk about what is important to you and what you

want to see happening moving forward. Most certainly usually not with somebody you don't normally work with [...]

*Consultant A*

#### **4.3.5.3 AI uncovers hidden information**

Several of the participants pointed to the discovery of hidden information as a key mechanism through which AI works. This includes discovering organisational capabilities, but also learning about individuals and getting to know interview partners in appreciative interviews. This category relates closely to the previous two categories, as information is revealed through appreciative interviews involving all key stakeholders in the organisation or community.

According to consultant E, AI gives people insights into “where the secret life lies” in an organization. People discover things about themselves and their organisation or community they otherwise would not discover.

Consultant B is of the opinion that AI sometimes unearths a fit between personal values and organisational values that would have otherwise remained hidden.

I think if we can help anybody at level of an organisation to shift their imagination about what is important... how what is important to them fits with what is important to this organisation, that there is actually an imagination fit, and so we have to have tools or approaches that engage the imagination in relation to our work. And Appreciative Inquiry is one of them.

*Consultant B*

Some participants held that it is especially the shift away from deficit-based problem analysis that reveals useful information. AI helps people in organisations to develop a more wholesome view of themselves.

I think it systemically gives people information that they didn't have because most often they are focusing on deficit or a problem orientated approach and so it shifts perspective and allows different information to be seen.

*Consultant H*

For me, the power of Appreciative Inquiry is that it looks at what is working as well as what isn't working. Very often in our society whether it's therapy or facilitation or consultation work we are focusing on what isn't working. So that only gives us part of the picture. [...]



And they've got the big picture of what they are doing instead of part of the picture.

*Consultant K*

Consultant F pointed to the importance of guidance by an outsider to discover hidden information.

The people I've used it with made comments like "wow, how come we haven't seen this before, how come..." because they didn't know they had those strength and they were working very well until somebody guided them to see it. Because sometimes it takes somebody outside the organization to help that organization to look at themselves.

*Consultant F*

Consultant A held that especially if there is underlying tension, AI can be a powerful way to break through and make people engage in real conversations. Often the AI process leads people to discover similarities they were not aware of before

[...] what happened during that exercise is there was someone near the end who said, "I had no idea you felt that way or you did that and I have a completely different perspective of you now." So it just gets people to understand where others are coming from but not in a judgemental way. So it is putting the information out there on something that is neutral and not saying, getting people face to face arguing about.

*Consultant A*

Also, positive information and affirmation has an impact on the group dynamics within the human system.

You know people get positive affirmations from each other which if they are heartfelt, is always good bonding in a group dynamic sense. So I think information that wasn't given previously. Acknowledgement and affirmation in terms of group dynamics and therefore some relationship building aspects.

*Consultant H*

#### **4.3.5.4 AI as capacity building and empowerment**

Uncovering different aspects of their organisations empowers people and gives them the choices they need to make changes.

So Appreciative Inquiry was a pathway for me to actually empower and enhance capacity. [...] the way in which you make the organisation visible to itself gives the organisation choices and power. And until they saw it, it might be as simple as a diagram on a whiteboard.

But until the organisation as a whole saw that, they hadn't seen it and they hadn't seen themselves in that light. And once they have seen themselves in that light they have choices.

*Consultant B*

And when they look at the output they would say that we didn't know that we are like this, we didn't know that our organization is like this, we didn't know that we had these strengths and we could still stress the strengths and move on forward and do more. So in a sense it establishes the capacity of an organization. It reaffirms it and gives it room to stretch and expand.

*Consultant F*

Shifting the frame to appreciation plays a large role in this empowerment.

[...] I think it empowers by reminding and focusing the organisation on its own capacity. [...] It highlights that this organisation may have problems but it has within itself capacity to build on. [...] But it empowers and enhances an organisation by shifting the frame, by bringing into the frame their own sense of wellbeing and capacity, and especially if that has got hidden. So that's why with an Appreciative Inquiry approach you leave with a platform to build on [...]

*Consultant B*

#### **4.3.5.5 AI works through positive physiological responses**

Some participants identified positive physiological responses to the focus on appreciation as one of the mechanisms through which AI influences human systems.

It engenders a positive physiological response so people are more empowered to think creatively. People tend in my experience to think creatively when they are feeling positive and are physically in a more positive state, like happy or joyful or affirmed. [...] If you get them talking about stuff that is working, they are going to feel good.

*Consultant H*

AI keys into positive emotions.

It keys into the two things we always have going for us: aspirations and what we actually have. It's positive approach then raises hope and energy which helps provide the drive to do what we actually want to do.

*Consultant E*

Consultants K and A specifically highlighted the use of positive emotion by contrasting AI with other approaches that potentially raise negative emotions.

They come away from a day doing this kind of strategic planning feeling lots of energy, lots of excitement, and lots of positive feelings around their organisation. What they are doing and their way forward. So before when I used to do traditional strategic planning people would often come away thinking well that was a really good day and I'm feeling very reflective about it but gosh I'm feeling weighed down by all I have to do. [...] But at the end of an AI planning day their spirits are lifted and they are feeling just so much more positive.

*Consultant K*

Again I think it comes back to the energy. I think it releases energy. I think when people focus on what is not working it divides people. It separates and divides people and de-energises people. When you focus on what is working, when you focus on what is important and what is valued it creates connections and draws people together and those connections in turn create energy. So I think that's probably at the core of it.

*Consultant A*

#### **4.3.5.6 AI is subversive**

Some of the interview partners held that AI is “subversive”, finding solutions to problems without ever naming them as problems but much rather creating a common ground to start from.

And it can be quite subversive. You know it's an appealing approach that gets to quite deep issues quite quickly in a very non-threatening way.

*Consultant K*

Consultant G referred to AI as a “sneak up on them approach”. She illustrated this with a case story of a merger between a large organisation and a small entrepreneurial organisation in which she facilitated the employee side of the post merger integration. Both organisations were successful in their respective fields, and both scared: The large organisation was to lose its name in the process; the merged company would take on the name of the smaller company. Employees were scared of losing their identity. Employees at the small entrepreneurial company were scared of “losing their edge” in the merger with a big corporate. AI was “sneaking up on them” and created an atmosphere in which these fears could not grow, rather than addressing them as fears it drew attention to common ground between the two

organisations.

On a similar note, consultant F pointed out how people tend to be drawn into an AI process even if they are initially sceptical about it.

There will be some people who would say for example, sceptic or pessimistic about the methodology. Or who would just be there and kind of I'll be on the sidelines, on the bench and just watch. But then, what they don't realize is that once the process moves on they become part of it.

*Consultant F*

## 4.4 AI in practice

This section explores the ways in which facilitators of AI engage in the process in practical terms. It explores the situations and circumstances in which they use AI and how they adapt the process to situational circumstances. Finally, ways of evaluating AI and indicators of AI success are explored. Table 8 below shows the outline of this sub-chapter.

AI in practice	
Applications	Facilitation Other ways of engaging in AI
Types of clients	NGOs Public sector (Private sector) others
Adaptations	Combining AI with various methods Timing-related adaptations
Evaluation of AI effectiveness	Evaluation methods Indicators of AI success The participant perception of the outcome matters

Table 8: AI in practice overview

### 4.4.1 Applications

Participants in this study applied AI in a wide range of scenarios, ranging from work with individuals to large group facilitation, in differing settings and with a range of objectives.

<b>Facilitation using AI</b>	
Individual level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance review</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> <li>• Supervision</li> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Individual visioning</li> <li>• Coaching</li> </ul>
Team level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team development</li> <li>• Facilitating conferences and groups</li> </ul>
Organisation / community level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic planning</li> <li>• Organisation development</li> <li>• Change management / strategic change / culture change</li> <li>• Community development</li> <li>• Capacity building</li> <li>• Conflict management</li> <li>• Reflection and evaluation</li> </ul>
Between organisation / community level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land claims</li> <li>• Negotiations between communities and NGOs</li> <li>• Merger between two commercial companies</li> <li>• Co-operation between service providers for those suffering abuse</li> <li>• Dialogue / Research</li> <li>• Monitoring and evaluation</li> </ul>
<b>Other ways of engaging in AI</b>	
“Teaching” AI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AI training</li> </ul>
Using AI philosophy in leadership capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership in church</li> </ul>

Table 9: Areas of application

#### ***4.4.1.1 Individual level facilitation***

Some of the participants of this study apply an adopted form of AI to individual development. This includes performance review, mentoring, supervision, coaching, professional development and individual visioning.

Two of the interview partners used AI in performance reviews. Consultant E was responsible for the PR process in the organisation he was working in at the time. The performance review process as it had been traditionally was a survey-based instrument that was damaging to the organisation rather than helpful, as it was perceived as threatening by those being reviewed. At the time, consultant E had recently been introduced to the ideas of AI and social constructionism, and he realised that the questions predetermined the outcomes. He changed the PR process: The questions asked were replaced by open, appreciative type questions, e.g. “what values do church members see reflected in this clergy member’s behaviour?” The change of the PR process resulted in greater satisfaction of clergy members and while some still changed their position it tended to be as part of professional development rather than a move out of failure.

I was contracted to run a performance review of a person and so we actually designed an Appreciative Inquiry question sheet and sent it out, using the 360 degree, but we did that with an Appreciative Inquiry structured sheet.

*Consultant B*

Consultant J uses AI in her mentoring. Consultant K uses AI in supervision, but also in helping individuals in their professional development and individual visioning.

And I also sometimes use it as a professional development process with people who want to evaluate how well they are doing in their job, so they can use it as a reflection and look where their areas of expertise are and whether they are working in line with their values and where the gaps might be in their functioning. [...] And sometimes, [...] individuals come to me because they want some guidance as to where they are going in their lives and what their next step might be. Or they may want to do some visioning about the future.

*Consultant K*

Consultant H used AI “with individuals doing business coaching to identify and look at strength based coaching”.

#### **4.4.1.2 Team level facilitation**

Three of the participants used AI as a team development process.

I was also using it a little more laterally for example some team building I did with a Scottish Executive Agency.

*Consultant H*

And then there have been probably two or three workshops where I've worked with teams where I've used that as a AI pure approach.

*Consultant A*

And I also sometimes use it for team development. There are different teams that want to do some reflection with each other. So I use it in a very adapted way in those kinds of settings.

*Consultant K*

Consultant J mentioned that she used AI to facilitate conferences and groups without going into the details of such applications.

#### **4.4.1.3 Organisation- or community level facilitation**

At an organisational or community level, facilitators participating in this study used AI in a diverse range of applications, such as strategic planning and organisation development, change management (including strategic change and culture change), community development, capacity building, conflict management, and reflection and evaluation.

Consultants A, B, F and K use AI in (both group and organisation wide) strategic planning quite frequently. Consultant F also used AI as to facilitate organisation development and has encouraged organisations he worked in to adopt a facilitated AI process.

And I've done a strategic planning project with a local non-government organisation and that went over three or four months and that was probably pretty close to being mainly AI focused, pretty pure AI.

*Consultant A*

For example I mainly work with community organisations and not for profit organisations and so I use it for strategic planning with groups like that.

*Consultant K*



Consultants B and E applied AI in planning and change management. Consultant E recently facilitated a strategic change initiative in a school. Consultant A also facilitates strategic change in relation to restructuring using AI principles.

For example I ran a big summit with 120 people. [...] It was a local health service was doing a restructuring. And they needed to get all their people on board and help them figure out how things were gonna look in the future. So I used it as a kind of culture change, visioning exercise.

*Consultant A*

Consultant H used AI for strategic development, building cohesiveness and enhancing communication within community settings.

Again that was strategic development, community development. Cohesiveness stuff. Getting people on the same page, that kind of thing. Strength based identification.

*Consultant H*

Consultant F used AI above all for capacity building and strength-focused evaluation within the development sector. Likewise, consultant K uses AI for strength-focused reflection and evaluation, mainly in not-for-profit and community organisations.

#### ***4.4.1.4 Between organisation / community level***

Many of the interview partners have used AI in a variety of settings that included co-operation between various organisations or communities. Consultant F at one point in her career worked on designing processes for land claims for Maori tribal organisations using AI processes.

Consultant H used AI processes to co-ordinate inter-organisational and community relations in Gambia “in terms of brokering and negotiating between small villages, NGOs and large funding providers like UNDP for example”.

Consultant G on the other hand used AI to facilitate a larger merger process between two commercial companies in New Zealand over a number of months.

One instance in which AI was applied with interesting outcomes was when Consultant E facilitated a government-sponsored initiative exploring the possibility of co-operation between different service providers dealing with victims of domestic and child abuse. The

goal of the intervention was to develop a process which would allow these organizations to work together more effectively. People in these organizations were subjected to a hard, high-stress environment. The government wanted to find new ways of dealing with the issues.

Two of the participants were involved in a research project exploring different ways to facilitate dialogue on contentious issues, such as genetic modification, between various interests groups.

So I was contracted by these people who were doing it as a MORST funded piece of research and in this they tried out these four different approaches to dialogue and Appreciative Inquiry was one of those four. So a colleague [...] and I designed and facilitated [...] using Appreciative Inquiry as a foundation for dialogue on a contentious issue, like genetic modification.

*Consultant B*

Consultant C on the other hand is mainly concerned with monitoring and evaluation of development initiatives, where she tends to integrate AI if the situation warrants it. However, AI is not her main orientation in this work.

#### ***4.4.1.5 Other ways of engaging in AI***

Three of the interview partners do not just facilitate AI processes, but also train other professionals in using AI. Consultants E, A and H facilitate, or facilitated in the past, training workshops in which they taught participants about the philosophy and applications of AI.

Consultant E also used AI in a leadership capacity. He was asked to look after a parish at one point in his career and decided to use an AI inspired stance in his work. He tried to “develop an eye for what people have going for them” and to focus on that. This was quite an eye-opening experience for him, as his “default position” is “what’s broken, what needs to be fixed?” In the end, consultant E left the parish feeling that he would miss most of the people there, including those who had a reputation as troublemakers.

#### ***4.4.2 Types of clients***

The participants in this study engaged a wide range of clients in AI processes. Most participants counted not-for-profit or non-governmental organisations among their clients, many also stated to be working with public sector organisations. Only four of the interview partners gave examples of, or explicitly mentioned having worked with, commercial organisations; whereas these four also named more examples of working in the not-for-profit or public sector than examples from commercial organisations.

Consultant E has applied AI approaches in a wide range of organisations and situations. This includes work in the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, including work with the Bishop Action Foundation; a contract with a range of organizations dealing with child abuse, working with a school for women who suffered abuse, and other schools in New Zealand. Consultant E has also carried out work around performance reviews for private sector organizations, e.g. review of CEO performance. He also ran three-day AI training programs, in which the majority of participants were members of the church, but also other professionals (HR managers, consultants and others). Most of his whole-system work takes place in the not-for-profit and church sector.

Consultant G facilitated a merger between two large commercial organisations in New Zealand, but also facilitates conferences and groups across a range of settings. She also works with public sector organisations.

Consultant H's clients include community groups, small businesses, groups of artists, ecovillage communities, other grass-roots communities in various countries, social enterprises, experimental designers and artists and political institutions.

Consultant A's clients are above all public sector organisations, non-government and not-for profit organisations and occasionally commercial organisations. Examples include a local health service which was doing restructuring and wanted to achieve a cultural change through a facilitated AI process.

Consultant K uses AI-inspired methodologies one on one with individuals, for example (but not limited to) supervision in the not for profit sector. In terms of group and whole-system work, she mainly works with community organisations and not for profit organisations, for example a mental health provider.

Consultant J used to do a lot of work with tribal organisations. Now her clients include state sector and not-for-profit organisations, as well as church organisations, but no ordinary businesses.

#### **4.4.3 Adaptations**

The following section deals with the adaptations participants make in the AI process to fit contextual restraints. Table 9 shows an overview of the themes. The two adaptations participants talked about most were time related adaptations (i.e. fast-tracking or skipping processes due to lack of time) and combining AI with other facilitation methodologies. Another adaptation mentioned was the encouragement to others to incorporate AI philosophy into their every day business.

Themes	Sub-themes
Combining AI with other methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Combining AI with social constructionist inspired methods</li> <li>Combining AI with methods from other paradigms</li> </ul>
Timing related adaptations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using parts of the process</li> <li>Fast-tracking interviewing</li> </ul>

Table 9: Adaptations

##### **4.4.3.1 Combining AI with other methods**

All participants mentioned having combined AI with other methods. However, while some participants explained details of such combined methodologies, some merely stated they did combine AI with other techniques. Participants found a variety of ways in which they combined AI both with paradigmatic similar methodologies and with very different methods.

##### *Combining AI with other social constructionist inspired methods*

Consultant G is interested in all types of narrative approaches. She has done some “pure AI” projects in the past, now she is more interested in fusion – using a variety of narrative approaches and focusing on processes that are less planned but instead moving with emergence. She has recently discovered “The Art of Hosting” which is a more emergent,

more participant driven process. She participated in trainings in the UK and Australia. She also uses world café, open space and future search. All of these things work really well for her in a fusion of approaches.

Similarly, Consultant H also primarily names techniques consistent with a social constructionist paradigm when naming the techniques she likes to combine with AI.

[...] integrating it with other methods, like for example open space technology to do networking capacity building type events for various people. [...] I've used it as a combinational lead-in approach to a number of things like world café and open space which are also participatory techniques. [...] If I think structurally then it would be things like open space, world café, future search, that kind of thing. Whole system participatory kind of stuff.

*Consultant H*

Consultant K employs the same methods, pointing out that the inclusiveness they represent is her central motive for using them.

I really specialise in inclusive ways of working. I use things like world café methods which is a tool for exploring with large groups of people various questions. I use open space. I use those sorts of techniques mainly. The more inclusive and the more generally consultative the better really. [...] So AI fits into that because it actually involves everyone in an organisation. It's not just talking to the managers or heads of department or whatever, but it actually involves everyone in having their say.

*Consultant K*

Consultant J also combines AI with world café design when facilitating large groups.

Consultant B usually uses AI in combination with other approaches. One of these is "Cognitive Edge".

[...] Cognitive Edge, which is probably more appropriate for highly complex messy situations. [...] I've combined some techniques from each. So I've used a form of crowd or group sorting in order to get emergent properties and I've used that from stories where I've actually asked an Appreciative Inquiry focused question.

*Consultant B*

#### *Combining AI with methods from other paradigms*

Consultant C is mainly concerned with evaluating development initiatives, and she is strongly grounded in the pragmatism particular to her field. She likes to adopt her methodologies to the local situation at hand which usually implies combining AI with more traditional, problem-solving methods.

Consultant A applies a number of facilitation- and consulting approaches, among her interests are Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and neurolinguistic programming (NLP). She may for example lead into a workshop using MBTI, to get people to accept and talk about the diversity among themselves and then move on to an AI-focused team development. The methods employed are largely based on the outcome desired by the client.

#### **4.4.3.2 *Timing related adaptations***

Participants named a number of timing-related adaptations. Some participants will use parts of the AI process to achieve specific outcomes if clients are unwilling or unable to commit necessary time and resources to the AI process. Consultant F mentioned a “Mini AI” which he particularly uses in planning processes with small groups “to give participants a taste of what they would want to happen”.

Consultant K often experiences clients who are unwilling to commit the time to go through a whole AI process during a workshop or summit, so she may just lead them through a process of discovering their core values and leave the more concrete action planning to be done without her facilitation. She also mentioned an example where she asked for the appreciative interviews to be done ahead of the AI summit.

Consultant E mentioned one adaptation in which interviews were done by a group of students of AI “running along” with organisation members in a particularly busy unit of a hospital. Even interviews done in this way discovered important information about the functioning of the unit.

Consultant B tends to do interviewing in small groups rather than dyads (explained in more detail in the section on appreciative interviews).

#### **4.4.4 Evaluation**

In this study, I paid considerable attention to how participants evaluate AI effectiveness, as the evaluation of the effects of AI is at the heart of understanding the contribution of AI to organisational and community functioning. The three core themes that emerged in this category are:

1. evaluation methods (how do facilitators evaluate AI effectiveness?),
2. indicators of AI effectiveness (how do facilitators know if an AI initiative was effective or not?) and
3. 'the participant perception of the outcome matters' (essentially, the clients' evaluation of the outcome is important).

##### **4.4.4.1 Evaluation methods**

Most interview partners did not name specific evaluation methods they employed most of the time. However, consultants E, A and K mentioned getting feedback from clients in various forms, mostly at the end of a workshop. Consultant K will also communicate with the initiator of the workshop at a later point in time.

Consultant E receives feedback in form of post event stories and checking in with clients on the accomplishment of their objectives. Likewise, consultant A communicates with clients at the end of workshops to get feedback.

I probably don't do enough going back and talking to people after the workshops but I do get feedback on how that worked [...], but I usually do a check out where I get people to go around and reflect on how they found the day and what is different for them. What they valued and what they are taking out of it. And usually the comments that come from that piece of it give me a sense of where the thinking is at.

*Consultant A*

Consultant K does not have a formal feedback process, but will occasionally have some feedback in form of an informal questionnaire.

Well not formally at all, although occasionally I've done little feedback questionnaires at the end. And with the person who brought me into the organisation a week down the track a little feedback questionnaire of what worked, what didn't and what has changed as a result, so very

informal.

*Consultant K*

She will also sometimes get in touch with clients again at a later point in time to check in on the follow-up of workshops and the implementation of plans within the client organisation.

In fact what I often do is a follow up interview with the person I first had the briefing meeting with. I often build that into the contract [...] And that seems to add value for them because it's a sort of marker. It's not just, "Well we've done our strategic planning day and leave it in the drawer." It's like we've got to come back to it and act on it. So I often do that either as a face to face interview or a phone interview.

*Consultant K*

#### **4.4.4.2 Indicators of AI effectiveness**

Consultant A, H and K mentioned a number of indicators of AI effectiveness, whereas they put a certain focus on intangible factors such as cohesiveness, common understanding, improved relationships etc.

Consultant H will look for certain intangible aspects when doing work with a group. These include a "gut feel" of cohesiveness in the group. This is seen in addition to the more tangible outcomes desired by the client.

[...] But I think there are aspects a little bit more intangible and a little bit more difficult to pin down and I'd say they are equally as valid they are just not as easily translatable in language basically. So those sorts of things are more to do with gut feel and cohesiveness in the groups and group dynamics indicators, flow through to other activities, a bunch of stuff like that basically.

*Consultant H*

Similarly, consultant A will be looking for improved relationships among the group, and other intangible factors, such as common purpose and understanding and a feeling of connectedness.

So if I see that relationships have gotten stronger and improved. If I see that there is more of a sense of common purpose and common understanding and if I see there is a sense of positivity and energy behind what a group is doing then I feel like it has been a successful intervention. If people are talking about their relationships differently. If people are seeing the world in a



different way, feeling more connected.

*Consultant A*

Consultant K will look for how engaged people are and will later check in again to see how much of the planning has been put into action. Also, the client's desire to re-engage with an AI process is an indicator of success of an AI intervention.

But an informal measure of it's effectiveness for me is how engaged people are and how much they put into practice, what they come up with. And the fact they come back for more. So they say, "Look that was a great process you did with us two years ago. We are ready to do that again. Will you come back and do that again."

*Consultant K*

#### ***4.4.4.3 The participant perception of the outcome matters***

Some participants in this study held that the participant perception of the outcome of an AI process is the only relevant measure of its success, and also that there is no tangible, objective way to measure AI success.

Because it is based on social construction the effectiveness is really in the eye of the people who are going through the exercise in terms of how far they feel they've come with it. [...] it's almost like my opinion of whether it went well or not doesn't really matter. What really matters is their opinion, whether it went well or not. So I don't think there is an objective way to say it was successful.

*Consultant A*

According to consultant H, clients usually have certain tangible outcomes in mind which they will be looking for in their evaluation.

First and foremost if the client has a certain set of evaluation or certain outcomes I would obviously in the first instance, if I'm working for a client we'd be looking for the outcomes that the client is looking for. [...] Most of the time clients come from a standard, positivist framework in terms of imagining that you can evaluate and measure certain things and to some greater or lesser extent you can.

*Consultant H*

Consultant J pointed out that clients not only assessed tangible outcomes, but also their relationships with each other.

So when you are talking about evaluation. That was done in those cases by the people themselves, evaluating how successful their gatherings were in terms of both during and afterwards. That includes relationships too, because quite often in the past people could reach their goal but the relationships were not doing as well [...] as with Appreciative Inquiry.

*Consultant J*

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The participants' stories were very insightful. As I engaged in conversations with more and more facilitators, some common themes and patterns emerged. Especially in the light of current AI literature some of the findings lead to significant implications for the theory and practice of AI.

For reasons of clarity, I structure the discussion around the themes that emerged from the findings: First, I discuss insights that emerged about facilitator characteristics; secondly, those related to the theory of action held by facilitators, and thirdly those in relation to the practice of AI. Then I formulate the key insights emerging out of this discussion, tying together the insights from the various parts of this research. Finally, I present conclusions and implications of this study, and discuss limitations and areas of future research.

### **5.2 Facilitator characteristics**

In the group of people I interviewed for this study, there appeared to be a strong connection between a previous career in either the not-for-profit or charitable sector, or involvement in religious organisations, or involvement in other environments with strong humanistic undertones (e.g. one participant lived in ecovillage communities for some time; another participant was a holistic body-mind-therapist). This points to personalities who greatly value respectful social interaction with other human beings. Also, participants of this study facilitated primarily in the not-for-profit, NGO and charitable sectors.

Bringing this together with the corresponding theme from the literature of AI being accepted in NGO and not-for-profit organisations much more than in commercial organisations (Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008), this points to the conclusion that certain people with particular personalities and biographies are prone to engage in AI, or become AI facilitators. Based on findings from this research, a preliminary suggestion can be made that a 'typical' AI facilitator comes from a background in which human interaction is highly valued, and in which "spiritual principles" (F) and "consultative" (J) interactions play a significant role. However, much more research (both qualitative and quantitative) is necessary to make definite statements to this extend. However, these findings lead me to state an initial proposition about the characteristics of AI facilitators:

*Proposition 1: It takes a particular personality and background to become an AI facilitator. Facilitators tend to come from environments that embrace values of human co-operation.*

As much of the AI literature points out, social reality is co-constructed and constantly changing. The same applies to the practice and interpretation of AI as experienced by participants of this study. Most participants described changing either their interpretation or practice of AI or both over time. One theme that was prevalent in various narratives was a development from using the applied methods of AI towards interpreting AI as a philosophy or way of life and subsequently applying the underlying principles rather than concrete methodologies in their facilitation work.

*Proposition 2: The practice and interpretations of AI are in a constant state of change. Growing facilitation experience seems to lead to a deeper engagement with the principles rather than applications of AI.*

Along with a shift in emphasis away from applied methods to the philosophical base of AI, participants also diversified the base of the actual applications they used, incorporating elements that are not necessarily developed from an AI background. None of the facilitators interviewed in this study used exclusively AI as a facilitation method. However, many called it the “core” or “underlying philosophy” of their work.

*Proposition 3: While facilitators name AI as the central source of inspiration for their facilitation work, they do not necessarily employ facilitation methods associated with AI all the time.*

Some participants offered the following explanation for this: In New Zealand the market is too small to be exclusively focused on one method, a facilitator has to be flexible enough to respond to the client’s wishes and needs. A further investigation of this question could potentially yield interesting insights: Is this flexibility particular to small markets like New Zealand? How do facilitators in other national and cultural contexts work?

## **5.3 Theory of action**

### ***5.3.1 Importance of principles***

Many participants of this study shared their definition of AI as being more than simply a change management method with the literature presented in chapter two. Participants defined

AI as a philosophy and a way of being, but also providing a set of tools (or techniques). The philosophy is at the core of AI, and the more concrete applications on the periphery.

Participants judged adhering to the principles of AI as more important than employing the concrete applications, for example the 4D-process, which one participant described as a “planning framework”. Most participants in this study were very clear in this stance, whereas much of the literature reviewed in chapter two refrains from such value statements, i.e. methodologies such as the 4D cycle are presented as integral part of AI. The practitioners interviewed in this study held that staying true to the principles underlying AI is quintessential to the AI process, whereas adhering to the 4D cycle is not.

Cooperrider refused for many years to put into writing a concrete AI methodology, preferring to articulate principles instead (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) describe a variety of best practices of AI processes, calling them ‘forms of engagement’ and pointing out that there are many more possible forms of engagement in addition to those described. Comparing these ideas from the literature with findings from this study, an overlap becomes obvious: Practitioners indeed opt for the freedom to design their own processes appropriate to the situation, whilst keeping the principles of AI in mind.

### ***5.3.2 Circumstances hindering or supporting AI***

When looking at the circumstances participants identified as either supportive or detrimental to AI success, one can clearly deduct an awareness of power dynamics. Facilitators identified lack of buy-in from leadership and other key people or the leadership neglecting outcomes as key hindrances to a successful AI process, whereas they described the presence of leadership buy-in, clear lines of reporting and involving the whole system as key success factors. This clearly stands in sharp contrast to allegations of naïveté advanced in some of the literature criticising AI (Reed, 2007). Participants in this study showed a clear awareness of the importance of power dynamics in the client system.

Facilitators participating in this study also pointed to the importance of due diligence, e.g. establishing the boundaries of an intervention and clear lines of reporting, as well as preparing and planning the workshop thoroughly. Again, this seems to address some of the concerns of AI being employed inappropriately or calling an OD intervention AI even if it is not (Bushe, 2000). Participants in this study were very aware of the circumstances in which they worked and consciously dealt with the restraints imposed on them by client organisations, particularly

by the leadership. An unreflected use of AI in any situation was very clearly avoided by all participants.

The focus on due diligence and creating clear lines of reporting and a clear focus for the intervention are measures targeted at controlling power dynamics in the client system. However, the findings in this study are merely a preliminary indication of how facilitators deal with power dynamics. The limited time and broad scope of this study prevented a detailed exploration of the subject. More research is needed to fully understand how facilitators deal with power dynamics in client systems.

In the course of this research I encountered one theme that was not addressed in any of the literature I previously reviewed: Resistance to the “positive” focus of AI and the narrative approach. Three of the interview partners described a situation in which people refused to buy into the AI approach. Overall, facilitators seemed to encounter this very rarely, nevertheless the issue does exist and needs to be addressed by facilitators in the field and should also find more attention in the academic discussion of AI. Facilitators in this study described different reactions to the lack of buy-in: one facilitator will reason and explain what the intentions and mechanism are behind AI, another facilitator has moved on to integrating AI more subtly into her methodologies without referring to it as Appreciative Inquiry.

### ***5.3.3 Appropriate use of AI and the meaning of “appreciation”***

Most interview partners paid attention to the ‘appropriate use of AI’. Research participants identified situations in which AI is likely to work well, and situations in which AI is unsuitable. This is an interesting insight addressing Bushe’s (2000) concern of AI being used only when appropriate in the context. From their experience, facilitators identified that AI is best applied in contexts where

- the ownership of the AI process is grounded at senior level
- there is an understanding of the approach in the client system
- enough time is available for the process and
- the timing is right organisationally.

On the other hand, AI may not be the best method to use if

- there is underlying unpleasant tension,
- the intention behind the intervention is not clear to everyone,

- there is no leadership buy-in,
- the client wants a quick fix and has no interest in looking at the bigger picture and deeply engaging with their values,
- the client system is not open for radical change,
- there is no integrity behind the process and it is merely used as “window dressing” by the leadership, or
- the client organisation is an oppressive or authoritative system.

In much of the literature I reviewed initially in this study, circumstances for AI interventions were implicitly assumed to be ideal. However, in practice the appropriateness of AI as a method in a specific situation is a major concern for facilitators of AI. Again, facilitators had different ways of dealing with these circumstances. Some said they were not involved in quick fixes and superficial change. Others said they would “build these restraints into the conversation”, i.e. clarify with the sponsor how far the intervention can go and stay within this framework whilst being upfront about the amount of change that can be expected from such a limited scope intervention.

Another concern raised in the literature is that of interpreting “appreciation” as merely looking at an abstract positive with little consequence for the organisation (Bushe, 2000) or failing to take into account the complexity of AI (Rogers & Fraser, 2003). Participants in this study addressed the meaning of “appreciation” in an Appreciative Inquiry in a complex, reflected manner. Many pointed out the importance of finding relevant information that will serve to move the organisation toward a desired future, rather than simply uncovering feel-good moments. Participants also pointed to the importance of acknowledging blocks, resentments and other negative emotions. “Appreciation” was not interpreted as ignoring negatives, as sometimes feared by opponents of AI (Reed, 2007). Much rather, AI can be used to acknowledge those feelings and turn them into wishes for the future. Interestingly, some participants in this study expressed a concern about other facilitators suppressing negative emotions or enforcing a sole focus on ‘the positive’ – these examples were given to distance themselves from such behaviour. The question remains: Do other facilitators indeed engage in such facilitation practice? Would a larger sample in this study have uncovered such facilitation practice?

### 5.3.4 *How AI works*

Participants described a number of key mechanism through which AI influences human systems. These are:

- appreciative interviews as the key mechanism through which AI works,
- AI assures input from all key stakeholders,
- AI uncovers hidden information,
- AI as capacity building or empowerment,
- AI works through positive physiological responses,
- AI is subversive.

Participants identified appreciative interviews as the basis and key mechanism and “most critical phase” in the AI process. Whereas the literature sees one-on-one interviews as the basis of AI, participants of this study were divided about this point: Some held that the intimacy created in the one-on-one situation is key, others held that conversations in small groups of three to five people also gave participants the chance to make their voice heard.

By assuring input from all key stakeholders and levelling the playing field and through the mechanism of appreciative interviews, AI uncovers “where the secret life lies” (Consultant E) in an organisation. This uncovering of information is the key step through which AI induces change in organisations, by making information visible that was not in the open before. This leads to capacity building and empowerment, as the organisations discovers its own strengths and capacity. This effect is mediated through a positive physiological response of participants, who *feel* good about themselves and their organisation because of the positive affirmation they receive.

One other factor not described in those terms in Appreciative Inquiry literature but identified by participants in this study is the subversiveness of AI. Facilitators very often get called in to an organisation to *solve problems*. The reframing from problem-solving to capacity enhancing nevertheless addresses problems, albeit in a very subtle and indirect way.



## **5.4 AI in practice**

### ***5.4.1 Applications***

Interestingly, while AI was developed originally as a philosophy and method of change applicable to whole systems, participants in this study used AI in a number of ways to facilitate processes with individuals, teams, organisations and between organisations. Participants also applied AI in leadership capacities and taught AI as a method to other professionals. This goes to show that professionals using AI are very creative in finding new ways of engaging in AI, and the number of AI applications is ever growing.

### ***5.4.2 Adaptations***

In practice, AI seems to be applied in a way that departs from some of the original writing on AI. Participants in this study used AI mostly in combination with other methods. This includes combining AI with methods which are consistent with a social constructionist paradigm, such as open space technology or world café, but also methods developed under other paradigms, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.

The guiding paradigm among practitioners seems to be pragmatism – creating clarity about what the client wants to achieve and choosing the methods best matched to these goals. This means in many instances departing from a pure AI methodology. Particularly time constraints cause facilitators to alter their methodologies and sometimes carry out only part of an AI intervention (e.g. reflecting on deeply held values using a discovery process but not going any further at the time of facilitation).

### ***5.4.3 Evaluation***

A key insight that emerged from this section is that little systematic evaluation is done into the effectiveness of AI by practitioners. This is largely due to the grounding in social constructionist philosophy, which makes evaluation a hard-to-grasp concept. Some participants will follow up in a conversation with their sponsor some time after the facilitated event; or ask participants to fill in a feedback questionnaire at the end of a workshop. However, no participant reported systematic evaluation or consistent follow-up of workshops.

In keeping with a social constructionist paradigm, some participants held that only the participants' perceptions of the outcome matters. Clients tend to have certain tangible outcomes in mind, so they are likely to evaluate the outcomes of an AI intervention based on pre-perceived goals. However, this may miss large parts of the emergent properties of the AI

process. Nevertheless, from a client's point of view a focus on measurable outcomes is desirable, and AI facilitators are bound by their clients' wishes. Even consultant F, who strongly identified with a social constructionist paradigm, stated that "to some extent" one can measure tangible outcomes of a change process.

Above and beyond the client's perceptions, participants did identify a number of factors which they see as indicative of AI effectiveness, such as a gut feel of group cohesiveness, enhanced communication, enhanced relationships, feelings of connectedness etc. These factors are intangible and hard to measure, or "not easily described in language" (consultant F).

In terms of evaluation, participants seemed to be caught in a paradox between a pragmatic focus on tangible outcomes (as desired by clients), a grounding in social constructionism (i.e. the stance that the perceptions of everybody involved matter) and their own perceptions as experienced facilitators (who have a "gut feel" for what is working or not). These tensions clearly point to a need for more conceptual work regarding the evaluation of AI. The question of how to evaluate AI between the tensions of pragmatism and staying true to a social constructionist paradigm will need to be addressed in depth in future research.

## **5.5 Key insights and conclusions**

The key insight I gained from this thesis is that AI has two distinct sides: (1) an underlying philosophy which is deeply rooted in humanistic values and putting the respect for the individual centre stage, and (2) a set of techniques and processes to bring the first side to live in communities and organisations. In this two-fold interpretation, the philosophy and values are by far the more important aspect of Appreciative Inquiry. AI elevates human beings to unlock their potential, rather than treating people as a means to an end or a human 'resource' in an organisation. AI appreciates people as human beings with values and the potential to create something truly great in their organisations and communities.

Participants in this study shared the humanistic values underlying AI and sought ways to incorporate this into their every day work. At the same time, they faced an environment that values outcomes of business transactions over humanistic values; clients often regarded efficiency as more important than relationships. The facilitators I interviewed for this study were very realistic and aware of this. Therefore, they were caught in a dilemma between their own values and the demands imposed on them by clients.

In this study, I did not find the slightest indication of the naïveté of which proponents of AI are sometimes accused. Despite being deeply grounded in their own humanistic values, participants were very aware of the influence of power dynamics and of the complexity of “appreciation” in AI processes. Facilitators had a very realistic view of the opportunities and constraints they faced in their role as external facilitators of change. In many instances, they were external service providers for clients who wanted tangible outcomes out of an organisation development initiative. Participants in this study tended to describe themselves as facilitators of “transformative” or “inspired” change. They are very eclectic in their practice and oriented towards outcomes rather than process, and in practical terms regarding AI as one (albeit important) tool among others in their toolbox.

Employing AI is not always feasible in practice. Facilitators find various ways of dealing with this – some avoid working in settings where a participant-driven, consultative approach is not feasible, others employ other methods in such settings. This choice seems to be largely related to the dilemma explained above: On the one hand, facilitators see themselves as facilitators of transformative change, with an interest in deep change processes, involving profound reflection on values. On the other hand they are service providers hired to increase organisational functioning within a framework agreed upon in interaction with the client.

## **5.6 Implications**

Findings from this research add to the understanding of AI as both a philosophy of change and as a change management method, and have practical implications for the use of AI. Findings imply that we need to reconsider our interpretation of AI as a change management method. A two-fold interpretation of AI emerged from this research, seeing AI as consisting of deeply held values as a core and concrete applications on the periphery. Even though AI is profoundly grounded in humanistic values, much of the theorising and empirical research on AI is too focused on the applications, and lacking reflection on the underlying values. In order to truly advance the study of AI, a deeper engagement and clearer description of the values underlying AI is necessary.

Practitioners face a dilemma between the values represented by AI and a bottom-line-orientation of most organisations. Essentially AI is caught in a paradox of a promise of humanistic values, putting human beings and their development at the centre, and a promise of tangible organisational improvement. This paradox will have to be addressed both in academic research and in practice.

Related to this paradox is the appropriate use of AI. If an organisation is not open to radical change and is unwilling to invest the necessary time and resources to deeply reflect on its values, but rather seeks short term process improvement, AI may not be a good method to use. For the practice of AI facilitators this means that it is absolutely essential to be clear about the goals and boundaries of the intervention. Participants in this research were very concerned about the appropriate use of AI and clearly identified circumstances that can either hinder or support an AI process.

The value stance which is inherent in AI makes it hard to evaluate as a change management method. What differentiates AI from other change management methods is the deeply held humanistic values, putting people first. If one were to only evaluate tangible business results one would miss the point of AI, which is to elevate human beings to unlock their own potential. If, however, AI fails to prove its tangible benefits for improving organisational effectiveness, its high costs (especially the necessary investment of time) will prevent it from being widely accepted in organisations, particularly in the business community.

## **5.7 Limitations and directions for future research**

The chosen methodology in this study brings with it a number of limitations. The limited number of participants and choice of narrative reporting as well as the limited structure imposed on interviews all contribute to a limited generalizability of findings. However, as insights emerged during the process, some of these were solidified by being addressed by all or most of the interview partners.

This research came to an initial description about how AI influences human systems. More such research in various contexts could accumulate to a theory of how AI influences human systems, and a clear description of the factors and mechanism making AI work, thus making successful, transformative change a more achievable goal in practice. While the facilitator perspective opened up the study of how and with which effects AI is being applied in New Zealand, the next step to further our understanding of how AI influences human systems in this unique context is the in-depth evaluation of people and organisations engaged in AI processes. As an antecedent for such research, a deep engagement with the evaluation of AI seems necessary. A method of evaluation that is both pragmatic and yet true to the social constructionist paradigm is yet to be developed.

Some of the results of this study may be transferable to other forms of organisational development. The themes of due diligence and a thorough understanding of the local situation are not limited to AI. Interestingly, participants in this study tended to combine the more concrete methodologies of AI with other forms of OD. This raises the question whether this practice is common not only in New Zealand, but also in other contexts.

This study produced some interesting insights into the application and evaluation of AI in the New Zealand context. In order to further develop an understanding of how culture influences the practice of AI, both cross-cultural comparisons of facilitation practices and evaluation of actual AI initiatives across various cultures are necessary.

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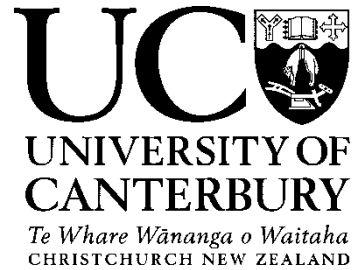
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## Appendix I: Information leaflet practitioners

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College of Business and Economics



### Appreciative Inquiry in New Zealand

A research project in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Commerce (Management)

Researcher: Christina Neumann

Under the supervision of: Assoc. Professor Venkataraman Nilakant  
Dr. Ian Brooks

#### Invitation to participate in research project

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a master student at the University of Canterbury. Part of my thesis is concerned with the question how AI is interpreted and applied by professional consultants and facilitators in New Zealand.

I would be delighted if you decided to participate in this study. I would like to interview you [*give you a phone call*] to talk about how you interpret AI and how you use it in practice. Of course your participation is completely voluntary. Any information you give me will be treated confidentially, your name and other personal data will not be disclosed to anyone. Of course you may withdraw from the study at any point in time should you wish to do so.

Please raise any concerns or further questions you might have about this research. I can be reached via email [redacted] or cell phone [redacted]. My office number is [redacted], extension [redacted], but I am currently out of the office a lot so the mobile phone is a safer way to reach me.

A number of questions I am interested in follows below. However, over and above this I am really interested in what you think are the relevant questions about Appreciative Inquiry and how it actually works to change human systems.

These are some of the questions I am interested in:

- Do you use AI in your consulting practice? In what ways?
- Does it constitute a large or a small proportion of your consulting work?
- Do you usually combine AI with other methods or do you use mostly "pure AI"?
- How long have you been using AI and what made you start using AI as a consultant?
- Do you see AI more as a 'philosophy' or as a 'tool' with regards to its influence on social processes?
- How do you evaluate the effectiveness of AI?
- I'm also interested in the use of AI in team development. Do you use AI as a team development tool at all?
- Do you know and/or collaborate with other AI consultants?
- Would you allow me to contact you again if any other questions arise as my research progresses further?

I hope you are interested in participating in this research. I will give you another call later this week, hoping to arrange for a concrete time for a conversation.

Kind regards,

Christina Neumann

Christina Neumann

Master Student

Department of Management, College of Business and Economics,  
University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Email: [cne25@student.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:cne25@student.canterbury.ac.nz)

Phone: [REDACTED]

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I have read this information sheet and voluntarily consent to participate in this research.

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Participant

Date

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Researcher

Date

## Appendix II: Interview Guide Practitioners

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### Interview guide consultants / facilitators

*Thank you very much for agreeing to talk to me. As I have already told/mailed you earlier, my research is concerned with the question how Appreciative Inquiry is applied and evaluated in New Zealand. I have prepared a number of questions I would like to ask you. However, over and above this I am really interested in your view of Appreciative Inquiry, and how you think it influences human systems. So please feel free to wander off and explore your experiences and insights. I would greatly value your input as a professional AI consultant/facilitator. At this stage, do you have any questions to me?*

*[Ask to allow to record conversation / If not feasible propose to take notes, write them up and send them back for checking.]*

- In what ways do you use AI in your consulting/facilitation practice?
- Does it constitute a large or a small proportion of your consulting/facilitation work?
- Do you usually combine AI with other methods or do you use mostly "pure AI"?
- How long have you been using AI and what made you start using AI as a consultant?
- What is AI for you? How do you define or interpret AI? Do you see AI more as a 'philosophy' or as a 'tool' with regards to its influence on social processes?
- How do you think AI works?
- How do you evaluate the effectiveness of AI?
- What do you think is it that makes AI work?
- Under what circumstances does AI work best? Under what circumstances doesn't it work well?
- I'm also interested in the use of AI in team development. Do you use AI as a team development tool at all?
- Do you know and/or collaborate with other AI consultants?
- Would you allow me to contact you again if any other questions arise as my research progresses further?

*Thank you very much for your time and interest in this research!*