

Uncovering New Possibilities: A Methodological Reflection of Appreciative Inquiry in Exploratory Research

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on the methodological application of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in a qualitative case study exploring institutional support for emancipated foster youth in higher education. The study effectively leveraged AI as its theoretical lens, significantly shaping the research approach. The innovative application of AI yielded groundbreaking findings, including introducing “journey advocates” as a transformative concept in student affairs and higher education. This article proposes practical recommendations for using AI in an exploratory research context. In addition, the article will seek to inspire a more adaptable mindset by showcasing the methodological innovation of using AI, highlighting its potential to uncover new possibilities and insights in exploratory research.

Keywords

Appreciative Inquiry, journey advocates, foster alumni, Appreciative Education Conference, research methodology

Conducting research is a decision-making process. Although all decisions are crucial, determining the research design and methodology is a pivotal aspect, particularly in the context of a doctoral dissertation. This article examines my experience with the methodological application of Appreciative Inquiry in a qualitative case study exploring institutional support for emancipated foster youth in higher education. In effect, the study leveraged Appreciative Inquiry, specifically the Discover and Dream phases, as the theoretical lens that significantly shaped the research approach. This article draws from ongoing discussions and reflections about my research journey with my advisor/co-author. Together, we navigated the complexities of the research process, exploring the challenges, insights, and growth experienced throughout my dissertation journey. Brainstorming sessions with my co-author provided valuable clarity, particularly in refining my research focus and ensuring methodological rigor. Through this reflective article, we aim to contribute to the conversation around embracing creative methodological approaches as a norm to inspire a culture of innovation in research.

Overview of the Original Dissertation Study

Emerging literature on former foster youth in higher educational institutions affirms that they require additional attention because of the debilitating challenges that predominantly characterize their postsecondary transition as compared to that of their peers from the minority populace (Beard & Gates, 2019; Cruz Santoyo, 2019; Dworsky, 2020; Fryar et al., 2017; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019; Geiger et al., 2018; Gonzalez, 2019; Hogan, 2020; Okpych et al., 2018, 2020; Piel et al., 2020; Salazar et al. 2017; Sullivan-Vance, 2018).

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In response to persistent calls for targeted support, the United States higher education system has seen a rise in campus-based support services (CSPs) for foster alumni. However, there is still a lack of information on the development and implementation of CSPs. Also, research on foster youth in higher education often overlooks the perspectives of program staff. As a result, the dissertation study used a qualitative case study approach with an Appreciative Inquiry lens to explore how postsecondary campus support programs support students with foster care experience.

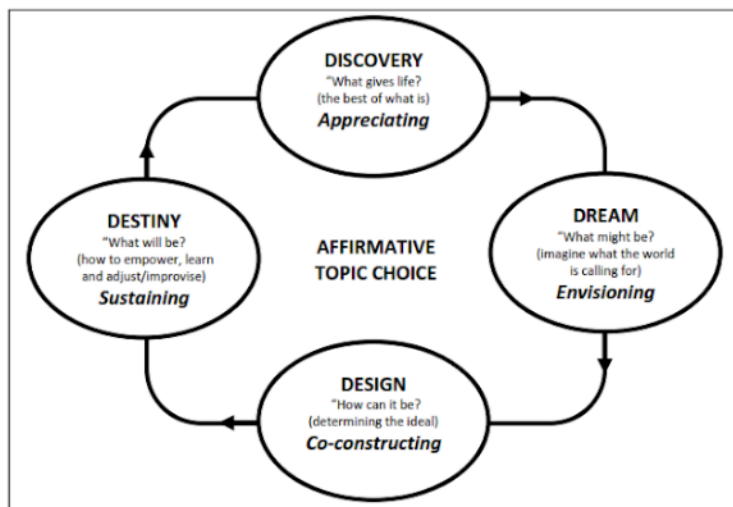
Using information from the Ohio Department of Higher Education website, as of February 17th, 2021, the fourteen colleges that form part of the Ohio Reach Network were identified as institutions suitable for this study (Ohio Reach, 2022). The institutions are a mixture of two-year community colleges and four-year public colleges. A total of 11 administrators representing eight (8) institutions across Ohio contributed to the study findings. Participants worked with foster youth for two to 30 years, with an average of 12 years of experience. Due to the sample size, the primary focus was on the structure and culture of CSPs. Appreciative interviews were the primary data collection method for capturing participants' experiences and insights.

Additionally, I obtained information from state and institutional documents, such as policies and program manuals, which provided rich contextual information that facilitated sense-making during the data analysis. The overarching findings revealed that embedding a "journey advocate" philosophy enabled program administrators to adopt a community-based and empowering approach. This approach led to a more normalized college experience, cultivating a sense of belonging and academic success among foster alumni in Ohio.

Appreciative Inquiry Theoretical Lens

The study was designed with Appreciative Inquiry tenets, adopting a best-practices approach and focusing on what worked well in CSPs that support foster alumni in the Midwest. According to scholarship, the model was developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) to move away from the problem-solving paradigm (Bushe, 2012; Clouder & King, 2015; Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Cram, 2010; Kung et al., 2013; Nel & Govender, 2019; Riopel, 2020; Thibodeau, 2011; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). According to Cockell and McArthur-Blair (2012), the predominant yet deficit-driven paradigm should be applied to nonhuman systems because using it to interrogate human systems implies that humans are objects that should be 'fixed.' They added that the essence of Appreciative Inquiry stems from the notion that humans are infused with energy when their skillfulness, achievements, and effectiveness are acknowledged. Clouder and King (2015) aptly captured the fundamentals of Appreciative Inquiry, highlighting its focus on uncovering strengths, generating new theory, and envisioning new possibilities.

Emerging as a response to the limitations of traditional problem-focused research, Appreciative Inquiry is grounded in eight core principles. The first five (constructionist, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory, positivity) were proposed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987). Sixteen years later, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom added the principle of wholeness, enactment, and free choice (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Kung et al., 2013; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Finally, as depicted in Figure 1, the Appreciative Inquiry model is structured around a 4-D cycle framework, which represents the stages of Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny.

Figure 1*4-D Appreciative Inquiry Framework*

As stipulated by the proponent of the Appreciative Inquiry framework (Cooperrider, 1986), the Discovery phase involves appreciating and valuing the best aspects of what *pertains*, while the Dream phase focuses on *envisioning what might be*. The Design phase aims to *dialogue about what should be*, and the Destiny phase is about *innovating what will be*. Although it is not as popular as the first four Ds, Cockell and McArthur-Blair (2012) discussed a fifth D, called the “Delivery, Deliver, or just Do it” phase (p. 23). Since Appreciative Inquiry’s groundbreaking inception by Cooperrider in 1985, it has been applied extensively by higher education researchers and scholars in different disciplines (Clouder & King, 2015; Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Cram, 2010; Kung et al., 2013; Nel & Govender, 2019; Riopel, 2020; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Cockell and McArthur-Blair (2012) also acknowledged that the Appreciative Inquiry framework has provided a foundation for new strengths-driven theories and constructs. These contributions have benefited communities worldwide through the framework’s widespread use.

Rationale for Appreciative Inquiry Approach

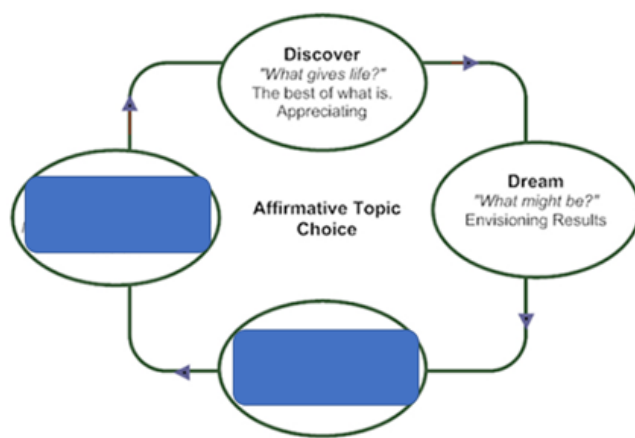
This study employed the Appreciative Inquiry framework, as advocated by Nel and Govender (2019), for its capacity to drive transformative change by focusing on an organization’s potential. Unlike deficit-oriented approaches, Appreciative Inquiry emphasizes identifying and amplifying existing strengths, enabling participants to envision and build towards a more desirable future (Barrett & Fry, 2005; Hammond, 1998; Reed, 2007). The primary dissertation drew on recent studies of college success programs serving former foster youth, which were predominantly quantitative and geographically limited, with scant attention to the perspectives of program staff and administrators. Given this gap, Appreciative Inquiry’s asset-based approach proved particularly apt for capturing the expertise and insights of frontline professionals. By centering their voices, the primary dissertation sought to illuminate effective strategies for supporting former foster youth in higher education.

Informed by the study’s purpose, although the Appreciative Inquiry theoretical framework consists of four phases (Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver), the research was limited to the first two phases, as shown in Figure 2. The rationale for limiting the study’s

scope to the first two phases (Discover, Dream) was that the original study was not designed as an action research project, which would have required a more collaborative methodology. One consistent piece of evidence from scholarship indicated that Appreciative Inquiry had been applied frequently in collaborative and participatory action research, which aligns with the purpose for which the model was developed (Busche, 2012; Clouder & King, 2015; Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Cram, 2010; Kung et al., 2013; Thibodeau, 2011). However, its application in qualitative case studies was not a deviation from the norm, as some scholars have also employed this approach (Butcher et al., 2022; George et al., 2024; Hall et al., 2021; Nel & Govender, 2019; Sim, 2019; Tucker, 2024).

Figure 2

Adaptation of the Appreciative Inquiry Framework for the Primary Dissertation Research



Note. Discover and Dream phases of the Appreciative Inquiry Framework

This study addressed a key research gap by focusing on the perspectives of CSP administrators and staff, shedding light on how these programs support former foster youth in higher education. Researchers have emphasized the importance of understanding the experiences of CSP staff (Geiger et al., 2018; Piel et al., 2020). Building on Piel et al.'s (2020) work, this study used Appreciative Inquiry to fill a knowledge gap in supporting former foster youth in higher education. The findings provide valuable insights into effective practices and inform program development, highlighting how CSPs can better support students by addressing their transitional needs. Figures 3-5 below illustrate how the dissertation mapped the research questions to the Appreciative Inquiry phases and adapted appreciative interview questions based on the work of Mohr & Watkins (2002).

Figure 3*Research Question Mapping in the Primary Dissertation Research***Research Question Mapping**

The first and second phases of the Appreciative Inquiry Model known as Discover and Dream respectively will guide this study's design. This approach focuses on uncovering what is working well and identifying factors that give life to human systems (Clouder & King, 2015; Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012).

Research Question	Mapping to the theoretical perspective
1. What do administrators observe, experience, and determine as the most valuable aspects of the CSPs supporting emancipated foster youth at their higher education institution? (Discover Phase)	Guidance on the AI paradigm is straightforward, and experts use the questions crafted by AI proponent's Cooperrider et al. (2003) to guide their study. Likewise, for this study, the first research question aligns to the Discover phase, and the guiding principle for that phase is to ask questions that will help the interviewee to practice appreciation by "valuing the best of what is" (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012, p. 15).
2. How do administrators describe the desired future of CSPs supporting emancipated foster youth in higher education institutions? (Dream Phase)	This research question aligns with the Dream phase, and according to Cooperrider et al. (2003), its purpose is to guide the interviewee to envision "what might be" (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012, p. 15). This question will draw imagery of what participants desire to be in the ensuing years.

Note. Mapping Research Questions to the Discover and Dream Phases of the Appreciative Inquiry Framework

Figure 4

Appreciative Interview Questions from Mohr and Watkins (2002)

(Appreciative Interview Questions from Mohr and Watkins, 2002 cited in Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012, p.26)

General Overview of Program

1. Can you describe how your program is structured?
2. What specific services are rendered by your program?
3. What are the key challenges you have encountered since you began working with this program?

Best Experience

4. Tell me a story about the best times that you have had with your organization.
5. Looking at your entire experience, recall a time when you felt most alive or most excited about your involvement.
 - a. What made it an exciting experience?
 - b. Who else was involved?
 - c. Describe the event in detail.

Values

6. Self – without being humble, what do you value most about yourself – as a human being, friend, parent, citizen, etc.?
7. Work – when you are feeling best about work, what do you value about it?
8. Organization – what is it about your organization (team, family, community, or other group) that you value?
 - a. What is the single most important thing that your organization has contributed to your life?

Core life-giving factors

9. What do you think is the core value or factor that allows the organization to pull through during difficult times?
10. If this core value or factor did not exist, how would that make your organization totally different than it currently is?

Wishes (Recommendations)

11. If you had three wishes for this organization, what would that be?

Note. Appreciative Interview Questions on the Discover and Dream Phases of the Appreciative Inquiry Framework

Figure 5*Adaptation of the Appreciative Interview Questions***Adaptation of the Appreciative Interview Questions**

1. Can you share what led you into this field of work?
 - a. What do you appreciate about their journey?
2. Share some of your most memorable stories of your students and program achievements.
 - a. What made it an exciting experience?
 - b. Who else was involved?
 - c. Describe the event in detail.
3. Share a time(s) that best illustrates the best of your program/student experience/your own work contributions?
4. What would you select as the most valuable aspects of your support program?
 - a. Could you give me an example of when you felt motivated?
5. Share an example of how your CSP responds to challenges and setbacks.
 - a. What is the core value or factor that allows your CSP to pull through during challenging times?
 - b. If this core value or factor did not exist, how would that make your CSP different from its current state?
6. What partnerships have you found helpful, and what has contributed to your CSP?
Probe: What are your thoughts about using a community-based approach to support postsecondary students with foster care backgrounds?
7. What would be your top 3 untapped areas that are valuable to providing the desired support services to foster alumni in colleges across the nation?
 - a. What resources do you know about that your organization does not have?
8. How would you describe the desired future of the delivery of support services in colleges that have students with foster care backgrounds?

Note. Primary Dissertation's Interview Protocol: The Adaptation of the Appreciative Questions

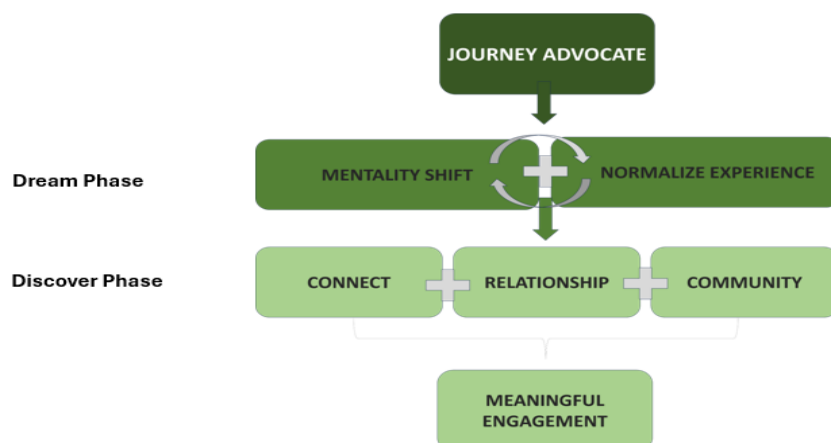
Impact of Appreciative Questions on Research Findings

The use of Appreciative Inquiry in my research methodology contributed to the discovery of a groundbreaking concept: "Journey Advocates." This concept emerged from the data and represented a seminal contribution to the field of student affairs and higher education, offering a novel approach to supporting and enhancing success outcomes for non-traditional students. In this context, a journey advocate refers to an individual or institution that champions the unique needs of foster alumni in higher education, providing a dynamic

and continuous support system. As a proposition, this approach can serve as either a guiding philosophy or a practical framework, implying a proactive commitment to normalizing the college experience for at-risk students throughout their postsecondary journey. Being a journey advocate involves connecting with students, building authentic relationships, and fostering a sense of community. The constructs that explain a “journey advocate” are illustrated in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6

Proposed Journey Advocate Support Framework



Note. A visual description of the phases that illustrate a “journey advocate”

Appreciative Inquiry-informed methodologies offer a powerful tool for reframing deficit-based approaches in higher education, focusing on strengths to better support diverse student populations. The concept of journey advocates exemplifies this approach, demonstrating Appreciative Inquiry’s potential to drive positive change and innovation. Through this research journey, I developed essential skills in resilience, critical thinking, and academic rigor, strengthening my research abilities and preparing me for future scholarly endeavors.

Appreciative Inquiry in Research: Insights from a Qualitative Exploratory Approach

Adapting Appreciative Inquiry for my study was a valuable learning experience that taught me the importance of flexibility and a focused approach to research design. By narrowing the scope to the Discovery and Dream phases, I gained meaningful insights and set my study up for success. This approach aligns with van Assche et al.’s (2023) emphasis on practical research methods, which are characterized by ongoing observation, reflection, and openness to new insights. However, this decision was met with mixed reactions from faculty members, some of whom questioned the theoretical framework and scope. Despite the challenges, I used this feedback as an opportunity to deepen my understanding of Appreciative Inquiry and qualitative case studies. Regular guidance from my co-author helped me build confidence in my approach.

Through this research design phase, I have gained valuable insights into the power of Appreciative Inquiry and the importance of continuous learning. Free resources, available through Florida Atlantic University’s Office of Appreciative Education

(<https://www.fau.edu/education/centersandprograms/oae>) and the Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry (<https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu>), were instrumental in shaping my research approach. By embracing diverse learning opportunities and using appreciative questions, I collected rich, nuanced data that revealed the complexities of participants' experiences. This journey has not only deepened my expertise in Appreciative Inquiry and qualitative research methods but also demonstrated the impact of empowering research approaches on participants and the quality of the insights gained. Ultimately, this experience has underscored the value of flexibility, openness, and a strengths-focused approach in research design.

Future Directions: Advancing Appreciative Inquiry Research through Reflection

Building on the lessons learned from my dissertation research, this section outlines key recommendations for future directions in Appreciative Inquiry research. Through reflective check-ins with my co-author that spanned nearly three years, I developed a nuanced understanding of research methodology and critical thinking. As I evolved as a researcher, I came to appreciate the vital role of positive questions, innovation, community building, and credibility. These recommendations aim to advance Appreciative Inquiry research by emphasizing the interconnected elements that foster innovative solutions. By considering these factors, researchers can develop strategies to support growth and meaningful impact in the field.

The Power of Positive Questions

According to Ludema et al. (2006), harnessing the power of positivity enables Appreciative Inquiry to become a catalyst for transformation, unlocking the inherent potential within individuals, organizations, and communities. Through positive questioning, researchers gather valuable insights that unlock new possibilities, driving transformative change and collective growth. Ludema et al. (2006) explained how asking positive questions can profoundly transform conversations, shifting the focus from problems to possibilities. Asking positive questions in research can shift interactions towards collaborative solutions, uncovering fresh insights and perspectives.

By harnessing the power of positive questions, researchers ignite a spark within themselves and their participants, revealing strengths and hidden potential. Exploratory research embodies a powerful synergy between inquiry and change, where knowledge and transformation are intertwined. As Cooperrider noted, “we live in worlds our questions create” (Moore, 2019, 9 Quotes section, para. 1), which underscores the importance of thoughtfully crafting research questions that profoundly shape our understanding of reality.

Unlocking Appreciative Inquiry's Potential in Research Methodologies

My research journey has highlighted the vast potential for innovation of Appreciative Inquiry-driven methodologies, particularly in exploratory research. As Appreciative Inquiry continues to transform research landscapes, there is a growing need for pioneering approaches to integrating Appreciative Inquiry into non-action research contexts. Recent studies demonstrate the benefits of interweaving Appreciative Inquiry with qualitative methodologies, such as Narrative Inquiry (Tucker, 2024) and Appreciative Inquiry-inspired adaptations (Butcher et al., 2022). To unlock the full potential of Appreciative Inquiry, future research should focus on contextual considerations, interdisciplinary collaborations, and innovative applications. By embracing this call for innovation, researchers can drive impactful advancements and address complex social and organizational challenges.

Enhancing Research Rigor

Ensuring research rigor in Appreciative Inquiry-driven studies requires cohesive design and implementation, as emphasized by van Assche et al. (2021). To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, researchers can integrate qualitative research strategies with expert guidance, such as adapting interview protocols and leveraging established methodologies. To further strengthen credibility, we recommend interdisciplinary collaboration to enable researchers to share their collective knowledge and expertise, thereby fortifying Appreciative Inquiry's methodological foundations (Bliese et al., 2024). Furthermore, conducting longitudinal studies and replication can help demonstrate sustained impact, while mixed-methods approaches can leverage the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods. By working together with researchers and practitioners to build shared understanding, practitioners can build a robust case for Appreciative Inquiry's effectiveness in driving positive change, ultimately advancing the field through collective expertise and verifiable evidence.

Conclusion

This article illustrates the potential of adapting Appreciative Inquiry for exploratory research and highlights its methodological promise. By embracing a strength-based approach, we have uncovered new possibilities for understanding and supporting diverse populations. As we move forward, we invite researchers and practitioners to push the boundaries of Appreciative Inquiry, co-creating a more vibrant, inclusive, and supportive world grounded in individual and community strengths. By leveraging the transformative power of Appreciative Inquiry, we can drive meaningful progress and foster positive change.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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