

Utilizing Comics in Arts-Informed Appreciative Inquiry: Untapped Potential When Conducting Research with Children

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Abstract: This paper demonstrates the potential of combining an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodological framework with arts-informed research methods, particularly in applying comics to the AI process where children are active participants in research. Included in this article is a review of each methodological framework and a critical exploration of the literature. It is the position of the authors that arts-informed methods applied within an AI framework offers unexplored potential for generating new ways of knowing by valuing and relying on the voices of child participants to gain different perspectives. These perspectives are crucial for research that directly impacts the child population.

Keywords: Arts-Informed Research (AIR), Appreciative Inquiry, Graduate Studies, Qualitative Research

Introduction

The academic community continues to be dominated by a positivist worldview that believes there is one objective truth that exists independent of human experience (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020) on what defines scientific inquiry and how knowledge is acquired (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Smartt Gullion & Schäfer, 2018). Although many have chosen to move away from more “traditional” research methodologies (Barone & Eisner, 2012) to ones less frequently used, the decision to follow a non-traditional path can have negative impacts on a beginning academic’s career (Kuttner et al., 2018). This paper is a culmination of the authors’ experiences and learning within a PhD in Education program at a Northern Ontario university—one PhD candidate and the other a professor. Our intent is to further the discourse on utilizing and respecting the voices of children within empirical research. Specifically, we theorize the connection between Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and arts-informed methods (particularly comics-based research), which together offer an underexplored area in research, to gain new and unique understandings into the perspectives of child participants. AI is an increasingly utilized action-based methodology rooted in principles of positive psychology (not to be confused with a positivist research paradigm, positive psychology is the study of positive characteristics, attitudes, and actions of people and organizations [Kozik, 2018]) and social constructivism (Tezcan-Unal, 2018). In addition, utilizing comics as a means of data collection challenges the academy’s traditional definitions of research while opening new pathways for participants to actively engage in the research process (Bahl, 2015).

Appreciative Inquiry

“...we have the opportunity to speak a different language, to use words like collaboration, inclusion and hope. This is the challenge of AI Practitioner in the coming years: to be a beacon of hope.”
(Cooperrider & van der Vaart, 2017, p. 2)

AI is shifting scholars’ and practitioners’ approaches to transformational change by looking towards positive components in organizations that can be built upon (Sankarasubramanian & Joshi, 2019). Charag and Fazili (2018) describe AI as “an invitation to a positive revolution” (p. 4). Grounded in the social constructivist theoretical framework, AI aims to build knowledge and ideas for change through collaboration and co-development exercises directly with research participants (Charag & Fazili, 2018; Gray et al., 2019). In this sense, organizations change because the people within those structures change (Sankarasubramanian & Joshi, 2019). As people within broader systems come together to make new meaning(s), they can dream, design, and implement positive changes.

The core principles of AI all build on the strengths and optimism of an organization (the methodology’s overarching theme; Gray et al., 2019). Table 1 offers a brief overview of AI’s five principles.

Table 1: Brief Overview of Appreciative Inquiry’s Five Core Principles

| <i>Category</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Constructionist | Researchers and participants are on a parallel plane, using language and connection to build unique realities that offer paths to transformative change (Gray et al., 2019). |
| Positive | AI considers the “positive forces” (Scandura, 2017, p. 142) that are not only evident in persons and social structures, but are also used to promote change. |
| Simultaneity | Change begins with the research and offers all those involved in a study opportunities to create a scaffold to continuously move closer to lasting and transformative change (Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017). |
| Poetic | Every person’s history, as well as their future, has countless possibilities for information acquisition and interpretive understanding (Kosik, 2018) |
| Anticipatory | AI intends to offer images and visuals of a new, different, and better future that propels individuals to act in the quest for lasting change (Scott & Armstrong, 2019). |

These five core principles form the foundation of AI research. In practice, AI follows a four-step cyclical delivery model, most commonly known as 4D (Charag & Fazili, 2018). The 4D’s (discovery, dream, design, and deliver [or destiny]) offer a logistical and successive map for engaging in AI research, particularly in data collection and analysis. Some AI practitioners have begun adopting a fifth D (define) and a sixth D (drench) (Sankarasubramanian & Joshi, 2019); however, the 4D model continues to be utilized by most AI practitioners.

Review of Appreciative Inquiry with Arts-Informed Methods

Even the most traditional methodologies can benefit from being flexible and adopting multiple methods of inquiry (Creswell, 1998, p. 229). Since both AI and arts-informed research seem to fall outside research that is considered traditional (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Preston, 2017), both are typically welcoming to innovation in research methods (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Watkins et al., 2018). However, few AI researchers have utilized arts while engaging participants in the 4D process, and none, it seems, have done so while partnering with young children as co-researchers.

While utilizing photography data collection methods in their AI study to gain more meaningful participant engagement, Dewar and MacBride (2017) note that AI research has an obligation to connect with both participants and interlocutors on a deep and personal level; an idea shared by many arts-based researchers (Leavy, 2018). However, the literature indicates that few AI researchers have explored this theoretical connection between the two methodologies before Dewar and MacBride (for examples of these, see Galazka’s [2011] use of drama; Lander & Sinner [2010] studying art within an AI context; and Rollins & King’s [2015] use of music and poetry). We believe this is a missed opportunity for AI researchers to become, as Haberlin (2017) notes, “bricoleurs” (p. 8)—researchers who seek out and utilize wide and diverse data collection methods.

With Child Participants

Klatt et al. (2013) connected AI with arts-based methods while engaging child participants when they looked at arts-based interventions in a classroom setting. However, their study explores the impacts of arts-based interventions in the classroom without utilizing arts-informed data collection methods to do so. While a worthwhile study that offers some understanding of how to implement art themes into an AI study (combining appreciative questioning with third graders followed by a corresponding art exercise), Klatt et al., do not explicitly analyze the art that was produced by the children.

Bergmark and Kostenius (2018) seem to be the most contemporary example of combining AI with arts-based data collection as they attempt to offer future AI researchers a blueprint for engaging in the AI process in the school system. The authors posit that the inclusion of arts data as a critical part of the AI process while working with children offers a different forum for finding children’s voices and offering them to the research (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2018). This is consistent with many arts-based researchers who consider engaging child participants in the arts as an ethical

expectation of this type of research. Wall (2019) clearly conveys this message, noting the richness of engaging child research participants with a combination of visual arts expression while offering space to collectively explore with the children their interpretation of their creations. In consideration of visual arts offering greater opportunity to communicate with children (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Cologon et al., 2019; Knight et al., 2016) and to elicit different and deeper responses in them (Bolden, 2017; Clough & Nutbrown, 2019; Lawrence et al., 2017), we agree with Wall's position.

Comics as a Method of Inquiry

Utilizing sequential arts, such as comics, as a method of inquiry and data collection offers the strength of “the unification of word and image” (Kuttner et al., 2018, the affordances of comics section, para. 1). Kuttner et al. (2018) understand the process of combining the more “traditional” qualitative methodologies (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 104) with a visually aesthetic delivery, as an enhancement to dissemination practices that promises to make them palpable to wider audiences, while connecting to both their cognition and emotions. As Hung (2017) notes, there is growing interest for researchers to engage in AI research and so, to Kuttner et al.'s point, it is our position that AI's growth can be further enhanced with the inclusion of arts as a means of data collection.

Using comics as a method of inquiry offers key understanding and perspectives on advancing meaning making in research. Sequential arts in research recognizes that advancing understanding means that we must push beyond a written or visual collection and presentation of findings (Sousanis, 2018). Comics-based researchers believe that comics are not simply the combination of words and drawings. Rather, comics are images and text that captures tone, movement, and emotion of participants all through the building of visuals that are (at times not so) linear to offer participants new ways of sharing their stories while offering readers a different path to grow knowledge and understanding (Sousanis, 2018). Considering the latter, comics broaden readership well beyond the traditional academic audience (Boerman-Cornell, 2016; Kuttner et al., 2018). Boerman-Cornell calls attention to sequential arts research offering an ability to expand and grow the group that engages research to include young children and goes on to note that the combination of visuals and texts creates a product much more than the sum of its parts. The multimodal delivery of comics creates a synergy of information dissemination that can be easily digested by many different audiences from eclectic and varied histories (Boerman-Cornell, 2016).

Utilizing Comics to Inform AI

The AI methodology has been applied specifically to research with child participants on many occasions (for contemporary examples, see Gray et al., 2019; Lane et al., 2018; Martyn et al., 2019; Scott & Armstrong, 2019), as has research that includes engaging with comics (Atalay et al., 2019; Boerman-Cornell, 2016; Carneiro Rolim et al., 2017; Lawrence, 2019). AI is an action research methodology, and as such, participants are actively engaged in the research process (Bradbury et al., 2019). Believing participants can offer insight and solutions to problems that are meaningful to them has action researchers attempting to shrink the gap between researcher and participants to build relationships (Bradbury et al., 2019; Townsend, 2018). Townsend goes on to note that closing the gap between participant and researcher is an ethical position researchers should consider. In including children as participants, this position can be aligned with Wall's (2019) position of including art in research.

Within the academic community, there is a perception held by some that AI over emphasizes the positives to highlight what is working well and that participants' views depicting negative experiences and can be invalidated or ignored (Charag & Fazili, 2018). The more commonly utilized “deficit-oriented” research approaches have long held the primary directive for academic inquiry: to identify gaps and failings in the topics of study (Hochstrasser Fickel et al., 2018). As researchers, we balk at the belief that change occurs primarily through recognition and discovery of what is missing and, as AI posits, there is potential for acquiring new knowledge in highlighting positive experiences and actions of study participants, while using creative means (such as metaphors) to convey such stories (Scott & Armstrong, 2019). Building on this point, Leavy (2018) notes that capturing a fuller participant voice (as AI does by highlighting positives) can also be captured through engaging in art processes with those involved in a study. Lee et al. (2019) note that comics research can offer a powerful ability to connect with participants and raise their voices to new levels.

Conclusion

As academics, one new and one established, we appreciate the potential arts-based research practices have in capturing nuanced complexities that allow both those belonging to the academy and beyond new ways of understanding (Leavy, 2018). Future research will look to apply a comics-informed AI methodology to investigate attachment bonds between kindergarten students and their education team (teacher and early childhood educator [ECE]). Teacher–student attachment bonds have rarely considered primary school children’s voices, and capturing them through exploring positive elements in their classroom (AI) by offering students various avenues to have their voices heard (e.g., arts-informed methods, such as the creation of comics) have yet to be empirically studied. By combining AI with comics methods, researchers have an opportunity to combine “affective and aesthetic sensibilities” (Lee et al., 2019) with the power of connecting with child participants to uncover and grow their greatest strengths (Kozik, 2018).

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