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The shadow side of positive organizational change: practitioners' experience navigating dialectical tensions in appreciative inquiry
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CHAPTER 2: APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND DIALECTAL TENSIONS

2.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes AI's contribution to third-generation change scholarship, establishing it as an ideal case to study the assumptions and impacts of the process. The chapter begins with a focus on AI's roots in social construction and outlines the guiding principles for enacting positive change. The section that follows examines AI as a paradigm shift in action research, which supports our understanding of AI's prioritizing positive discourse over problem discourse. The first section of this chapter concludes with an exploration of AI methodology from the perspective of setting the agenda for what is discussable in AI. The following section explores how a positive organizational change approach generates tensions that demand navigation strategies. First, examining organizational shadow situates the study of tensions in positive change literature. Next, tensions are explored through the lens of dialectical theory to identify opportunities for further scholarship. The section concludes with a focus on tensions in AI and the problem of how to navigate the "elephants in the room."

2.2 Socially Constructing a Positive Reality in Organizations

AI promulgates the theory that *words create worlds* to highlight the importance of social discourse and language in the context of organizational change (Cooperrider et al., (1995). Bushe (2000) noted, "as we talk to each other, we are constructing the world we see and think about, and as we change how we talk, we are changing the world." (p. 100). Gergen (2009) agreed, noting that we are not required to understand organizations in any specific way. For example, our understanding of an organization prioritizing profits over concern for people is one of many alternative ways to explain an organization's behavior. Gergen (2009) reminds us "that for any

state of affairs, a potentially unlimited number of descriptions and explanations should be possible” (p. 5). Another explanation for an organization’s focus on profitability may be to ensure job security and competitive salaries for employees. As Gergen (2009) cited:

When we say that a certain description is ‘accurate’ (as opposed to ‘inaccurate’) or ‘true’ (as opposed to ‘false’), we are not judging it according to how well it pictures the world. Rather, we are saying that the words have come to function as ‘truth telling’ within the rules of a particular game—or more generally, according to certain conventions of certain groups (p. 1).

AI’s intentional focus on the positive has been described as a *language game* in which words gain meaning through implicit exchanges and rules of engagement. AI’s language games construct a reality in which certain rules of engagement facilitate positive discourse norms (Gergen, 2009).

Cooperrider (2005), largely considered one of the founders of the AI philosophy, provides an often-cited definition of AI:

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. (Cooperrider et al., 2005, p. 3).

The definition of AI highlights the social construction of an organizational change methodology focused on strengths rather than on finding problems to solve. The practice of inquiry, intentionally designed to uncover strengths, facilitates positive change as individuals and organizations discover their untapped capabilities and potential.

AI’s guiding principles (Table 1) draw heavily from social constructionist philosophy that assumes discourse creates, sustains, and transforms organizations (Barrett, Thomas, & Hocevar, 1995). The principles are essential to our understanding of AI’s construction of reality in which there is a way of thinking, speaking, and acting. The eight principles include the

constructionist principle, the simultaneity principle, the poetic principle, the anticipatory principle, the positive principle, the wholeness principle, the enactment principle, and the free choice principle.

Table 1

Summary of the Eight Principles of Appreciative Inquiry (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003, 54-55)

Principle	Definition
1. The constructionist principle	<p><i>Words create worlds.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reality, as we know it, is a subjective versus objective state. • It is socially created through language and conversation.
2. The simultaneity principle	<p><i>Inquiry creates change.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry is intervention. • The moment we ask a question, we begin to create a change.
3. The poetic principle	<p><i>We can choose what we study.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations, like open books, are endless sources of study and learning. • What we choose to study makes a difference. It describes-even creates-the world as we know it.
4. The anticipatory principle	<p><i>Image inspires action.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. • The more positive and hopeful the image of the future, the more positive the present-day action
5. The positive principle	<p><i>Positive questions lead to positive change.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Momentum for large-scale change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding. • This momentum is best generated through positive questions that amplify the positive core.
6. The wholeness principle	<p><i>Wholeness brings out the best</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wholeness brings out the best in people and organizations • Bringing all stakeholders together in large group forums stimulates creativity and builds collective capacity

7. The enactment principle	<p><i>Acting “as if” is self-fulfilling</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To really make a change, we must “be the change we want to see” • Positive change occurs when the process used to create the change is a living model of the ideal future
8. The free choice principle	<p><i>Free choice liberates power</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People perform better and are more committed when they have freedom to choose how and what they contribute • Free choice stimulates organizational excellence and positive change

The constructionist principle reinforces the assumption that “the way we know is fateful” (Watkins & Mohr, 2001), meaning habitual thoughts and assumptions about organizations can constrain imagination (Cooperrider et al., 2003). As such, AI intentionally solicits stories about the organization’s “positive core” to create an awareness and appreciation of those moments and situations where the organization has been at its best. The constructionist principle assumes that every organization, no matter how dysfunctional, has experienced high points (Cooperrider et al., 2003).

The simultaneity principle in AI assumes that inquiry is intervention (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The first questions asked during an organizational change process set the stage for the data that is later discovered (Cooperrider et al., 2003; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). If questions focus on problems, problems are likely to be discovered. If questions focus on what is life-giving, then positive stories are likely to surface. (Cooperrider et al., 2003). “These data become the stories out of which the future is conceived, discussed, and constructed” (Cooperrider et al., 2005, p. 9). Given that inquiry and change happen simultaneously, AI intentionally crafts positive questions to inspire and facilitate positive change (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Questions that begin

with “What is working here?” are believed to elicit a more positive response than questions that focus on “What is problematic here?” (Cooperrider et al., 2005).

The poetic principle embraces the metaphor of organizations as “open books” that are continually co-authored by organizational members and stakeholders (Cooperrider et al. 2003). The poetic principle posits the belief that “the topics we chose to study are fateful. They not only determine what we discover and learn; they actually create it” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 61). This principle assumes that if a direction or focus of change keeps the organization stuck in a non-productive pattern of behavior, the organization can choose to focus in a different direction. An important element of the poetic principle is co-authoring the organization’s story. The topics organizations choose to study will influence how people discover, learn, and create the organization’s future. (Cooperrider et al., 2005). It follows that the more positively focused the topic, the more likely the organization is to discover positive phenomena.

The anticipatory principle recognizes the influence of positive imagery on current behavior. The principle assumes that projections of the future mobilize action (Cooperrider et al., 2005). “The more positive and hopeful the image of the future, the more positive the present-day action” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 54). In AI, inquiries focused on “what should be?” or “what might be?” are intended to inspire compelling images of the future (Cooperrider et al., 2005); some question if the anticipatory principle conveys a sense of obligation to imagine a positive future (Grant & Humphries, 2006).

The positive principle acknowledges that organizational change requires large amounts of positive affect (such as optimism, inspiration, and excitement) and social bonding. (Cooperrider et al., 2003). Positive questions amplify the positive core, leading to long-term positive change (Cooperrider et al., 2005). In practice, the positive principle is the search for what nourishes

people and “what gives life to an organization when it is at its best” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 68). For example, a positive inquiry focused on empowerment will likely generate more positive effects than an inquiry focused on micromanagement (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Of the eight AI principles, the positive principle is the most widely equated with AI (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Feldman and Worline (2011) identified the amplifying effects of positive narratives that connect individual actions to larger organizing efforts. Given the positive principle requires large amounts of positive affect, the challenge is how to manage contradictory emotions that emerge during the process of AI (Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Grant & Humphries, 2006).

The wholeness principle in AI demonstrates the value of bringing the organization and stakeholders together to participate in the change process. Engaging the whole system is believed to facilitate the sharing of diverse perspectives, not to force agreement, but to create the whole story of the organization. AI scholars contend that honoring the wholeness principle creates a safe space for people to focus on issues that support the greater good (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

The enactment principle acknowledges that transformation occurs when organizations act as if the desired change has already been enacted (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). For example, “if organizations want people engaged in the business, they must act as if high participation and commitment are the norm” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 74). The enactment principle invites organizations to evaluate how their current norms align with AI’s social construction of reality (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The challenge in AI is managing tensions that arise when AI norms contradict organizational norms (Fitzgerald et al., 2010).



Lastly, the free choice principle recognizes that when people choose how they want to contribute to change, they perform better (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). In practice, the free choice principle sets an expectation that people may engage and disengage in the AI process at will, without fear of repercussion (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The free choice principle may mirror or conflict with organizational norms for participation.

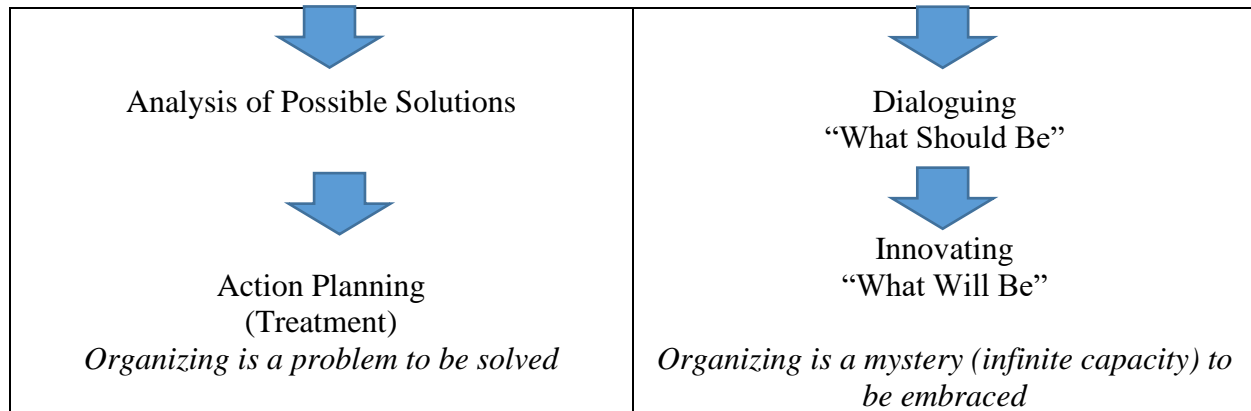
Of the eight principles, the positivity principle is most widely associated with AI and sets an expectation for the type of privileged discourse in a positive change approach (Fitzgerald, et al., 2010; Bushe, 2007). The positivity principle also constructs a dialogic and relational way of being that may surface organizational contradictions about what is deemed positive.

2.3 AI as an Alternative to Problem-centric Action-research

Until the advent of AI, the de facto approach to change was action research. Action research involves identifying problems, diagnosing causes, and analyzing solutions for action (Lewin, 1951; Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995). AI scholars debunked the assumption that problem-solving was a requirement for organizational change, arguing that foregrounding and talking about problems creates more problems to solve (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). The AI versus problem-solving model (Figure 1) exemplifies the polarization of these two dominant paradigms (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000).

Figure 1: *Two Paradigms for Organizational Change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000).*

Paradigm 1: Problem-Solving	Paradigm 2: Appreciative Inquiry
<p style="text-align: center;">“Felt Need” Identification of Problem</p> <p style="text-align: center;"></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Analysis of Causes</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Appreciating “Valuing the Best of What Is”</p> <p style="text-align: center;"></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Envisioning “What Might Be”</p>



To emphasize the paradigm shift, the metaphor of organizing as a problem to be solved was attributed to traditional action research. In contrast, AI uses the metaphor of a mystery to be embraced (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Rather than assuming organizations need fixing, AI scholars argued: “Everything people find wrong with an organization represents an absence of something they hold in their minds as an ideal image” (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, p. 19). The suggestion that problem-solving was inferior to AI has been a constant tension in AI scholarship.

The AI versus problem-solving paradigm noted extensively in AI literature (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Cooperrider, et al., 2005; Ludema, Whitney, Mohr & Griffin, 2003; Watkins & Mohr, 2001) gave rise to descriptions of AI as positive discourse and problem-solving as deficit discourse or “negative talk.” Ludema (2000) noted:

In response to the growing body of deficit vocabularies produced by critical approaches to social and organizational science, a handful of scholars are calling for appreciative approaches to social and organizational science that hold increased potential for revitalizing scholarship and enhancing the human condition (p.269).

Ludema argued that deficit discourse leads to the enfeeblement of society and advocates for the promulgation of vocabularies of hope. Ludema posited, “these hopeful images of the future, in

turn, become powerful catalysts for change and transformation by mobilizing the moral, social, and relational energies needed to translate vision into reality and belief into practice” (p. 271).

While Ludema (2000) was not prescriptive about language that constitutes vocabularies of hope, he pointed to AI’s focus on inquiry, dialogue, and the collective imagining of an ideal future as conditions that foster vocabularies of hope. In contrast, vocabularies of organizational deficit are described in AI literature as problems typically addressed in action research, such as role conflict, turfism, low morale, burnout, and job dissatisfaction (Cooperrider et al., 2005). AI scholarship implies that “problem talk” is analogous to deficit discourse, which goes against the grain of AI’s privileging of positive discourse.

2.4 Setting an Agenda for What is Discussable

AI methodology is guided by positive inquiry. The methodology most widely associated with AI is the 4-D cycle (discovery, dream, design, and destiny), which sets the agenda for what is discussable in AI (Figure 2). The 4-D methodology builds on the theory that people and organizations move in the direction of what they study (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1999; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The founders of AI were reluctant to prescribe a methodology for fear that it would stifle experimentation and creativity (Bushe 2012). However, understanding the methodology sheds light on when practitioners are most likely to encounter shadows in AI.

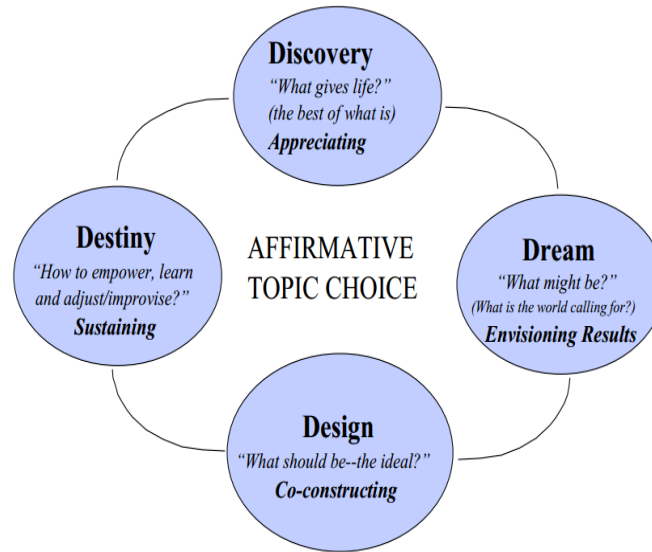


Figure 2: Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2005, p. 5).

In the *discovery* phase, organizational members interview each other to discover and appreciate “the best of what is” or has been in the organization. Discovery builds on the assumption that in every system something works, albeit a moment in time or longer periods. The *dream* phase is next. In this phase, organizational members engage in a collective visioning activity to imagine “what might be” regarding the organization’s positive potential (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The *design* phase involves writing a set of provocative propositions of “what should be,” meaning the qualities and attributes participants most desire to see in the organization. The final phase is *destiny*, which solicits personal and organizational commitments to achieve “what will be.” The Leadership Clergy Institute later suggested the 4-D model be revised to add Define as the first D to identify the focus of the inquiry, known as the 5-D model (Bushe, 2011).

The 4-D methodology also shapes the agenda for the AI summit, convening 30-3,000 internal and external organizational stakeholders in a 3-5-day event. Summits may encompass all

four stages of the 4D process if time permits. The AI summit aims to accelerate change by having all participants focus exclusively on an affirmative topic. Ludema (2003) noted:

When an organization decides to embark on an AI Summit process, it is committing to an unconditionally positive approach to organization change. Based on the principles of appreciative inquiry, everything involved in an AI Summit—before, during, and after—is focused on the positive (p. 39).

The summit's exclusive focus on the positive begins with selecting an affirmative topic by a small group of organizational members. The affirmative topic intends to create a compelling image that activates the heliotropic effect. The heliotropic effect theorizes that all living beings are inclined to move toward positive energy and away from negative energy (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Spreitzer & Cameron, 2011). Examples of affirmative topics noted in AI case studies include Avon Mexico's focus on exceptional gender relationships, Myrada's focus on creating and strengthening community development organizations, DTE Energy Services' focus on creating a culture of choice, and Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division's topic of creating a shared vision (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). The planning group then makes vital decisions that ensure an unconditional focus on the positive, including selecting summit participants.

Ludema (2003) noted the power of the planning team to affect the outcome of the summit:

The planning team has tremendous power to influence what happens with the rest of the organization during the summit. If the planning team begins with a spirit of curiosity, curiosity will flourish at the summit. If the planning team continuously affirms the best in its members, affirmation and productive relationships will grow at the summit. If the planning team embodies inclusion and openness, inclusion and openness will be in full bloom at the summit (p.42).

The AI summit methodology bestows significant power on the planning committee. However, Gergen (2009) reminds us that discourse is informed by organizational authority "over matters of reality, reason, and right (p.47)," which raises questions about how power dynamics affect whose interests are represented and whose voices are valued before, during, and after the summit.

Gergen's theory of power and authority in organizations builds on Foucault's (1979) concerns about how people willingly submit to subtle forms of power in everyday life without considering its positive and negative implications. AI literature has been largely silent on the implications of power-related tensions on positive change discourse. Accordingly, this study aims to understand, more broadly, the implications of tensions associated with AI in positive-focused organizational change, including attention to how power unfolds in the process.

AI summits' exclusive focus on the positive assumes deficit discourse is unproductive, whereas positive discourse is generative (Ludema et al., 2003). Generativity describes creating new images that change how people think so that new possibilities for action become available (Bushe, 2013). As such, the marginalization of people with less than positive narratives may happen in the process. Bushe (2013) offered a different perspective, noting, "Getting the stories of marginalized members of the system can sometimes be the most generative thing you can do. This allows the really new ideas, which always exist at the margins of social systems, voice" (p. 10). Other scholars have suggested that focusing exclusively on the positive limits the generative potential of deficit discourse. Barge and Oliver (2003) stated, "our concern lies with the idea that fixing the meaning of appreciative as 'positive' dismisses and discounts other equally important and appropriate types of conversation and emotionality in organizations that may foster learning and change" (p. 125). Fineman (2006) contends that "in exclusively favoring positive narratives, AI fails to value the opportunities for positive change that are possible from negative experiences" (p. 275). Bright, Powley, Fry, and Barrett (2011) have suggested that hidden images of hope are embedded in the cynical or critical voice. To that end, this study aims to deepen our theoretical understanding of the tensions that enable and constrain what is discussable in the context of positive change.

2.5 The Tension of Positive versus the Shadow

In positive change literature, the “shadow” metaphor conceptualizes the polar opposite or dark side of organizations (Kolodziejski, 2004). Shadow is described as “the facts which organizations wish to deny about themselves, due to the threat posed to self-image and self-understanding and, more generally, the need to be viewed in a favourable light by others” (Bowles, 1991, p.387). The concept of shadow was initially focused on the individual level (Jung, 1968) but was later applied to groups (Gemmill, 1986) and organizations (Bowles, 1991; Kolodziejski, 2004; Fitzgerald et al., 2010).

While the shadow is often associated with negative thoughts and emotions (Bowles, 1991; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995), scholars argue that the shadow may hold both positive and negative traits that have been repressed or censored by the organization (Kolodziejski, 2004; Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Kolodziejski’s (2004) hermeneutic study drew from psychoanalytical and organizational behavior literature to explore the shadow generated by complex dynamics between individuals, groups, and organizations. In her dissertation, Kolodziejski (2004) described the shadow as “that which is considered inappropriate and shunned, that which is unbearable to hold consciously and denied” (p.64). She also called the shadow “trapped, untapped, potential.” Fitzgerald et al. (2010) further developed the concept of shadow as a repository of behaviors that do not fit accepted cultural norms and includes “the full spectrum of censored feeling and cognition, ranging from repressed strengths and capacities to fragilities and abhorrent characteristics” (p.221). Fitzgerald et al. (2010) posited the shadow could have detrimental effects on organizations if not recognized and can also hold growth potential.

A dearth of scholarship focuses on the tension of positive versus shadow in organizational change. Allen and Pilnick (1973) focused on positive and negative norms

observed in retail and manufacturing organizations in the United States and abroad. The researchers defined ten normative clusters influencing business success, such as organizational and personal pride. For each cluster, Allen and Pilnick (1973) developed an illustrative framework of what positive and negative organizational norms looked and sounded like (Figure 3). Behaviors anticipated or expected of group members constituted norms. The clustering and identification of positive or negative (shadow) norms brought visibility to behaviors that had not been typically discussed or explored. Organizations could use the framework to solicit feedback from members on their experiences of positive and negative norms. The ten clusters guided the feedback intended to be solicited verbally in meetings or through surveys.

Figure 3: Ten Normative Clusters (Allen & Pilnick, 1973).

Norm Cluster	Positive	Negative (Shadow)
Organizational and personal pride	We enjoy working for the company	They are always trying to take advantage of us
Performance/excellence	People always try to improve, even when they are doing well	People are satisfied with the routine or mediocre
Teamwork/communication	People go out of their way to help each other	It's a dog-eat-dog and save your own skin
Leadership and supervision	It's tradition to ask for help when you need it	It is best to hide your problems and avoid your supervisor
Profitability/cost-effectiveness	Profitability is on the minds of everyone	Profitability is a management problem
Colleague or associate relations	Colleagues are treated with dignity and respect	Workers are treated as just a pair of hands
Customer and consumer relations	People are continually looking for ways to serve the customer better	People fail to make the effort to ensure customer satisfaction
Honesty and security	People are not willing to compromise security measures and regulations	People fail to realize the importance of security regulations
Training and development	The company really cares about developing employees	People de-emphasize training in favor of more pressing demands

Innovation and change	People are continually on the lookout for better ways of doing things	People tend to hang on to old ways of doing things even after they have outlived their usefulness
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The significance of Allen and Pilnick's (1973) research in this study was the illumination of shadow norms in organizations. In the study, the researchers pre-determined the clusters and looked for behaviors that were either positive or negative relative to the cluster. My study is an opportunity to interpret the shadow from practitioners' direct experiences and further analyze how positive and negative norms inform the shadow in the context of positive organizational change. Also, my study seeks to understand the shadow as a repository of repressed or underutilized strengths.

2.6 Dialectical Theory as a Lens

The dialectic scholarship helps us to understand the dynamic interplay of tensions associated with positive organizational change. Baxter's (1988) seminal study of couples in romantic, heterosexual relationships defined dialectical tension as opposing needs that exist simultaneously, such as the desire for autonomy and connection. The two poles of autonomy and connection are constantly struggling for dominance, as are other tensions, such as predictability versus novelty, and openness versus closedness (Baxter & Simon, 1993). Baxter theorized that dialectal tensions are inherent in all relationships (Baxter & Simon, 1993). Tracy (2004) advanced the research by studying prison and correctional officers' reactions to organizational contradictions in situ.

Building on Baxter's work, organizational scholar Sarah Tracy (2004) observed four families of tensions experienced by employees in a correctional facility setting: respect versus suspect, nurture versus discipline, consistency versus flexibility, and solidarity versus autonomy.

While Tracy's study focused on employees in two correctional facilities, Linville et al. (2013) studied tensions as they manifested in a dyadic relationship between an employee and another person, such as a boss or co-worker. Linville et al. (2013) conducted in-depth interviews with fourteen employees from different organizations, including public corporations, privately owned small businesses, non-profits, and government agencies. The study focused on employees' experiences of dialectical tensions during organizational change events, such as mergers and acquisitions, organizational restructuring, and executive-level leadership changes. Linville et al. (2013) analysis of dyadic tensions between the employee and another person, such as a boss or co-worker, were defined as integration versus non-integration, expression versus non-expression, and change as necessary versus change as a threat.

These studies highlight the inevitability of competing tensions in organizational relationships and life. They provide a conceptual framework to study the dialectical tensions inherent in positive change initiatives. To date, AI scholarship has not used the frame of dialectical tension to understand a change effort at the meso level of organizing processes. Yet, given the acknowledgment of the shadow as an oppositional pole that emerges with the positive focus of change efforts, this study utilizes the helpful dialectic framework to understand the shadow in POS literature.

2.7 Identifying Tensions in AI

As aforementioned, the primary tension identified in AI literature is that which results from the focus away from problems and on to the positive (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Cooperrider, et al., 2005; Ludema, Whitney, Mohr & Griffin, 2003; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Aside from the positive versus problem tension in AI, there is a lack of knowledge about other tensions that may emerge as the AI process unfolds. Grant and

Humphries (2006) questioned if “participants are able to openly choose the discourse/vocabulary with which they construct their realities and negotiate meaning, or are those discourses/vocabularies chosen-imposed on them in a manner reminiscent of the vast impersonal systems of control/power identified by Foucault?” (p.415). Srithika and Bhattacharyya (2009) noted that tensions associated with culture, leadership, and management style could emerge as organizations unlearn old routines and embrace AI. Fitzgerald et al. (2010) hinted at tensions that may surface when a less-than-ideal current state overshadows AI’s aspirational focus. Bushe (2011) questioned, “Is it even possible to inquire into images of a positive future without evoking the negative past or present?” (p.18). In the last decade, AI scholarship began to explore how a focus on the positive has generated tension. Given the emphasis on the positive, many questions remain about what tensions surface in the process. This study adds to the literature by first identifying those tensions, asking RQ1: What are the dialectical tensions experienced in the AI process?

As noted earlier, scholars suggest a positive focus may censor or limit talk about problems (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Pratt, 2002; Fineman, 2006). Scholars have questioned the possibility of untapped knowledge when the focus is on the positive (Fineman, 2006; Grant & Humphries, 2006; Hill & Onyett, 2012). Other scholars have expressed concern about how selecting the positive can restrict what is explored and studied in organizations or discount negative experiences (Bushe, 2007; Fitzgerald, et al., 2010; Gemmill, 1986; Grant & Humphries, 2006; Golembiewski, 2000; Pratt, 2002). Others have cautioned about the stifling of conversations about hurts or injustices in favor of positive discourse, citing the danger of fostering mistrust, disengagement, or even violence (Oliver, 2005; Grant & Humphries, 2006). But how might the other guiding principles in AI become a source of tension? For example, the

wholeness principle advocates bringing all stakeholders together to stimulate creativity and build collective capacity (Whitney & Trosten Bloom, 2003). But what are the assumptions underlying the wholeness principle that may generate tension in organizations? For example, how are decisions made? What role do leaders play? What role do organizational members play? What tensions emerge because of assumptions about the meaning of wholeness? And what assumptions underlie the whole of AI? To further understand these tensions, this study also seeks to understand RQ1a: What are the assumptions that underlie these tensions?

Some scholars have suggested that the 4D methodology (discovery, dream, design, deliver) may be where tension surfaces in AI. Fitzgerald et al. (2010) noted, “to the extent that it (or normative definitions of the positive) become reified as ‘the way,’ it may censure experimentation and novel approaches, and in our experience has done both.” Fitzgerald et al. (2010) raised the question of what assumptions are attached to the 4D model. If an organization completes the process, is there an assumption about success? Conversely, if an organization fails to complete one or more of the four steps, what are the assumptions, and how might assumptions contribute to tension? Fitzgerald et al. (2010) stated, “the image of the 4D model has a normative impact on our imagining of AI potentialities, so that the ‘full transformative potential,’ may not be perceived as realized unless the full cycle is enacted.” This study seeks to understand RQ1b: How, when, and where tensions surface? In other words, what are the circumstances around the tension when it surfaces?

To my knowledge, scholarship has been largely silent on the theoretical implications of dialectical tensions in AI. Much of the AI literature has focused on the practitioner’s recognition of shadow norms. As Fitzgerald et al. (2010) noted, “Often the Shadow first expresses itself through uncomfortable feelings and awareness. As facilitators, we are learning to first recognize

and include our own discomfort rather than to ignore or discount it, as integral to authentic appreciation.” (p. 229). Johnson (2007) suggested there is something to be learned “when we look at how we think about and manage those uncomfortable moments when someone ‘resists’ our appreciative frame, or when we are most uncomfortable in our own shoes as AI practitioners” (p.18). Accordingly, there is an opportunity to identify theoretical implications from practical experiences. As such, this study asks RQ2: What are the implications of the tension?

Most of what we know about tensions in AI comes from practitioner’s experiences. The November 2012 issue of the AI Practitioner was dedicated entirely to articles focused on “Embracing the Shadow through Appreciative Inquiry.” The articles included intrapersonal reflections from work in the field (Hill & Onyett (2012) and thoughts about AI and diversity (Wasserman, 2012). In addition, articles included reflections on the ways that AI’s positivity can inadvertently generate the shadow, be used as an intervention into shadow, reflect a larger cultural shadow of discomfort with painful conversations, and perpetuate an existing shadow by not naming or challenging it (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Practitioners' perspectives are vital to answering RQ2a: How do tensions influence the change process?

Theoretical development opportunities also exist regarding how tensions are managed and navigated in change processes. Allen and Pilnick (1973) offered strategies to navigate tensions associated with their positive versus negative normative system. Proposed strategies included behavior modification and training for organizational leaders, reinforcing messaging in internal communications, and modifying recruitment, hiring, and orientation practices (Allen & Pilnick, 1973). Baxter (1988, 1990) proposed various techniques for navigating tensions. For example, choosing autonomy at the expense of connection is the selection technique. Baxter also

proposed separation as a technique for navigating tension, meaning the relationship parties alternate between the two poles of autonomy and connection. The third technique is to neutralize the intensity of the poles through small talk. The fourth technique is to reframe the tensions so that the two poles are no longer regarded as opposites (Baxter, 1988, 1990). However, it is unclear how these relational dialectics translate to change processes. Further research is needed to identify approaches for navigating tensions in the context of positive organizational change.

Tracy (2004) expanded on Baxter's research and posited a theoretical frame for making sense of organizational tensions—as simple contradictions, complementary dialectics, or paradoxes. Simple contradictions frame tensions as a choice between two actions or alternating between the two. Complementary dialectics reframe the tension so it is no longer viewed as tension. Paradox frames the tension as a double bind—to obey is to disobey, and to disobey is to obey. Tracy argues that framing tensions as complementary dialectics rather than simple contradictions or paradoxes lets organizational members know that they are not alone in experiencing contradictions, which may foster the open sharing of coping mechanisms. While selection and reframing strategies offer insight into managing the “elephants in the room,” further exploration is needed to identify additional strategies to navigate tensions in AI. Given the proliferation of AI, this study asks RQ2b: What are strategies to navigate the tension?

This chapter identified gaps in AI and positive change scholarship that calls for further research, including the need to understand dialectical tensions experienced in organizations when the focus is on the positive assumptions about the tensions, theoretical implications of the tensions, how tensions influence the process; and strategies to navigate tension. As such, the following questions will guide my research:

RQ 1: What are experiences of dialectical tensions associated with AI in organizational change efforts?

RQ 1a: What assumptions about the tensions became evident during the change process?

RQ 1b: In what context did the tension arise?

RQ 2: What are the implications of the tension?

RQ2a. How did the tension influence the process?

RQ2b. In what ways are dialectical tensions in AI navigated in organizations?