Appreciative Inquiry: Development Evaluation, The Values Underpinning Research, Learning by Doing, Data Collection

Appreciative Inquiry and Data Collection Methods: Reflections on Working as a former Research Coordinator

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I started my journey with the Centre for Employment Innovation on Monday, October 26, 2020 as the Research Coordinator for the Nova Scotia Works Diversity and Inclusion & Certification projects in Canada. It was an exciting, welcoming and also a difficult tenure trying to make sense of the wide variety of documents to be reviewed, understood and analyzed, coupled with the readings on data gathering methods and analysis for **Developmental Evaluation for Social Impact** *course.*

Introduction

Appreciative Inquiry stood out for me, because it is both a research philosophy and is used in data collection.

I learnt that Appreciative Inquiry is framework or approach that centers the contributions of community and stakeholders in self-determined change. It is used to identify challenges from a systems point-of-view and to look at the strengths of teams and communities using internal capacities.

For example, instead of an outside expert asking a community, 'what is going wrong and what can I do to solve the problem?' a developmental evaluator who uses the appreciative inquiry approach would ask the community:

What were the strengths?

What were the points of tensions, setbacks and weaknesses? What did we learn and what can we apply from the moments of strengths in the next course of action?'

This is evident in Michael Patton's (2011) argument where he states that a developmental evaluator is embedded into the project and he or she is not just gathering data, analyzing it and writing a report but actively engaging communities and stakeholders (p.305). He further went on to explain that the co-creation process involves: conceptualizing the social innovation together along with generating inquiry questions, figuring out what data to collect and how to collect it and tracking changing conditions, what emerges and paying attention to new learnings (Patton, 2011, p.307).

This therefore means that appreciative inquiry requires a shift in thinking from seeing problems as a matter of individual deficit but recognizing that members of the eco-system have an instrumental role to play in social innovation and change. **Change does not occur in a linear, predictable fashion neither does it happen when there is 'ONE VOICE' shaping, directing and determining the narrative. Change happens when the community involved, is able to see themselves as partners in the change making process rather than mere recipients of program benefits.** All community members and stakeholders should be involved from conceptualizing, designing, collecting data, analyzing it and putting together the report like a group, putting the pieces of large puzzle to make sense of the big picture.

This is directly related to my past work experiences where we are in the early phases of creating developmental evaluation for both projects. We were not at the stage where we are doing interviews and focus group discussions but we are at the stage where I have to collect data in real-time such as attending Zoom/Microsoft Teams meetings, email exchanges and listening out for important information in informal spaces such as lunch discussions or face to face meetings where we socially distance.

I have personally witnessed cases where discussions may go 'off tangent' from the original agenda item and then I will ask questions for clarity such as 'could you share some more details on why is this so?' and participants would give me broader political and historical context of about the origins of a problem- that is multiple, systemic barriers for African Nova Scotians and Peoples of African descent to find meaningful work and why this persists.

I would then observe the moments of tensions to the moments where the group decide on how to proceed whether through forging partnerships with social innovators who have similar goals or drawing on the expertise of local community people for support as the program develops.

Learning by doing is key. I have applied what Patton (2011) calls 'situational responsiveness as a developmental evaluator" (p.314). Situational responsiveness is simply knowing when to be an active voice, when to be interactive with the team and when to be reactive or allow conversations and directions for action to unfold organically. In other words, a developmental evaluator is not expected to be 'dead silent or dominate the discussion' in meetings or collecting any form of data in real-time.

Appreciative Inquiry also challenges me to understand that before I collect/gather data, I need to know what are the values underpinning the research, what data to collect, for what purpose and for whom?

This leads us into the course reading by Cobb and Donnelly (2015) where both state that the values that underpin a project are the same ones that inform the evaluation (p.6). I immediately connected this quote by reflecting on the work of the Centre for Employment Innovation (CEI). Although research and innovation is one of the four (4) pillars for our work, research and innovation do not stand alone but is combined with collaboration and engagement. We are doing research that is community-based, practitioner-based and one that also seeks to identify innovative or exemplary practices to make the development and delivery of employment services more diverse and inclusive. Having established these clear principles and purpose, it is better to determine what data collection methods are to be used. Surveys are popular quantitative data methods of collection used in research for our company and other institutions.

Quantitative data methods of collection like surveys are advantageous in terms of cost and time effectiveness and they answer question like how many or what percentage of a population is affected by the problem to be researched? (Ferris, 2011). However, the disadvantage with using quantitative methods of data collection like surveys is that, you need an experienced statistician to develop the data collection instrument in a way that the population to be surveyed represents the general population (representative sample) by using a confidence interval. For example, in a 2018 group research project entitled 'The Socio-Demographic Factors that affect Voter Turnout in the 2011 General Elections in Jamaica', the researchers including myself, surveyed 1,500 people using a confidence interval of 95%. It is not possible to survey all 2.9 million people living in Jamaica so the confidence interval was used to help the researchers come up a sample that represents the total population. Without doing this, when it comes on to interpreting and analyzing quantitative data, the data will be inaccurate and virtually useless.

Additionally, numbers alone cannot give a comprehensive picture on why a problem exists/persists and how is it affecting a community. This is not to say that quantitative methods of data collection are not important but it is dependent **on the purpose of the research, the problem to be researched, research question/s and research values.**

This is where qualitative methods of data collection such as focus group discussions and in-depth interview become more useful. According to Curry (2015) in-depth interviews explore individual experiences and perceptions in rich detail while focus group discussions generate unique insights into shared experiences and norms. These are applicable to previous phases for the developmental evaluation reports for the Nova Scotia Works Diversity and Inclusion project and the new phase of the project that I worked on. In-depth interviews are helpful when a developmental evaluator/researcher wants to address sensitive topic by examining an in-depth, individual point of view and in the case of the project, sensitive topics would encompass discrimination, exclusion, feelings of alienation in the workplace or not finding work for long periods of time, racism and so on.

A major challenge using this data collection method is how to build trust with the participant so that there is no fear of reprisal. This is connected with the topic of 'research ethics' where you follow a set of principles or guidelines to ensure a participant is protected such as confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent but ethics in and of itself will not allow a participant who is a victim of institutionalized/ systemic oppression to speak up boldly. I learnt some ideas from breakout room session from the Developmental Evaluation for Social Impact course where a researcher has to abide by both ethics and come up with creative ways of asking interview questions to elicit rich insights or detail and that includes: being

conversational in tone, relatability of the researcher to the participant but not being too involved, active and empathetic listening and asking very clear or simple questions. You can could ask questions that evoke images or tie questions to culturally relevant or sensitive themes. For example, Peoples of African descent are connected to a history and culture of orality or oral expressions so if you can tie questions to popular, community proverbial expressions , dance or song or any community custom, this would be a good way to engage and encourage more relaxed and authentic communication.

On the other hand, focus group discussions are ways of getting a group perspective on an issue in great detail. Focus group discussions are ideal for including persons from diverse backgrounds and different generations to broaden the spectrum of looking at a problem and it will provide safe space especially for members of the community who are not literate or shy to speak up alone. The challenge with a focus group is observing and controlling the power dynamics- those who speak up boldly vs those who don't, the perspective of men vs. perspective of women, old versus young and so on. It is critical that a fair and equal opportunity is given to different voices to share their experiences and perceptions and equally critical that a researcher pays keen attention to the moments of silence and when to step in to give another group member a chance to share. My big takeaway from this course on Developmental Evaluation for Social Impact comes from Dr. Paula Romanow towards the end of Thursday's discussion where she says when doing qualitative data analysis, even if one person shares their experience or perception, it is still important.

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