


February 2024

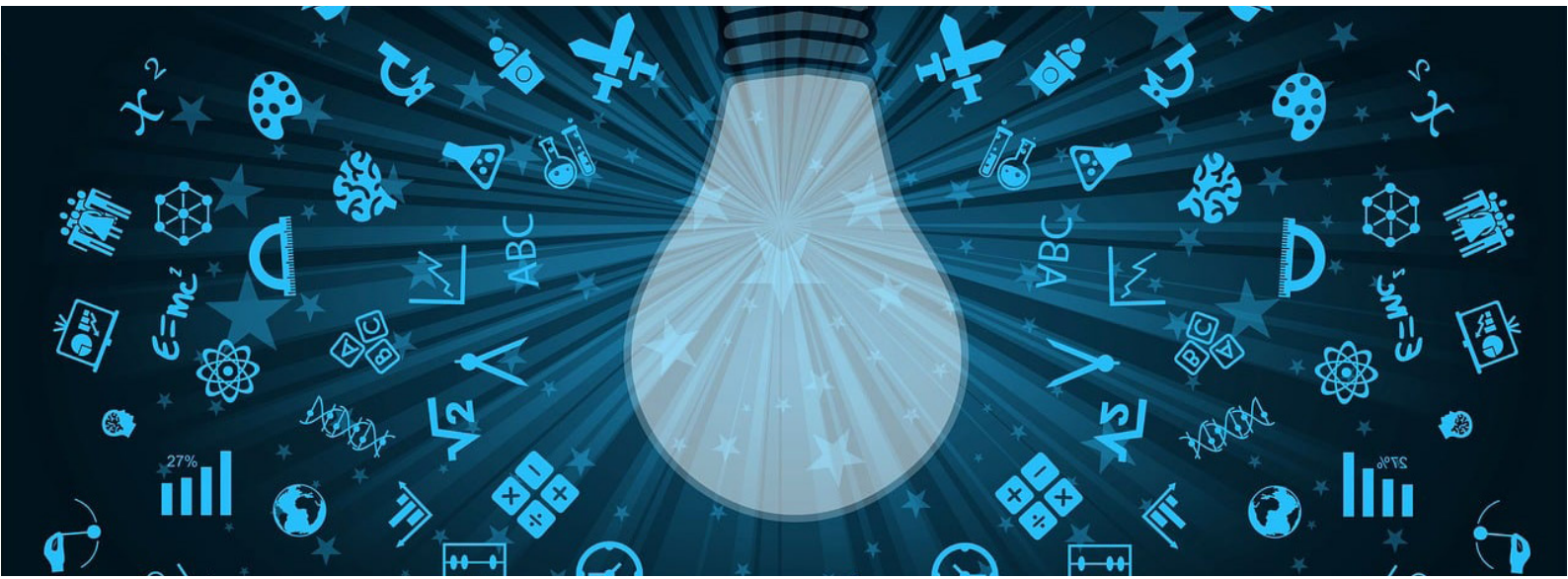
Volume 26 Number 1

ISBN 978-1-907549-58-8

 dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-58-8

AI Practitioner

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



Appreciative Inquiry as a Research Method for Qualitative Research and Prospective Theory Building for the Age of Enlivenment

Edited by

David L. Cooperrider and Lindsey N. Godwin

Co-publishers

**The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry
and Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company**



www.aipractitioner.com/subscriptions 



Sign up for our free AIP eNews 



Luc Verheijen

Luc Verheijen is a partner at Kessels & Smit, the Learning Company. He is a Taos Institute Associate and co-publisher of *AI Practitioner*. His book, co-authored with Saskia Tjepkema and Joeri Kabalt, *Appreciative Inquiry as a Daily Leadership Practice* was published by Taos Institute Publishers in 2020.
Contact: lverheijen@kessels-smit.com



Saskia Tjepkema

Saskia Tjepkema is a partner at Kessels & Smit, the Learning Company, a member of the supervisory board of NSO-CNA Academy for School leadership and a co-publisher of *AI Practitioner*. Her co-authored book *Appreciative Inquiry as a Daily Leadership Practice* was published by Taos Institute Publishers in 2020.
Contact: stjepkema@kessels-smit.com

Co-publishers' Introduction, 2024

The Angelic Smile Experiment

In this introduction to the 2024 *AI Practitioner* publishing year, the co-publishers share the results of their angelic smile experiment, linking it to the words of Alice Herz-Sommer and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. They invite us, at the start of this complicated new year, to look for positive, engaging ethical encounters with others using small acts of appreciation in our daily routine.

With this first *AI Practitioner* issue of 2024, the co-publishers wish for their community of readers and contributors a meaningful, healthy and happy new year. As the world around us continues to develop in ways that cause sadness, grief and despair, we hope for each one of you the chance to experience joy, happiness and awe.

In the words of the late Alice Herz-Sommer, pianist and Holocaust survivor: yes, we know about the bad things and we choose to look for the good in the spaces we live, work and love in. It is not that the stories we will meet when putting our attention there will change the global course of the world. But they can make a difference, as much for the people we meet as for ourselves. The message in one of the new year's cards we received is apt: "When the world seems to turn darker, let our relationship be one of light".

The angelic smile

A story comes to mind related to these new year wishes. It's about an experiment one of us has been undertaking for quite some time: the angelic smile experiment. To understand the experiment, we need to share the back story first.

One day, a colleague was on a hike with a friend in the mountains near Sun Valley, Idaho in the USA. While descending, they encountered two other hikers. The first greeted our colleague and his friend in the most cordial and warmest way one can imagine. She radiated, her energy was captivating. The downhill



Did we just meet an angel?

He became aware that his emotions had shifted.

walkers, our colleague and his friend, continued their journey for fifteen minutes or so, when they took a short break at a small mountain stream. They acknowledged the fact that they both had been walking in silence after the greeting encounter. When sharing their sense of wonder about the meeting with the other hikers, it turned out that both, independently, had the same image and question in mind: did we just meet an angel?

The beginning of an experiment

A few years later, after a conversation with the hiking friend, our colleague was reminded of this special encounter. It is the beginning of an experiment which he calls the angelic smile experiment. The purpose of this experiment is to see what happens if you walk around and encounter people conveying the same quality of heartfelt and sincere greeting as he experienced in the mountains of Idaho. He often walks and greets people he comes across – with an angelic smile. The results are interesting, but don't show any particular pattern. Some people greet him back with a smile that lights up their entire face. Others ignore him. Yet others show surprise, or sometimes their suspicion. Dogs don't seem to care.

One morning, our colleague was on the train, on his way to give a lecture at the university, feeling a bit grumpy after having had a bad night's sleep. When he arrived at the destination train station, he had a fifteen-minute walk ahead of him. Somehow, the angelic smile experiment came to mind and, although not in the best shape, he decided to conduct the experiment once again.

When he arrived at his teaching venue, he became aware that his emotions had shifted. No more heavy thoughts or grumbling feelings. Actually he felt light, cheerful, even happy. That is the moment that the biggest insight from all his angelic-smile walks hit him: the biggest effect was not for others, but for himself! To quote Pema Chödrön: "To appreciate people and things around us does not take a big effort, but it warms our hearts and makes us feel connected to the world."

A moment of ethical significance

The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas explores the ethical implications of the face-to-face encounter, emphasizing the idea that our existence is profoundly interconnected with the existence of others. It is in and through the encounter with the "Other" that our sense of self and ethical responsibility is fundamentally shaped: the encounter has a transformative impact on the self.

Our subjectivity is deeply connected to our ethical encounters with the Other.

We can make a difference if we pay attention to the power of our micro-gestures.

The initial encounter in the mountains near Sun Valley becomes, in that sense, a moment of ethical significance, prompting reflection and wonder about the nature of the meeting. The question “Did we just meet an angel?” reflects Levinas’s idea that the encounter with the Other disrupts our ordinary understanding of the world and calls us to respond ethically. The transformative experience in the angelic smile experiment also aligns with Levinas’s notion that our subjectivity is deeply connected to our ethical encounters with the Other.

Micro-gestures as AI practice

So, to a certain degree, this story invites us into exploring the significance of what we might call “micro-gestures” as practices of Appreciative Inquiry, the small acts of appreciation in our daily routines. The moments we support others by connecting with them through their strengths. The examples of times when asking a new type of question triggers an interaction that leads to new possibilities. The angelic smiles with which we greet people we meet.

As with the frameworks of Appreciative Inquiry, the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas highlights the importance of recognizing and building upon the positive aspects of human relationships and experiences. Whereas the developments of the grand schemes and the global systems feel too complex, too distant and too abstract, we can make a difference if we pay attention to the power of our micro-gestures. Or, to put it with the words of Levinas, when there is nothing left to us but the humanity of the other human being.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Everyone Matters (2013, February 13). *109-yr-old Holocaust Survivor's Wisdom: "Look for the Beauty in Life"* [Video].

YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnoQ8F_CUFE

Chödrön, P. (2019). *Welcoming the Unwelcome. Wholehearted Living in a Brokenhearted World*. Shambhala Publications.

Levinas, E. (1961). *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Luc Verheijen and Saskia Tjepkema
February 2024

[Back to Table of Contents](#)