Application of appreciative inquiry in tourism research in rural communities

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ABSTRACT

Appreciative inquiry is a participatory research method based on positive psychology. Founded upon grounded theory and the social constructivist paradigm, appreciative inquiry is a simple, effective, and epistemologically sound tool to understand the rural population’s knowledge, needs, and priorities without alienating them from research. Based on the study conducted to comprehend the interrelationships among conservation, livelihood, and tourism development in three rural communities located in the vicinity of Chitwan National Park, Nepal, this study argues that appreciative inquiry can be a useful tool for conducting tourism research in rural communities. This study employs five steps, including grounding, discovery, dream, design, and destiny.

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1. Introduction

Appreciative inquiry was initiated as a research method alternative to conventional action research in the organizational development field in the 1980s (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). This method searches for strengths in individuals, organizations, communities, and societies, which give life, health, vitality, and excellence to the development of those human systems (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). In fact, during the last 25 years, appreciative inquiry has experienced exponential growth. It has been applied in many social science and development fields, including organizational development (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006; Reed, Jones, & Irvine, 2005), community development (Jain & Tiraganan, 2003; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003), health (Carter, 2006; Messerschmidt, 2008), education (Bushe, 2010; Grant & Humphries, 2006), and recently in tourism (Koster & Lemelin, 2009; Raymond & Hall, 2008a; 2008b).

The success of appreciative inquiry can be attributed to its theoretical foundation and its adaptability in practice. Theoretically, appreciative inquiry is a strength-based, generative, constructivist, and participatory action research method, and is a highly dynamic and adaptive process that emphasizes the use of innovative methods to study complex human systems (Bushe, 1999; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that appreciative inquiry can be a promising tourism research tool that can be applied in rural communities. It begins with a discussion of appreciative inquiry and its relationships with strength-based approaches, grounded theory, the constructivist paradigm, and participatory action research. The paper then goes on to discuss the appreciative inquiry process and explains how this process has been adapted to examine the interrelationships among tourism development, biodiversity conservation, and livelihood improvement. Finally, the paper probes the challenges involved with employing the appreciative inquiry approach. First and foremost, however, this is a methodological paper, and it emphasizes methods rather than study results. For the findings, readers are suggested to refer to Nyaupane and Poudel (2011).

2. Appreciative inquiry: a strength-based approach

Appreciative inquiry is one of the strength-based or asset-based approaches applied in social and behavioral sciences. The history of the study of human strengths can be traced back to Hindu and Buddhist philosophies and the classic works of well-known psychologists such as William James, Carl Jung, Carl Rogers, Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow, Erik Erikson, Marie Jahoda, Edward L. Deci, Richard Ryan, and others (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). In recent years, these strengths have been studied as “individual strengths and virtues” in positive psychology (Compton,
2005; Gable & Haidt, 2005; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & King, 2001; Simonton & Baumeister, 2005), as “life giving forces in human systems” in appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Watkins & Mohr, 2001), as “positive deviants” in positive deviance (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010), and as “community capitals and capacities” in asset-based community development and sustainable livelihood (Ashley & Carney, 1999; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

The most important aspect of appreciative inquiry is that it allows researchers to better explore the “life giving forces in human systems (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). These life-giving forces provide life, health, vitality, and excellence to functioning individuals, organizations, and societies. Appreciative inquiry advocates for the use of affirmative approaches—the use of a positive lens—in the study of life-giving forces because these approaches are present in the success stories of people and organizations. In other words, this approach seeks out the best qualities in both individuals and organizations, and not the problems and deficits (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). The following are examples of appreciative questions that can be employed to find out the strengths (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987): What are the strengths?; who are the virtuosos?; who is doing well?; and what is fulfilling? Similarly, assets in communities and organizations can be studied by asking: what are the assets?; what is working?; what is productive?; which ones are resilient and sustainable?; what nurtures?; and what is improving?

The traditional problem-solving or deficiency-based approaches typically ask people to look backwards in order to discover problems and their causes, and then to design programs through which to solve their problems. These approaches can help to maintain the status quo, but rarely result in the creation of a new vision (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Such problem-solving approaches are generally notorious for generating conflict (i.e., people blame each other for the problems) and defensiveness (i.e., people rarely accept that they are to blame for the problem). Unlike traditional approaches, the focus of appreciative inquiry is to learn about the strengths and successes of people who are interested in sharing their strength and the stories of triumph related to their lives, communities, and organizations, which it is hoped will provide a new vision for the future.

3. Appreciative inquiry: a constructivist grounded theory method

Appreciative inquiry is founded upon grounded theory and supports the social constructivist paradigm (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Grounded theory is an inductive method used to build middle-range theoretical frameworks by employing a systematic process of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is a qualitative research strategy employed to derive general abstract theories from the analysis of the patterns, themes, and common categories found in observational data (Babie, 2007; Creswell, 2007, 2009; Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The inquiry process in grounded theory proceeds in an almost reverse fashion from the traditional scientific method, which begins with choosing a theoretical framework and then proceeds with developing a hypothesis, collecting data, analyzing data, and making a conclusion about the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). On the contrary, the process of data collection and analysis go hand-in-hand in grounded theory: the theories are generated or grounded in data obtained from participants who experience the phenomena of the study (Charmaz, 2000; Creswell et al., 2007).

The use of theories developed from observations in grounded theory has been highly appreciated by social scientists, but the procedures employed to develop the theories largely followed positivist and post-positivist traditions (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser, 1992; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). With the popularity of postmodern, interpretive, and naturalist approaches in the social sciences, Charmaz (2000, 2008) urged for the adoption of a constructivist paradigm in grounded theory procedure. Taking the middle path between postmodernism and post-positivism, the social constructivist paradigm espouses: 1) relativist ontology—that there are multiple realities; 2) transactional and subjectivist epistemology—that investigator and participants are interactively linked in an inquiry; and 3) hermeneutic and dialectical methodology—that reality can be elicited and refined through the interactions among researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Charmaz’s (2000) constructivist grounded theory postulates that multiple realities and truths can coexist and assumes that knowledge can be created through interaction among the researcher and participants. The theory further supports the pluralistic and plastic character of reality that can be comprehended in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructs (Charmaz, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwant, 1994). Additionally, it is recommended that flexible heuristic strategies be adopted in the constructivist grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2000).

Similar to grounded theory, appreciative inquiry adopts the inductive process (i.e., there is no predetermined hypothesis to test), and it starts with the grounded observation of the “best what of what is” in the form of stories and continues with the finding of patterns or themes and develops theories from these themes (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Appreciative inquiry holds a constructivist position and supports the notion of subjectivity, nonlinearity, and the complexity of the world (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Grant & Humphries, 2006; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). It believes that positivist, reductionist, and deterministic epistemologies, which employ rigorous, systematic, and objective methodologies to obtain reliable and valid knowledge, are not well suited for studying human phenomena (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). In all phases of appreciative inquiry, the study of a phenomenon takes place in its natural setting, and the focus of the inquiry is on finding the socially created reality shaped by language and other social processes, which are local and specific in nature. The investigator and the participants in an appreciative inquiry process are in dynamic interaction. The inquiry findings or outcomes, therefore, are not the objective reality but the literal creations or construction of the inquiry process. Appreciative inquiry internalizes hermeneutic methodology (i.e., the meaning of social phenomena are analyzed by juxtaposing them within the broad context from which they originate). In addition, the appreciative inquiry process is also dialectic (i.e., people compare and contrast different phenomena and attribute meaning to them).

4. Appreciative inquiry: a participatory action research method

Appreciative inquiry is a participatory action research (PAR) method, an offshoot of action research that adopts cooperative inquiry. Action research searches for practical knowledge to help people in their everyday lives (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Lewin, 1946; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). This type of research puts theory and practice together with action and reflection to find practical solutions to pressing real-world problems (Peters & Robinson, 1984; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Cooperative inquiry, rejecting the positivist and post-positivist dualist/objectivist epistemology, advocates for research with people rather than research on people. In other words, all participants work together in an
inquiry group as co-researchers or co-subjects (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Heron & Reason, 2001, 2008). Furthermore, both researcher and subject participate actively throughout the entire process of an inquiry from the very first step (i.e., designing the inquiry) to the final step (i.e., acting collectively to transform the social world) (Heron & Reason, 2008).

PAR integrates action research with cooperative inquiry and has been defined as “a qualitative research inquiry in which the researcher and the participants collaborate at all levels in the research process to help find a suitable solution for a social problem that significantly affects an underserved community” (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 256). The PAR research process involves a spiral of self-reflective cycles of planning, acting and observing, reflecting, and replanning (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). The research process is participatory—people do both practical and collaborative research on themselves and work together to examine their social practices and to reconstruct their social actions. PAR also acts as an “emancipator” in that it liberates people from the social structures that limit their self-development and self-determination (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Shani & Bushe, 1987; Susman & Evered, 1978). Additionally, PAR is a critical, reflexive, and dialectical process that improves theories and practices of both practitioners and other people affiliated with a social phenomenon that is being studied (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). But perhaps most importantly, PAR is not a single-shot procedure; instead, it is a social process that is meant to reveal relationships between people and their social realm (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

One of the guiding principles of appreciative inquiry is the free choice principle which argues that “free choice liberates power” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 75). In other words, people feel better and are more committed when they have the freedom to choose how and what to contribute. Therefore, appreciative inquiry encourages a participatory and collaborative process of inquiry. The inquiry treats the research participants not as research objects, but as collaborators who design, analyze, and implement the results, evaluate programs, and even build theories. Furthermore, a cooperative and participatory inquiry approach such as appreciative inquiry tends to make participants feel less vulnerable, because it is less threatening for people to share their ideas among themselves rather than with outsiders (Lavender & Chapple, 2004). Inquiry can be conducted through pair interviews, group discussions, and focus group discussions (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Whatever the inquiry method, participants take the lead role. And the role of the researcher is to listen, question, cue, guide, and encourage the participants to make success stories more descriptive and interesting (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). In other words, the participants, subjects, and interviewees in the appreciative inquiry process are co-researchers engaged in bringing about change through interaction with others.

Another guiding principle of the appreciative inquiry process is the simultaneity principle which states that “inquiry creates change” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 58). Appreciative inquiry believes that research itself is an intervention in human systems (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The very first question that a researcher asks is the potential seed of change. After all, the questions direct participants to think, talk about, discover, learn, dream, and act on. The selected topics become the agenda of learning, knowledge-sharing, and action, or in short, the topics serve as a pathway toward an innovation in an organization or community (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

Appreciative inquiry is a way of seeing and being in the world (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). The opportunity-centric methodology maps the positive core and gives the radically new direction to impact positive revolution (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The process of mapping a positive core occurs when “an organization enhances its collective wisdom, builds energy and resiliency to change, and extends its capacity to achieve extraordinary results” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 10). Thus, appreciative inquiry is a mutual learning process that liberates the human body, mind, and spirit in its search for a better, freer world (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Additionally, as a research process that is intended for discovering, understanding, and fostering innovations in social-organizational arrangements and processes, appreciative inquiry encourages collective actions to transform people, groups, organizations, and even society as a whole (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Therefore, the appreciative inquiry process seems to adopt the participatory action research process while studying people and society.

### 5. Appreciative inquiry process

The appreciative inquiry process is presented in various models, including the original Cooperrider/Srivastva Model (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), the 4-D Model (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999), the EnCompass Model (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006), and the Mohr/Jacobsgaard 4-I Model (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). The essence of all these models is a 4-D cycle (Fig. 1) that involves four steps: (1) discovery, appreciating what gives life; (2) dream, envisioning what might happen; (3) design, creating actions of what should be; and (4) destiny, sustaining the changes (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

The appreciative inquiry process begins with the discovery phase that involves appreciating what gives life and energy to an individual, community, or organization. The inquiry into and dialog about life-giving forces—strengths, successes, values, and hopes that transform the human systems—identifies “the best of what has been and what is” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). During the discovery phase, the goals and objectives, the best practices and exemplary actions, the positive core, and the full potential of an organization are all uncovered in the form of stories.

Stories, analyses, and maps of the positive core are essential resources for the dream phase (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr, & Griffin, 2003). Based on the realized life-giving forces and desired change direction, the clear vision of the future is co-created to challenge the status quo (Ludema et al., 2003; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). The images of the future in appreciative inquiry emerge out of grounded examples from an organization’s positive past (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The dream phase is both practical, in the sense it is built upon past outcomes, and generative, in the sense it aims to expand future potential (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

The design phase refers to the process of drawing a community’s or organization’s socio-technical architecture. In other words, it is the communication system, organizational culture, education and training, leadership, policies, strategy, technology, governance, employees, and infrastructure that enable the dream to become reality (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003; Watkins & Mohr, 2001). Furthermore, the provocative propositions that articulate the shared vision in the dream phase are created to put the dreams into practice. In addition, the provocative propositions stretch, challenge, and in some cases interrupt the status quo and guide future actions and behaviors (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

The destiny phase, which was previously called the delivery phase, answers the question as to how best “empower, learn, and adjust/improvise”; hence, it strengthens the affirmative capability of the whole system to maintain high performance, which subsequently sustains the ongoing positive change (Berrett, 1995; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Egan & Lancaster, 2005). It is true too that the destiny phase is often the realization of the dream.

Since human systems are complex and dynamic, all phenomena in socio-organizational systems cannot be studied with a single
Fig. 1. Appreciative inquiry steps.

approach because the insights generated by such approaches never provide the complete picture of the system being studied (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Therefore, when one considers the 4-D cycle as the basic guiding framework, all appreciative inquiry interventions can be made to fit the system being studied (Bushe, 1999; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The appreciative inquiry process can be formal or informal, fast or slow, and may include all the employees of an organization, or only the representatives of stakeholders. An organization can initiate the process by formally organizing trainings and workshops for its employees or stakeholders. That said, however, the process can permeate a community through informal discussions between individuals or during meetings. Additionally, a cycle can be completed in few days (e.g., three days for an appreciative inquiry summit) or it may take months (e.g., for a community-based organization with diverse stakeholders). The purpose of inquiry, the type of institution, and the nature of the desired change largely determine the appreciative inquiry process.

6. Application of appreciative inquiry approach

The application of appreciative inquiry began in the organizational development field soon after its first successful use in Cleveland Clinic at Case Western Reserve University and the publication of a seminal article on appreciative inquiry by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Many large corporations and other organizations soon adopted appreciative inquiry for different objectives (Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). For Avon Mexico, the focus of the appreciative inquiry was in learning to value gender diversity. For McDonald’s, it was about becoming an employer of choice. For British Airways North America, it was about making a whole-system change. For Hunter Douglas Window Fashions, it was about creating a shared vision. And for NASA, it was about developing a strategic plan and building an inclusive culture.

Within a decade of its inception, appreciative inquiry began being applied in the field of community development, especially in developing countries. For example, it was used to create and strengthen community development organizations in Myra, India (Watkins & Mohr, 2001), to examine the effects of a women’s health project in Nepal (Messerschmidt, 2008), and to study best practices within multi-agencies working with children with complex needs in the UK (Carter, 2006). Even after the successful implementation of appreciative inquiry method into the development field, it has been sporadically used for research purposes. The reluctance of researchers to employ appreciative inquiry stems from the debate regarding its appropriateness as a research tool (Bushe, 2007) and the ambiguity regarding how to use it in a research context (Carter, 2006). However, the scholars who use appreciative inquiry as a research tool (e.g., Carter, 2006; Koster & Lemelin, 2009; Liebling, Price, & Elliott, 1999; Michael, 2005; Raymond & Hall, 2008a) are generally in agreement that appreciative inquiry can and should be used as a research tool with the necessary adaptations.

In fact, some scholars (e.g., Liebling, Elliott, & Arnold, 2001; Liebling et al., 1999; Michael, 2005) have used appreciative inquiry as an interview tool, employing only the discovery phase. The appreciative interviews have not only produced detailed accounts of information, but have also initiated a positive change process. For example, Liebling et al. (2001) reported that appreciative inquiry interviews initiated the process of cultural change in the prison system by releasing the positive latent energy of the system. Michael (2005) found that the participants were more eager and open, and less defensive and fearful during the appreciative interviews than normal interviews, and provided unrehearsed information.

Others have used the appreciative inquiry 4-D cycle with some adaptations. Reed, Pearson, Douglas, Swinburne, and Wilding (2002) conducted three simultaneous workshops for the discovery, design, and delivery phases of the 4-D cycle, respectively. Carter’s (2006) appreciative inquiry process consisted of three phases: (1) appreciative interviews (discovery and dream); (2) nominal group techniques (dream and design); and (3) consensus workshops (design and destiny). Lavender and Chapple (2004) conducted the appreciative inquiry process through focus group interviews where the questions asked were related to discovery (i.e., what do you believe to be good about your community?), dream (i.e., what do you want to achieve in your community?), and design (i.e., what actions are needed to make your vision a reality?) phases of the 4-D cycle. In every case, the 4-D cycle was adapted to fit within the study context, that is, with the diversity of stakeholders (Reed et al., 2002), with the geographical isolation of the participants (Carter, 2006), and with the homogeneity of participants (Lavender & Chapple, 2004). At least three studies (e.g., Koster & Lemelin, 2009; Raymond & Hall, 2008a; 2008b) that employed appreciative inquiry were found in
tourism literature, and each of these studies adopted the 4-D cycle as its research framework. Since the studies by Raymond and Hall (2008a, 2008b) were aimed at developing a framework of good practice for volunteer tourism, and the purpose of Koster and Lemelin’s (2009) study was to provide unique travel experiences for visitors, the appreciative inquiry process was best suited for them because the focus of inquiry was on strengths and capacities rather than problems.

It is evident from the aforementioned discussion that the focus of inquiry should be the positive core in all appreciative inquiry interventions. While conducting an appreciative inquiry process, the 4-D cycle acts as a basic guiding framework, but it is not necessary that all appreciative inquiry practices go through all steps in the same manner. It is the objective and the context that most influence the form of engagement and the inquiry strategy.

7. Appreciative inquiry in understanding interrelationships between conservation, livelihood, and tourism

We employed the appreciative inquiry process in a research project aimed to uncover how tourism helps in the conservation of biological diversity and livelihood improvement in Nepal. The task of tourism development, biodiversity conservation, and livelihood improvement is only possible through the joint effort of a range of stakeholders, including governments, tourism entrepreneurs, non-profit organizations, and local people. Every stakeholder has its own interests and sometimes these interests conflict among stakeholders. Appreciative inquiry was chosen as a research approach against traditional research approaches because studies (e.g., Carter, 2006; Reed et al., 2002) in the past have reported that appreciative inquiry is the best approach in a situation where many stakeholders with diverse interests work together.

The research was conducted around Chitwan National Park, the oldest national park and a World Heritage Site in Nepal. The park is situated in south Nepal, covering 932 square kilometers in the subtropical lowlands of the inner Terai (Fig. 2). The park is home to more than 50 mammal species, 525 birds, and 55 amphibians and reptiles, including many globally threatened species (Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation [DNPWC], 2010). More than 200,000 people live in the 750 square kilometer area, which borders the park, and a significant proportion of its inhabitants are poor and dependent on park resources, such as timber, fuel wood, fodder, thatching materials, and other forest products, for their livelihood needs (DNPWC, 2008). In fact, reduced access to park resources has been identified as a major source of conflict between park authorities and local people in many protected areas, including Chitwan National Park. Additionally, the other major cause of park and people conflict is the entry of wild animals into villages, which damages crops, kills livestock, and destroys houses.

Tourism is burgeoning in the area with more than 100,000 visitations every year (DNPWC, 2008). The mega vertebrates such as the Royal Bengal tiger, one-horned rhinoceros, Gharial crocodile, Gangetic dolphin, and Asian elephant are the major tourist attractions in the park. However, tourism is highly concentrated in only one area (i.e., Sauraha) and so is the distribution of income from tourism. Therefore, the cost of conservation has to be paid by every individual living in the vicinity of the park, but the distribution of the benefits of conservation in terms of tourism revenue is highly skewed.

Taking into account the inquiry agenda and the study context, we developed a new form of the five-step appreciative inquiry process. We realized that prior to the four-steps researchers had to build a rapport to learn about and earn trust from the community, so to that end, we added a grounding phase prior to the discovery phase. Therefore, our adapted appreciative inquiry process based on our inquiry agenda and study context had five phases: (1) grounding; (2) discovery; (3) design; (4) dream; and (5) destiny (Fig. 1).

7.1. Grounding phase

We divided the grounding phase into four steps: (1) rapport building; (2) stakeholders identification and selection of participants; (3) orientation on research objectives and research methodology; and (4) development of interview protocol.
7.1.1. Rapport building

First, in order to improve our odds of success, we decided to have several informal meetings with key stakeholders. Many members of the various communities were initially reluctant to participate in our research because of previous research experiences where researchers simply collected information and the participants did not receive any direct value from the research. So we started attempting to build a rapport with local leaders to discuss the research aims, research methodology, and the benefits of our research to the community in order to obtain their full support. Another purpose of the informal meeting with the leaders of stakeholders was to facilitate a participant identification and selection process. In other studies, we noticed that this was a complex and frequently overlooked step. In this study, it was very challenging to bring all people from each stakeholder together at the same time, so we felt that the selection of participants was a very important step in the appreciative inquiry process.

7.1.2. Stakeholders identification and selection of participants

The rapport-building process helped us to identify key stakeholders and select participants. A stakeholder is a person, group, or organization that has a direct or indirect stake in an organization, because it can affect or be affected by the organization’s actions, objectives, and policies (Business Dictionary, 2010). For the purpose of this study, the stakeholders we identified were government organizations (Chitwan National Park and District Forest Office, Chitwan), international/national non-profit organizations (non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations), tourism entrepreneurs (hotel and restaurant owners, travel agents, and tour guides), and local people.

We were very conscious that our research participants should be a microcosm of the study area, reflecting as many different voices and constituencies as possible, including all stakeholders but not overemphasizing any one group. Since the study area is very large and diverse, we decided to conduct our inquiry in three different locations. The places were selected on the basis of stage of tourism development (i.e., Sauraha in Chitwan represents highly developed areas; Dibyapuri in Nawalparasi represents moderately developed areas; and Bagauda, Madi in Chitwan represents the least developed areas.) Tourism development was evaluated on the basis of amenity availability, especially of accommodations and transportation facilities. Sauraha is the third most popular tourist destination in Nepal (behind only Kathmandu and Pokhara) and is considered the tourism headquarters of Chitwan National Park. It is the gateway to the park with more than 65 budget and luxury hotels totaling approximately 2000 beds. Additional amenities include decent dining places that serve local, Asian, and Western food; travel agencies that offer sightseeing and other recreational activities; tourist attractions such as a visitor center, an elephant breeding center, and a Tharu cultural museum. And perhaps most importantly, telephone, Internet, electricity, banking, shopping, medical, and transportation facilities are well-developed. In fact, a 6 km long all-weather road connects Sauraha with East-West Highway at Tandi Bazar, and the district headquarter Bharatpur is only 15 km away. Bharatpur has experienced significant growth in recent years, which has resulted in the development of infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, and banks, and superstructures including hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies. An airport in Bharatpur, along with an additional seasonal airport in Meghaulai, and the East-West and Prithivi Highways connect Bharatpur with the major cities of Nepal, including both Kathmandu and Pokhara. Because of its easy access and a wide range of opportunities, Sauraha has been equally popular among both domestic and international travelers.

Of late, even Dibyapuri is attempting to grab a slice of the tourism development pie. It is conveniently located roughly 25 km from Bharatpur and contains all the basic infrastructures (e.g., electricity, telephone, and banking services). And although it still ranks far behind Sauraha in terms of modernity, the opening of two tourist hotels indicates that tourism development is gaining momentum. Dibyapuri is specifically popular among those nature lovers who want to avoid the touristic environment of Sauraha.

In addition, there is Madi area, which is sandwiched between Chitwan National Park and the Indian state of Bihar in the southern part of Chitwan valley. The area can be accessed from Bharatpur through a 45 km seasonal dirt road, a part of which passes through the national park. Though rich in natural and cultural resources, Madi is lacking in virtually all amenities, except for three local restaurants that double as hotels. As a result, visitors in Madi are typically day-trippers or development workers.

Of course, we still had the challenge of making the group representative and manageable, since it was not possible to launch our inquiry with every single person from each of our diverse stakeholders. So we subjectively decided to include only five people from each stakeholder. The number of participants in three separate appreciative inquiry sessions was: 13 in Sauraha, 17 in Dibyapuri, and 12 in Madi representing all stakeholders that included government organizations (3), tourism entrepreneurs (11), non-government organizations (NGOs) (8), and local residents (20).

7.1.3. Orientation on research objectives and research methodology

While all stakeholders have equally important roles in the appreciative inquiry process, they often have different levels of understanding regarding the interrelationships among livelihood, biodiversity and tourism, and even the appreciative inquiry process itself. The objectives of the orientation session were to inform the participants about our research goals, to introduce the appreciative inquiry process, and to clarify how it is different from a traditional deficit-based problem-solving approach. As it stands currently, researchers are often blamed for using technical jargon in their research objectives and questionnaire. So as to avoid those sorts of problems, we started our inquiry process with a discussion using simple words like: biodiversity, livelihood, and tourism. We initiated the conversation, facilitated the discussion, and helped the group to understand the meaning accurately, but in their own words.

We proceeded with an introduction of the appreciative inquiry process, so that the participants would engage in the discussion with a positive attitude and would feel comfortable sharing their knowledge, values, and strengths. We first presented the meaning, evolution, principles, and some success stories of its application (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, pp. 58–61). The participants were then given time to discuss their understanding of the appreciative inquiry approach and even told that appreciative inquiry is a strength-based approach that deemphasizes blame. An additional objective of the orientation was to introduce the appreciative inquiry process so that participants could use this method in their future community-based action research and in their communities as well.

7.1.4. Development of interview protocol

The purpose of this step was to develop the appreciative inquiry interview guidelines (i.e., customized interview protocol). We were very careful in developing questions because we understood all too well that what we ask dictates what we find. We adopted a participatory approach to develop the protocol. We were there to help the participants to make the questions appreciative and affirmative. This collaborative and participatory work developed three interview protocols: 1) the first protocol to examine how improved
7.2. Discovery phase

The objective of the discovery phase in the present study was to identify the positive forces in tourism, biodiversity, and livelihood interaction that contribute to the interests of the stakeholders. All the participants from a group were asked to cluster together and requested to share their stories in their groups. Each individual in the groups was asked to list and discuss their exemplary works within the group. The major focus during this process was on finding stories, and not on finding facts or opinions as in traditional reductionist methods. Also, the role of fellow group members was to listen and encourage the participants to make the story more descriptive and interesting.

Following the principles of appreciative inquiry, we did not make any encroachment on participants’ freedom during the process. This does not mean that the role of the researchers was that of impartial bystanders, rather it was that of active facilitators and catalysts whose function was to steer the inquiry process in the right direction and to encourage participants to share their stories. The outcomes of the interview process consisted of individual stories of exceptional accomplishments in tourism, biodiversity, and livelihood interaction. We requested that the participants compile the individual stories into a group story within the same stakeholder group. In the group story, the information from each individual story was neither repeated nor removed; hence, we termed it whole story. This process followed the wholeness principle of appreciative inquiry (i.e., wholeness brings out the best) (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 69).

As in action research, the process of data collection and analysis in appreciative inquiry went side by side. The data analysis process, often referred to as the data mining process in appreciative inquiry, went simultaneously with the process of sharing individual stories within the group. The data mining process was not meant for searching for the norm or the best fitting data, but to prepare an inclusive list of themes. The data analysis process involved the categorization of themes that are the lifeblood of tourism, biodiversity, and livelihood interrelationship. The theme search was meant to serve as the source of the future image that we hoped would lead to the desired outcome. Finally, the whole stories and themes located in the stories of each stakeholder group were shared with other stakeholders and the researchers and were then compiled to prepare a single exhaustive theme list. We observed that the success stories of every group were both interesting and inspiring.

According to the stories of the stakeholders, capacity building and empowerment, biodiversity conservation and environmental services, along with economic benefits and amenities development were the main outcomes of tourism, conservation, and livelihood interaction; however, we did notice some interesting differences among the stories in terms of their emphasis. Government organizations emphasized the outcomes related to biodiversity conservation and environmental services, whereas tourism entrepreneurs outlined outcomes that are predominantly related to economic benefits and amenities development. The outcomes enlisted by NGOs were related to capacity building and empowerment. Local people, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of the programs, equally valued all the aforementioned outcomes. After sharing the whole story of all groups in a common forum, there was agreement regarding the life-giving forces in biodiversity, tourism, and livelihood interaction.

In summary, the discovery phase of our appreciative inquiry process was fruitful in two ways. First, it uncovered the positive outcomes of tourism, biodiversity, and livelihood interaction. And second, it helped the participants to realize that the combined efforts of stakeholders can help to uncover the interests of each and every stakeholder. In fact, the true value of the appreciative process is in bringing together different ideas in order to develop a shared understanding. At the end of the discovery session, the team arrived at the following reflection: “We all are doing our best to build our community, positive questions certainly reveal positive outcomes, and an inquiry initiates change.”

7.3. Dream phase

The dream phase involves creating an ideal image of preferred future collectively based on the life-giving forces recognized in the discovery phase. Communities are caught up with day-to-day problems and never imagine and dream the future of their communities. This phase helps participants to think beyond their short-term problems. We requested that participants think about the ideal tourism, biodiversity, and livelihood interaction. The direction given to the participants at this phase was as follows:

First of all get comfortable. Close your eyes if you like. Think about the ideal relationships you want to see among conservation, livelihood, and tourism in next 25 years. Now, present your imagination in a visual form or share a few words to describe it.

Individual dreams were shared in the stakeholder groups to create a group dream. Some of the groups presented their dreams in visual forms using maps and drawings. Then, the group dreams were presented and explained to the other stakeholders and the researchers.

The dreams envisioned by the stakeholders were related to biodiversity, infrastructures, superstructures, and the empowerment of local communities. As in the discovery phase, no complete agreement was found among the stakeholders regarding the ideal condition of the area 25 years henceforth. The government organizations and NGOs dreamed of a biodiversity rich national park and of a partnership between government and local communities in park management. However, sufficient infrastructure and superstructures were the dreams of both local people and tourism entrepreneurs. And after the discussion of the dreams, all the stakeholders came up with a common dream that involves a conservation-friendly infrastructure and tourism development that helps to build socially, politically, and economically healthy communities that thrive around a well-protected national park through the partnership among all stakeholders.

7.4. Design phase

The design phase refers to the planning and implementation of activities to accomplish the dreams. A number of other factors such as capital, technology, governance, human resources, and policies should also be considered since these factors directly affect the implementation of design activities. In the design phase, the participants were asked to think of activities that might help contribute to the realization of the dream, to analyze their own ability to implement the activities in terms of capital, and to design a detailed plan that answers the where, when, how, and by whom to conduct those activities. Even though traditional progress assessment methods, monitoring, and evaluation were not applicable to the appreciative inquiry process, the participants were asked to establish milestones that track the progress toward the
realization of dreams. The outcome of the design stage was a detailed plan of activities that articulates the responsibilities of stakeholders to achieve the common goal of biodiversity conservation and livelihood development through sustainable tourism development.

The major activities the stakeholders listed were: 1) the formulation of appropriate policies; 2) the empowerment of local communities; 3) capacity building; 4) seeking political support; 5) the development of conservation-friendly infrastructures and tourism development; 6) equitable sharing of revenue; 7) the diversification of the local economy; and 8) the delivery of conservation education programs. The stakeholders agreed to collaborate to accomplish the outlined activities and to distribute the responsibilities among the stakeholders based on their goals and capabilities.

7.5. Destiny phase

The destiny phase in appreciative inquiry is associated with sustaining positive outcomes. It is the time to enjoy the successes of the activities implemented in the design phase and to take action to sustain the accomplishments. A reflection session was conducted to evaluate what the participants learned from the appreciative inquiry sessions and how they were thinking of applying their appreciative inquiry knowledge and skill in the real field. The participants reflected that the appreciative inquiry process directed them to the desired direction and encouraged them to work together to achieve common goals. Furthermore, the participants commented that the appreciative inquiry process initiated mutual trust, respect, appreciation, and helped lead to the realization of a common goal. As one of the participants said, “I just realized we [all stakeholders] are in the same boat to the same destination.”

8. Appreciative inquiry: critique and reflection

Appreciative inquiry should not be considered a magical research tool. There are many challenges that we faced during this research, and they should be seriously addressed when applying the appreciative inquiry approach. Appreciative inquiry can be no more than a daydream or a false hope if the process is not carefully followed. The failure of the appreciative inquiry process leads to further alienation and frustration in participants. Rural populations in developing countries often equate researchers with the expatriate development workers who allocate and execute foreign aid in developing countries. Therefore, people in rural communities tend to have high expectations of researchers in terms of receiving support for development projects that involve education, health, and infrastructure improvements. It is imperative that researchers make it clear in the beginning what the research project can and cannot deliver to communities; otherwise, the outcome might turn negative if rural people are discontented as a result. In order to avoid this, we made it clear during the grounding phase what the purpose of the study was and what we would deliver at the end of the research.

The success of the appreciative inquiry approach relies on the understanding of social relationships, social conflicts, and a broad knowledge of the sociocultural, historical, political, and economic underpinnings of a community (Messerschmidt, 2008). Researchers should be cognizant of the local context and should respect the social and cultural norms in order to earn trust from the community. In addition to learning about their norms, values, and cultures, extra efforts have to be taken to build a rapport with the community, so that they feel open to share their knowledge. Both the primary author of this paper and research assistant, who facilitated the appreciative inquiry sessions, had previously worked in these communities and could speak the primary language of these communities. Knowing the communities, their culture, values, language, and norms helped to effectively conduct this research.

The appreciative inquiry approach assumes that there is equality in representation and in the expression of ideas and stories among stakeholders. Unfortunately, however, researchers and development workers tend to prefer to work with local elites to achieve their goals and to ignore people who come from the lower social and economic strata of the community. The most common mistake that is made in the appreciative inquiry process is the ignoring of marginalized groups, such as the poor, indigenous peoples, dalits, and women. Despite our conscious efforts, marginalized groups and women were still underrepresented in this research. Since they were not in leadership positions in their corresponding stakeholders, their representation was limited. This reflects the challenge of bringing minorities in on appreciative inquiry sessions through the normal stakeholder selection process. To remedy this, researchers need to pay special attention to include underrepresented populations. Still, even when individuals from these groups were included in the sessions, they were often reluctant to share their stories because they felt their stories were not worthy. Researchers should, therefore, encourage and create an environment that allows minorities to feel comfortable sharing their stories. We also noticed that during the intergroup discussions that some groups, such as government employees and business leaders, tend to dominate while presenting their ideas and stories. In a few instances, we even had to facilitate accordingly to provide opportunities for minority groups to speak during discussions. Therefore, we urge researchers to be aware of the existing social hierarchy among stakeholders to avoid the dominance of one group over another.

Like other participatory research methods, appreciative inquiry is a very time-consuming process, particularly during the grounding phase. We had limited time to conduct this research. We spent a total of one month in these three communities, and one day each was dedicated to run the last four-step appreciative inquiry sessions in the three communities. As indicated earlier, the grounding phase required a significant amount of time, even though we felt that the time allocated was insufficient. However, we overcame the time limitation with the help of local field assistants. The field assistants’ roles were to gather information about the communities and to contact stakeholders prior to our visit. In essence, the effective use of appreciative inquiry as a research tool heavily relies upon the facilitators’ understanding of each individual community during both the data collection and data analysis phases.

9. Discussion and conclusion

Appreciative inquiry is a strength-based participatory action research method that is based on the constructivist paradigm and follows grounded theory procedure. We recommend applying appreciative inquiry to tourism research for various reasons. First, tourism research in general is very problem-centric (i.e., researchers look for the deficiencies and the negative outcomes). The merit of problem-centric research is that by understanding the pressing problems and their causes, researchers can devise and implement appropriate solutions. However, this Band-aid healing approach only helps to maintain the status quo and cannot assure the long-term sustainability of tourism. Instead, the discovery of positive outcomes not only prevents the occurrence of problems but also contributes to tourism sustainability. Therefore, we argue for the adoption of strength-based approaches such as appreciative inquiry in tourism research that liberate communities and destinations from the whirlpool of social, environmental and economic
problems and ensure sustainability. Second, methodologically, tourism research belongs to the field of social behavioral sciences, even though most research in tourism is mostly conducted under positivist and post-positivist paradigms. By accepting that social systems are complex, nonlinear, and dynamic, appreciative inquiry calls for the adoption of a constructivist paradigm in tourism research.

Third, there is a consensus that the ultimate goal of tourism should be to enhance the quality of life of residents (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011; Nyaupane, Morais & Dowler, 2006; Schevyns, 1999; Simmons, 1994). Ultimately, it is the understanding of community needs that are key to the success of tourism. Surveys are the commonly used methods in tourism research. However, these methods have a limited application in developing countries, particularly in rural areas where the literacy rate is very low. Focus groups and other consensus-building methods have also been used. Still, these methods can be highly biased when expert planners and researchers, who are usually outsiders, only visit the rural area as tourists (Chambers, 1983). They observe the phenomenon through their own culture and contexts, and often misinterpret the culture, values, and needs of rural communities. Understanding the poorest of the poor, minority, indigenous people, and women is even harder, which compels a need for non-traditional methods of data gathering and verification. The appreciative inquiry approach could be an appropriate method because this method does not require that respondents read a text-based survey instrument. The data collection process involves an informal setting, in which the participants draw lines, maps, and charts to express their knowledge. Data are presented in such a way that community members understand and have more control over the process. In addition, the appreciative inquiry approach helps to validate and appreciate the richness of rural knowledge, and helps to empower rural communities, since they are often alienated by the use of technology and technical jargon.

In this paper, we demonstrated that appreciative inquiry offers researchers another worldview and methodology for framing and conducting tourism research. We do not mean that appreciative inquiry replaces all research approaches, nor do we claim that it is a panacea that can overcome all the challenges of conducting research. We certainly claim that appreciative inquiry is a new method, approach, or strategy for research, which initiates positive changes in communities.

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