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# Appreciative Inquiry: Guiding Principles for Majority and Minority World Teams Conducting Research in Majority World Countries

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# Appreciative Inquiry:
## Guiding Principles for Majority and Minority World Teams Conducting Research in Majority World Countries

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## Abstract

The vast majority of youth development research takes place in minority world cultural contexts. To understand and nurture the optimal development of young people living in majority world countries, cross-cultural research teams are uniquely suited to conduct careful and culturally sensitive research in these settings. However, this is difficult. Navigating research in a new language, a different cultural context, and a far-away geographic location is challenging, and the risks of getting it wrong are high. We argue that the guiding principles of Appreciative Inquiry can help teams navigate many of the challenges inherent in conducting youth development research in majority world contexts. Using a three-year study of positive Liberian youth development as an applied example, this article addresses the parameters, benefits, limits, and implications of using Appreciative Inquiry to study youth development in majority world countries.

Keywords: majority world, positive youth development, character formation, virtue development, research-practitioner teams, sport for development

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## Introduction

A large and growing body of research sheds light on what positive youth development (PYD) entails among minority world youth (e.g., Benson, 2006; Shek et al., 2019), but comparatively little is known about what the positive development of majority world youth entails (Lansford & Banati, 2018; Lerner et al., 2019). Given that most of the world's young people live in majority world countries (Statistica Research, 2022), greater attention to the character formation and healthy development of youth growing up outside the United States and other Western, industrialized countries is sorely needed (Chowa et al., 2023; Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021; Hansell et al., in press; U.S.A.I.D., 2019).[2] More specifically, we need more research in majority world contexts and more research conducted by majority world researchers and practitioners who have firsthand knowledge of and vested interests in supporting youth development in their own countries.

Adolescent psychology has for far too long been a "Eurocentric enterprise" (Nsamenang, 2002). As Lonnie Sherrod has noted, "A developmental science built on 5% of the world's children is not adequate" (2017, xv). Fortunately, researchers are beginning to heed the call, and the number of studies of positive youth development in majority world countries has increased in recent years (e.g., Koller & Verman, 2017; Tirrell et al., 2020; Tirrell et al., 2023; Wiium & Dimitrova, 2019). Researchers and practitioners are beginning to work together to identify the character and virtue lessons relevant to youth in the majority world (e.g., the 82% of the world that lives on less than $20 a day; Roser, 2021). This knowledge is essential to both build a foundation for future youth development research in majority world countries and to guide youth programs that seek to cultivate culturally valued character strengths in majority world youth.

Comprehensive research in majority world countries is often completed by bringing together researchers and practitioners from different cultural contexts, including individuals from minority and majority world countries. Navigating cross-cultural relationships can be difficult. Scholars from minority and majority world cultural contexts often have different levels of research experience and majority world cultural knowledge, and these two distinct knowledge sets—research and cultural expertise—are critical to conducting high-quality, youth development research in majority world countries. This article proposes a set of guiding principles that may help teams work together toward a productive end to increase majority world youth development research by utilizing the strengths of both majority and minority world researchers.

We propose that applying Appreciative Inquiry principles may provide important guidance for majority and minority world collaborators and help researcher-practitioner teams begin the important work of decolonizing developmental science research as it encourages a focus on positive dimensions of human development and developmental contexts (strengths, capacities, and potential), generates more culturally relevant theories and research, and supports change deemed valuable by members of the culture under investigation. As a means of illustrating how Appreciative Inquiry principles work in practice, this article includes an applied example, namely a study of positive youth development conducted in Liberia.

## (Some of) The Challenges around this Work

Before proposing a possible solution to the lack of culturally collaborative youth development research in majority world contexts, it is important to acknowledge some of the challenges inherent in conducting

2 This manuscript uses the term "majority world countries" as an alternative to "developing world," "low and middle-income countries," "Global South," or "Third World." We use it because it describes countries in Africa, Asia, South and Central America, and the Caribbean more geographically accurately and less pejoratively than other terms (Silver, 2015). However, we acknowledge that this term too is imperfect, since it lumps together countries with different issues, opportunities, and characteristics (Kahn et al., 2022).

collaborative youth development research in majority world countries. In addition to having little understanding of one another's knowledge sets, research teams from different cultural contexts can struggle with issues of power and authority (Coburn et al., 2008). For teams to function effectively, all members need to feel valued for their contributions. Team members from majority world countries may regard team members from minority world countries with suspicion or as deserving of greater input, and team members from minority world countries may feel they have all the answers or that they have little to offer to a study in such a different context (Hansell et al., 2024). Differences in expectations regarding norms, roles, responsibilities, and goals can lead to confusion and frustration on both sides (Elmore et al., 2019; Ettekal et al., 2017).

Another challenge is geographic distance. When team members reside on different continents and in different time zones, coordinating meetings can be difficult. Although technology can help minimize the miles, even technology has limits, especially when access to reliable internet and up-to-date technology cannot be assumed for all team members.

Conducting research in a culturally appropriate manner while upholding principles of ethical research presents other significant challenges. For instance, gaining appropriate participant consent can be difficult. Individual-based study consent procedures are rooted in "the Western ethos of liberal individualism" and may not be appropriate in collectivistic cultures where norms of decision-making do not emphasize individual autonomy, and youth are seen as belonging not only to their families but also importantly to their communities (Gbadegesin, 1998, p. 24). In Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, communal cultural values are central, and community is core to people's lives (Agulanna, 2008). Accordingly, it may be more culturally appropriate to gain consent from gatekeepers other than parents, including tribal leaders, community leaders, chiefs, community elders, or heads of households (Appiah, 2021). In addition, written consent may not make sense in communities with low literacy rates. In these cases, oral consent may be more appropriate (Appiah, 2021). Finally, when conducting research with children who have been orphaned to the community, it may be impossible to secure parental or legal guardian permission. To gain genuine informed consent, researchers need to utilize ethical, informed consent guidelines that account for both participants' local customs and their traditional practices as well as the scientific principles underpinning informed consent procedures (Amerson & Strang, 2015; Appiah, 2021). This is no small task.

The present manuscript proposes that applying the guiding principles of the Appreciative Inquiry framework (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) may facilitate the process of conducting youth development research in majority world countries among collaborative, culturally diverse research teams. Of course, applying this framework will not address all the aforementioned challenges, but it may help researchers and practitioners ethically navigate many of them. In addition to outlining what Appreciative Inquiry entails and how it can be applied to support research in majority world countries, the present manuscript also provides an applied example of what research guided by Appreciative Inquiry principles looks like in practice. Before examining the case study, however, we offer a brief introduction to Appreciative Inquiry.

## Appreciative Inquiry

First proposed by David L. Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva at the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve, as a method for organizational change, Appreciative Inquiry highlights and builds on an organization's strengths (1987). The framework was developed in the 1980s, popularized in the 1990s, and in the ensuing decades has matured from a series of organizational experiments into a highly successful and sustainable philosophy and practice for positive change. Organizations around the world have employed it to support change and promote growth among employees and stakeholders. The two basic premises are (1) that organizations and individuals perform best when they build on their strengths and (2) that stakeholders should engage in self-determined change.

To advance these aims, Appreciative Inquiry describes a change-supporting cycle (Cooperrider, 2021). This cycle includes a Discovery Phase, during which members of the team share stories about their exceptional accomplishments and identify the best of "what is." Next, in the Dream Phase, participants imagine a future that emerges out of grounded examples from its positive past, and storytelling shifts from "what is" to "what might be." Next organizations enter the Design Phase, where they work to create the ideal organization to achieve their dream, and finally, in the Destiny Phase, organizations plan for the future. It is a time of continuous learning, adjustment, and improvisation. The Appreciative Inquiry framework spells out a series of guiding principles to support movement through this strengths-focused and self-determined change process.

Although much attention to Appreciative Inquiry has focused on its role in supporting change, Cooperrider (2021) recently noted that it was never meant to be an organizational development or human systems change practice. Instead, it was meant to be applied as a theory-building tool. It was intended to be used to develop theories grounded in the data. More specifically, it was designed to promote the development of theories, inspired by the best of the present, generative in nature, and articulating a story of prospective possibility (Cooperrider, 2021). A meta-analysis of studies using Appreciative Inquiry suggests it is a highly effective theory-generating tool (Bushe & Kassam, 2005).

As a means of developing prospective theories, the Appreciative Inquiry principles rely on dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams. They depend on a search, a willingness to discover, and an openness to learn. At the heart of Appreciative Inquiry is the "art of powerful questions"—the ability to craft unconditionally positive questions that guide discussions with individuals within the organization (Vogt et al. 2003). Given its focus on identifying individuals' strengths, capacities, and potential, Appreciative Inquiry aligns well with PYD research aims and approaches.

Although Appreciative Inquiry was designed for use with organizations, it has been applied more broadly. It has been employed to support positive and inclusive education (Bott et al., 2017; Shuayb et al., 2009; Waters & White, 2015), healthcare (e.g., Richer et al., 2013), and evaluation work (e.g., Coghlan et al., 2003). Appreciative Inquiry has also been used, not often as a theory development tool, but in other ways in PYD studies. For instance, it was used to engage Australian youth in a community-building project (Morsillo & Fisher, 2007), to include youth voice in a positive education initiative (Halliday et al., 2017), to explore youths' experiences in an agricultural internship program (Delia & Krasny, 2018), and to explore the resilience, healthy capabilities, and strengths of young people from youth and staff perspectives across a handful of community-based organizations (Lind et al., 2019). In each of these cases, Appreciative Inquiry was used as a framework for participatory action research projects in minority world cultural contexts.

We propose that with its focus on building on strengths and supporting self-determined change, it may provide a useful set of guiding principles for studying youth development in majority world countries as well. A review of the literature suggests it has rarely, if ever, been used this way. However, because Appreciative Inquiry generates new outlooks and ideas, avoids stereotypical answers, empowers participants, identifies effective practices, and supports positive change (Shuayb et al., 2009), it may prove to be a useful for conducting youth development research in majority world countries.

## Liberian Positive Youth Development Study

Guided by Appreciative Inquiry principles, members of our research team, from 2020 to 2023, conducted a study of virtue and character development among Liberian youth. Consistent with Appreciative Inquiry principles, our aim was to propose a theory, grounded in the data, for what the positive development of Liberian youth entailed (Cooperrider, 2021). Rather than focusing on youths' challenges or shortcomings, PYD research focuses on youths' strengths and potential (e.g., Benson, 2006; Damon, 2004; Shek et al., 2019). PYD research is typically framed by Relational Developmental Systems theories (Lerner et al., 2015), which emphasize person by context coactions. Because individuals are shaped by and shape their

immediate and more distal contexts, PYD research is also concerned with understanding contexts that help young people thrive. Given that majority world contexts vary from minority world ones, we would expect PYD in these cultural contexts to similarly vary. Our study (Bronk et al., under review) sought to explore what PYD in Liberia, a majority world country, entailed.

Although PYD research and program evaluation has gotten underway in some African countries (e.g., Lerner et al., 2019, 2021; Matsuba et al., 2021; Tirrell et al., 2020, 2023; U.S.A.I.D., 2019), our study was one of the first studies of positive youth development undertaken in Liberia. Consistent with Appreciative Inquiry principles, we wanted to understand what positive Liberian youth development entailed from *Liberians*' perspectives. Rather than applying a minority world model of positive youth development or using a minority world model of positive youth development as a starting point to develop a model of Liberian youth development, we wanted to develop a theory that emerged from research with Liberians and that could be used to support self-directed change in the country.

Our project team consisted of youth development practitioners and researchers from Liberia and the United States. It helped that most of us had worked together for several years (some of us for even longer). Our familiarity with one another ensured we worked well together, respected one another, and felt comfortable voicing our concerns and perspectives. We worked closely to carry out every aspect of our study, including proposing guiding research questions, selecting participants, gathering data, and analyzing and presenting findings.

Creating a project team that consisted of people from different, relevant backgrounds proved to be an effective means of incorporating reflexive practices into the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Reflexivity refers to a set of "continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research process" (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023, p. 242). Reflexive practices are core to high-quality qualitative research, which by nature is a subjective and interpretive endeavor (Creswell & Poth, 2018). [3]

## An Appreciative Inquiry Case Study

Single case studies can offer in-depth understandings of complex phenomena and insight into issues that might not otherwise be visible to observers (Yin, 2014), and they have proven to be a useful way of highlighting effective approaches to studying PYD in other majority world countries (e.g., Lerner et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that what is learned from one case may not predict what will be learned from other cases. To that end, the following case study is provided as an illustrative example of what a study guided by the principles of Appreciative Inquiry may entail. It outlines the issues, opportunities, and challenges of applying the Appreciative Inquiry principles in a recent study in Liberia.

Rather than offering a clearly spelled-out methodology, the Appreciative Inquiry framework offers five guiding principles, including the constructivist, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory, and positive principles (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). These principles are closely related, but they each provide guidance relevant to different dimensions of the research process in majority world countries. Below we explain how each of the guiding principles shaped our study in Liberia.

***Constructivist worldview.*** The first guiding principle proposes that Appreciative Inquiry is undergirded by a constructivist worldview. Constructivist worldviews mean that rather than one objective reality, multiple subjective realities exist, and our subjective beliefs about what is true shape our thoughts and actions (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). In addition, a constructivist worldview proposes that experiences of reality are socially constructed. Individual conceptions of reality are constructed through interactions and discourse with other people. Through the language we use, we co-construct how we understand the world and our role in it.

3 The interested reader is directed to Bronk, K.C., Blom, L. C., Fryatt, S., Mau, M., & Appleton, Y. (under review). *A Model of Positive Liberian Youth Development* for a complete account of this study and its findings.

This principle was relevant to our study in at least two ways. First, it reminded us that U.S. and Liberian team members brought different experiences and perspectives to the project. We understood the constituent components of PYD and the factors that support it in different, culturally specific ways. Although we all spoke English, we spoke different dialects, and we came from cultures with different expectations about how young people should act and what strengths and experiences they require to thrive. We did not know what we did not know about one another, so the way we came to appreciate one another's perspectives was to spend time together, virtually, and, when possible, in person. We held quarterly Zoom calls, and U.S.-based team members made multiple trips to Liberia, where we spent time getting to know the Liberian culture and our Liberian teammates. Over time, we began to understand and appreciate one another's perspectives on life in general and PYD in particular.

The constructivist principle also meant that just as all Americans do not agree on what constitutes PYD, neither do all Liberians. We expected to find some similarities among our participants' perspectives on positive Liberian youth development, but we expected to find differences, too. To capture the full range of Liberian perspectives, we conducted interviews with a broad swath of information-rich participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). More specifically, we conducted interviews with adults who worked with young people in different capacities ($N$=25; e.g., as teachers, social workers, physicians, youth policy makers), and to triangulate around and expand on our findings, we conducted focus groups ($n$=8) with young people ($N$=44) who had been nominated as thriving youth by members of their communities. To ensure our participants were inclined to share the complexity and nuance of their perspectives and to ensure we fully understood each of their perspectives, Liberian team members conducted interviews. We expected Liberians would share more with interviewers from their own culture, and we knew Liberian interviewers would understand cultural references far better than would cultural outsiders.

Since our Liberian team members lacked extensive interviewing experience, we conducted a series of trainings and pilot interviews. In addition to discussing the philosophy that undergirds semi-structured, clinical interviews, we also held interview training sessions, both online and in person. We paired experienced U.S. researchers with Liberian practitioners, and together these pairs conducted at least 10 pilot interviews before Liberian team members conductetd interviews on their own. Once the Liberian interviewers began conducting interviews on their own, trained interviewers reviewed transcripts and offered formative feedback. This was a scaffolded, energy- and time-intensive process that lasted almost two years, but it was worth the investment; it generated a richly detailed dataset that could not have been gathered any other way.

Liberian team members not only led interviews; they also co-led, along with U.S. team members, focus groups. Liberian focus group leaders put participants at ease and helped ensure that U.S. team members understood the subtleties of what participants shared, and U.S. researchers helped support Liberian team members who were new to leading focus groups.

***Simultaneity principle.*** The second Appreciative Inquiry principle, the simultaneity principle, suggests that inquiry creates change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The moment we ask questions, we initiate a reaction, and the language, tone, and intention of the questions posed shape the nature of that change. In short, questions are fateful.

Guided by the simultaneity principle, we sought to encourage serious reflection on—and hopefully intentional action around—positive Liberian youth development. Accordingly, in designing our interview and focus group protocols, we intentionally posed questions that encouraged consideration of our topic of interest. For instance, we asked adults to reflect on and describe a young person who they believed was doing particularly well, and we asked focus group participants to discuss the internal characteristics and external supports that they believed helped them thrive. Participants bonded over the course of their 90-minute focus group sessions, trading WhatsApp contact information and taking photos together. At the end of focus groups, participants shared with members of the project team their plans for enacting positive change in their country. One focus group participant noted that he had never been asked to consider the

promise of Liberian youth, and that he had never been challenged to reflect on how his story could help the youth in his country. Interviewees followed up with members of our team to share their extended reflections on thriving youth.

Asking positive questions not only changed our participants. It also changed the members of our project team, including our in-country driver who only overheard us talk about our data-gathering experiences, but who nonetheless eagerly shared his evolving thoughts on what constituted optimal youth development. Studying positive Liberian youth development encouraged each of us to reflect on how we could become more deeply engaged in supporting it. An interviewer, who had worked as a tailor at the outset of the project, shared her plans to mentor young girls living on the streets. Moved by the stories of the young women in the study, she devised a plan to teach those interested in learning how to sew so they would have a money-making skill that could open a path to a better life. This was not something she had considered before getting involved in the study. The act of asking questions and hearing participants' stories caused her to reflect on her role in supporting positive Liberian youth development. Given the power of questions to unleash a cascade of change, it is important to seriously reflect on the questions posed.

***Poetic principle.*** The poetic principle proposes we make sense of our lives through the stories we tell and by what we aspire to achieve (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The words and the topics we choose to discuss invoke sentiments, understandings, and worldviews (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). There are countless ways we can understand, interpret, and make sense of our experiences. Both the words we use and the topics we address have the potential to change the reality of the culture we study.

Because the stories we tell matter, we wanted to ensure we fully heard and accurately interpreted the information participants shared with us, and since our perspectives undoubtedly shaped the study, we took steps to ensure we accurately understood participants' own stories.[4] To enhance the validity of our study, we conducted member checks with approximately a quarter of our participants. We shared our emerging findings with participants and asked if we had accurately and completely captured their intended meaning. For instance, we met with people in the office of the Minister of Youth and Sports to discuss what we had learned. Our findings, they told us, aligned well with their understanding of PYD in Liberia, and they expressed an interest in using our findings to support future youth policy funding decisions. We also shared emerging findings with Liberian youth practitioners outside our research team and with Liberians who did not directly work with youth to ensure our learnings aligned with the broadest possible interpretation of Liberian PYD. In these ways, we tried to clear the way for participants' ideas and voices to emerge.

In addition, when our project team was together in Liberia, we debriefed extensively with one another. Each evening, we met to share our experiences and interpretations with one another. We challenged one another's ideas, perspectives, and experiences, and this habit deepened our collective reflections and helped us recognize and capitalize on our subjectivities (Gentles et al., 2014). To learn more about the majority world culture, minority world team members joined majority world team members for meals, for worship, to tour schools, and in other cultural activities.

The poetic principle, and the validity-enhancing strategies it inspires, are critical to supporting self-determined change in majority world countries. This principle reminds researchers to incorporate strategies into the research process that minimize the chances that project team members' perspectives obscure the full range and nuanced nature of participants' perspectives.

***Anticipatory and positive principles.*** The anticipatory principle, the fourth principle, suggests that images inspire action (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Our future is a constructed reality created by our present thinking and imagery. Human systems move in the direction of images of the future. The more positive and hopeful the images of the future, the more positive and hope-filled the present-day action. The

4 Liberian and U.S. project team members selected the topic of study, designed the questions posed, and chose what was attended to in our analyses. Each of these decisions was undoubtedly shaped by our own backgrounds, biases, positionalities, and experiences.

fifth principle, the positive principle, is closely related to the anticipatory principle. It suggests that positive questions lead to positive change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Momentum for change requires positive affect and social bonding, and this momentum is best generated through positive questions that amplify the positive core. Taken together, the fourth and fifth principles suggest that focusing on the positive in the present is likely to lead to a positive future.

We could have chosen to study the things that go wrong for Liberian youth. We could have asked interviewees about the barriers to youth thriving. We could have included struggling youth in our focus groups as a means of identifying obstacles to positive Liberian youth development. Such an approach may have highlighted important issues that our chosen approach occluded. However, consistent with the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, we chose instead to focus on what was going right and on how we could build on those things. Highlighting the strengths served to illuminate an inspiring path forward, and the participants told us this positivity, which was not otherwise typical in their daily conversations about youth, felt inspiring.

***Wholeness principle.*** The wholeness principle is not one of the five foundational principles of Appreciate Inquiry. Instead, it is an emergent principle, meaning it was not initially proposed but has instead emerged from research and evaluation relying on Appreciative Inquiry principles (Appreciating People, 2023). We highlight it here because it has particular resonance for studies conducted in majority world countries. The wholeness principle proposes that each member of the project team has something of value to offer. The project team is more than the sum of its parts. Neither the U.S. researchers nor the Liberian practitioners could have conducted this study on their own. It was only by coming together and by respecting one another's roles and contributions that the study was possible. Listening with an open mind and building respect across the team was critical to the project's success.

This principle also highlights the way members of the project team are likely to influence and be influenced by one another. On our project, Liberian team members developed a newfound respect for the research process and a renewed commitment to serving as mentors to Liberian youth. (The critical role of positive adult relationships in Liberian youth thriving was a key finding in our study.) American team members developed a renewed desire to focus on applied aspects of research, a better understanding of Liberian culture, and a love for Liberians. They expressed a particular desire to further support the communities where research was conducted, and they developed a greater level of respect for the remarkable resilience and inspiring strength evident among Liberian youth.

The wholeness principle calls for intellectual humility, which is key to advancing scientific credibility, but which is likely to be particularly relevant in teams comprised of members from different professional and cultural backgrounds. Intellectually humble individuals recognize their intellectual limitations, they do not claim to know more than they do, they recognize and appreciate others' intellectual strengths, and they are driven to learn (Porter et al., 2021). Members of our team strove to enact each of these dimensions of intellectual humility in our interactions with one another, and doing so helped ensure we gained the most from our varied perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds.

Appreciative Inquiry requires a cohesive project team. Members of the project team need to trust one another, listen to one another, and respect one another, even when they may not know one another particularly well. Building these relationships takes time, and even with time they are not guaranteed, but the wholeness principle means that leadership is more a function of consensus than hierarchy.

Taken together, these principles offered useful guidance as we worked to develop a theory of PYD in Liberia. Some of the principles provided useful guidance in how our study should be conducted. For instance, the constructivist principle reminded us that multiple subjective realities exist, and this encouraged us to seek input and guidance into the research design from multiple sources and stakeholders. It reminded us that research in majority world contexts should be conducted *with* rather than *on* majority world individuals. The simultaneity principle emphasizes the importance of questions. Since asking questions spurs change, we took care devising our data collection tools. Especially in majority world contexts, such

as Liberia, it is important to pose questions that inspire positive change. The Anticipatory and Positive principles encouraged us to focus on what was working in Liberia. Focusing on strengths, potential, and past successes helped shed light on the path to positive change, and in an economically vulnerable majority world country such as Liberia, this was critical to our doing more good than harm.

Other Appreciative Inquiry principles provided important guidance for how our team should collaborate. For instance, the wholeness principle reminded us that team members bring different experiences and expertise to the endeavor. Accordingly, we made a concerted effort to consistently listen to one another and to treat one another with respect. This was particularly important to our group dynamic since our team included members with different levels of perceived power.

Other research approaches emphasize one or two of these principles, but the Appreciative Inquiry approach is unique in emphasizing this full constellation of principles, and considering each of these principles together is essential to supporting ethical and effective youth development research in majority world countries. For instance, PYD approaches, similar to the Anticipatory and Positive principles, encourage researchers and practitioners to focus on what is going right as a means of supporting positive change (Catalano et al., 2019), and participatory action research, similar to the constructivist and wholeness principles, requires research to be conducted with rather than on individuals; it also addresses the issues of power and respect for all team members (Forbes-Genade & Niekerk, 2017). However, only the Appreciative Inquiry framework encourages each of these ideas, and each is required for responsible youth development research in majority world countries.

### Potential Limitations

In addition to the many benefits of using Appreciative Inquiry to guide youth development research in majority world countries, there are also some potential limitations to consider. One clear challenge is the time-consuming and resource-intensive nature of utilizing this approach. Appreciative Inquiry studies often rely on qualitative methods, which are by their very nature laborious and expensive (Shuayb et al., 2009). They require significant time and energy commitments from both participants and project team members. Although many of the existing studies guided by Appreciative Inquiry feature qualitative research methods, it seems likely that the guiding principles, which are fairly broad, could be useful in quantitative studies as well (e.g., treating team members respectfully, seeking input and guidance from multiple sources and stakeholders, focusing on the positive, conducting culturally collaborative research).

Another potential drawback is the exclusive focus on the positive. As noted above, only probing the positive could prevent participants from addressing problems, negative experiences, or barriers to change (Shuayb et al., 2009). However, others have argued that although this approach does not prompt discussions of problems, nor does it exclude them (Bushe, 2011). Problems and challenges naturally arise in the course of interviews and focus groups, and, although they are not the focus of this kind of work, they need not be ignored either.

Yet another potential limitation is the use of guiding principles rather than a more directive methodology. The principles associated with Appreciative Inquiry are intentionally broad. Their breadth allows them to be applied in a range of settings. However, their breadth comes at the cost of precision. Rather than prescribing how youth development research should be conducted in majority world countries, they describe what it should look like. Interpreting the guidelines is left to project team members. We hope the applied example offers useful guidance regarding how they may be usefully applied.

## Conclusion

To encourage the optimal development of *all* young people, research designed to support the positive development of majority world youth is needed (Chowa et al., 2023; Dimitrova & Wiium, 2021; Hansell et al., 2024; Sherrod, et al., 2017; U.S.A.I.D., 2019). Limited research in majority world contexts not only

restricts our understanding of universal and culturally determined facets of positive youth development, but it also leaves researchers and practitioners poorly prepared to support youth thriving in these locales.

In an effort to decolonize developmental science research, scholars in the youth development field are calling for guidance that can help improve collaborations among researchers and practitioners from minority and majority world contexts. We believe the Appreciative Inquiry framework may represent an important tool in this important endeavor. More specifically, as interest in conducting research in majority world contexts increases, there have been calls for more theory-building research efforts (e.g., Lerner et al., 2019). Good research requires good theories, and scholars seeking to conduct high-quality youth development research and practitioners looking to provide high-quality youth programming in majority world countries have bemoaned the lack of guiding theories in majority world cultural contexts. The Appreciative Inquiry principles offer useful guidance for generating these much-needed theories (Cooperrider, 2021).

Research guided by Appreciative Inquiry principles is likely to yield theories that are positive in nature. All too often, research on vulnerable and marginalized populations, such as majority world youth, is deficit-oriented (García-Coll et al., 1996). Deficit-oriented research identifies problems and shortcomings, rather than developmental competencies or the experiences, relationships, and internal characteristics that help youth thrive. In addition to ignoring the strengths and capacities of majority world youth, a deficit-based, problem-solving approach is likely to surface problems researchers cannot address, and a research report that highlights barriers to healthy youth development is likely to make stakeholders feel defensive. It could frustrate youth development practitioners left holding a list of problems but lacking guidance in how to address those problems. Generating theories that focus on the positive is likely to leave stakeholders inspired to find ways to build on existing strengths and chart a positive path forward.

Theories generated through research guided by Appreciative Inquiry principles are also likely to be endorsed by the people they describe. Parents, teachers, and youth development policymakers know what their youth need to thrive, and they should be empowered to lead the change they seek. The Appreciative Inquiry framework is likely to yield theories generated through a process that engages participants in self-determined change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

Finally, theories generated by research guided by Appreciative Inquiry principles will be specific to the locale in which they were developed and are to be applied. Culture-specific theories will provide a useful foundation for designing the culturally sensitive measurement tools and data analysis approaches needed to advance our understanding of positive youth development in majority world contexts (Lerner et al., 2019).

In addition to supporting PYD research and evaluation, we believe Appreciative Inquiry principles could similarly support sport for development and peace programs (e.g., Blom et al., 2015; Farello et al., 2019; Whitley et al., 2019). This work, which often calls for collaborations between minority and majority world researchers and practitioners, could benefit from the guidance these principles offer around how to pose questions, how to navigate issues of power, how to support self-determined change, and how to use what is working as a foundation for growth.

For each of these reasons and in each of these contexts, we encourage researchers to apply Appreciative Inquiry principles in theory-building research efforts in majority world countries. Following Appreciative Inquiry principles offers useful guidance for researcher-practitioner teams coming together from minority and majority world contexts to conduct important youth development research and evaluation. The approach builds on the team's strengths and the strengths of the community, creating a shared vision around the topic of interest. In applying Appreciative Inquiry principles, we have experienced intrapersonal and interpersonal changes among members of the project team, and we have witnessed change among participants. The principles' guidance around building on strengths and supporting self-determined change, we believe, makes them a particularly promising approach for conducting youth development research and evaluation in majority world countries.

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