

The Appreciative Inquiry Method (AIM)

What is it?

An approach to eliciting human expertise where the emphasis is on learning about and understanding expertise through a process of inquiry, rather than extracting a series of facts. It seeks to produce a compact description of a situation with the minimum of distortion caused by the methods of the researcher or analyst.

What it isn't

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as described by US academic David Cooperrider, described at <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/uploads/whatisai.pdf>. AI is about identifying the 'life giving forces' which give rise to organisations and using this in a process of organisational change.

What's behind it?

AIM fuses the ideas of Sir Geoffrey Vickers and the tools from Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). Vickers developed a theory that what drives organisations is not the seeking of goals but the maintenance of relationships between people. This was underpinned by his notion of 'appreciation'. AIM seeks to get at the standards, beliefs and values which underpin an expert's system of appreciation, using tools such as the Root Definition and CATWOE elements of SSM to achieve this.

Why AIM?

AIM was produced originally for the elicitation of knowledge in the development of expert systems for Information Systems. While other elicitation methods were suitable for fact-based knowledge, they were unsuitable for tacit knowledge relating to experts and how they selected and used information. AIM is a systemic method of learning which minimises the amount of time required of the expert but maximises the opportunity for the researcher to appreciate the situation of the expert. There is no real limit to the situations in which knowledge may need to be elicited: Dstl is using the method in the early stages of engagement with a problem-owner to understand whether there is a problem, where it may lie and what to do next in terms of any systemic intervention.

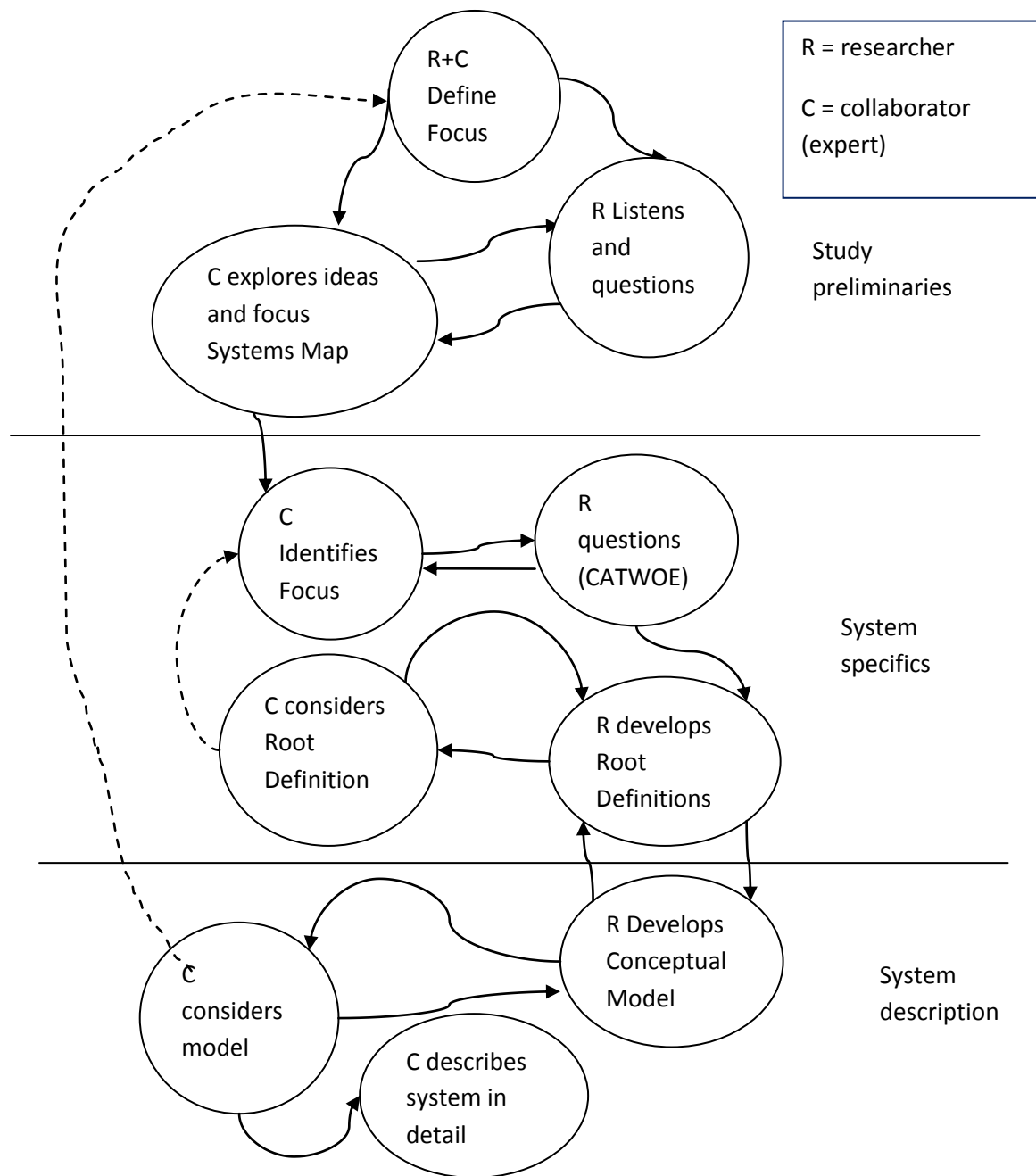
AIM or SSM?

The simplest way to understand the difference is based around scope. SSM is generally used where there is a need for change and it is optimised to work out how to go from the 'as is' to the 'to be' states. AIM on the other hand is generally 'limited' to gaining a shared understanding of the situation as is. Some advanced uses of AIM can extend the method into producing an agenda for change; care is required however to avoid overlap and unnecessary confusion with SSM.

How to use it

The diagram overleaf is a simplified version of the stages of an AIM study. It represents the current views of Dr Daune West (the creator of AIM in 1992) following 20 years of use of the method. The references list examples of case studies showing that AIM is fundamentally a useful approach. The book by Stowell and Welch gives examples of AIM which illustrate its flexibility and some enhancements to the original method.

The 3-stage process of using AIM



Select references

West D and de Brança F. 'A Systemic Approach to Eliciting and Gathering the Expertise of a Knowledge Guardian: an Application of the Appreciative Inquiry Method to the Study of Classical Dressage'. *Systems Practice and Action Research* 25 (2011): 241-260.

West D and Thomas E. 'Looking for the bigger picture: An application of the appreciative inquiry method in Renfrewshire Council for Voluntary Services'. *International Journal of Information Management* 25 (2005): 429-441.

Stowell F and Welch C. *The Manager's Guide to Systems Practice: Making Sense of Complex Problems*. Chichester: Wiley (2012): 49-57.