

## **A narrative assessment of synergic inquiry: Its effectiveness in fostering transformative learning in cross-cultural settings.**

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**Abstract:** This empirical study examines the effectiveness of Synergic Inquiry as a practical methodology for fostering transformative learning experience in cross-cultural settings. The study qualitatively analyzes the life narratives of participants who engaged in action-oriented projects conducted abroad that applied the Synergic Inquiry framework.

### **Introduction**

Interactions among people from different cultures have been expanding rapidly. This trend calls for higher capacities for dealing with cultural differences. In traditional cross-cultural studies, cultural difference has been mostly treated as a barrier to overcome. This tendency is clearly reflected in the commonly used term "culture shock," which implies a sort of terror. A cross-cultural encounter, however, can also be seen as a powerful opportunity for transforming and/or expanding one's perspective, which unfortunately has not been well investigated yet though there are some exceptions (e.g., Adler, 1975; Kim, 1988; Kim & Ruben, 1988; Mansell, 1981; Taylor, 1994a, 1994b; Yoshikawa, 1987).

*Synergic Inquiry* developed and advocated by Dr. Yongming Tang (1996a, 1996b) is a relatively new framework for fostering such transformative learning in cross-cultural settings. In practice, several action-oriented research trips (*Synergy Projects*) have been conducted in some foreign countries. This empirical study investigates the transformative experiences of the participants in these projects and consequently accesses the effectiveness of Synergic Inquiry as a catalyst for cross-cultural transformative learning in adults.

### **Overview of Synergic Inquiry**

#### Synergic Inquiry

Synergic Inquiry is a "transformative action methodology that provides conditions, contexts, and catalysts for cultivating capacities for problem-solving, learning, and growth by expanding

human consciousness" (Tang, 1996b, p. 1). The methodology focuses on utilizing various differences in people's perspectives. Such differences are "not regarded as sources of friction and conflict, but as sources of wisdom and learning" (Tang, 1996b, p. 1). Theoretically, Synergic Inquiry builds on the synergy principle of the universe--a grand pattern that exists in various contemporary theories in both natural and social sciences as well as Eastern wisdom traditions and the Western philosophy of dialectics. Synergic Inquiry has been used to experiment with varied contexts--i.e., individual development, relationship, team work, organizational development, community development, race and gender relations, as well as cross-cultural interactions. (For more theoretical understanding of Synergic Inquiry and its relation to transformative learning theories, please refer to Yongming Tang in the same volume. For its applications in transformative learning in some other contexts, please consult Carole Barlas' paper also in the same volume.)

In essence, Synergic Inquiry adopts a four-step process. *Self-Knowing* is a step to examine one's own structure of consciousness (e.g., values, beliefs, and assumptions). *Other-Knowing* is a step for learning to cultivate a consciousness different from one's own. *Differences-Holding* is yet another step that facilitates learners to hold different consciousnesses equally and create a both-and mentality, replacing the either-or mentality. *Differences-Transcending* is a step in which learners utilize embodied different consciousnesses as resources to create new knowledge, strategies, and solutions that go beyond the limitations of each single consciousness. At the core of this transformative process is a circular system for continually expanding human consciousness--i.e., the *action-reflection cycle*, which is manifested in all the four major steps of the process.

### Synergy Project

The Synergic Inquiry framework has been put in practice as Synergy Projects in various cross-cultural settings. Since 1994, four projects trips have been conducted in China, India, and Mexico. In each of these projects, the participants engaged in cross-cultural research activities along the Synergic Inquiry framework, typically for three weeks, in a certain organizational setting, in order to produce creative solutions for some practical issues in the organization. That is, they first clarified the two culturally different perspectives around the given issues, through in-depth interviews, continuous self-reflection including journal keeping, and daily group meetings (Self-Knowing & Other-Knowing). Then, they were expected to internalize each of the two perspectives as deeply as possible, in order to prepare the foundation for cultivating a new perspective beyond the original two (Differences-Holding). Lastly, they attempted to create synergic solutions for the issues, which would not have been available if they had remained within either of the two cultural perspectives (Differences-Transcending). Such a process of synergistic activities is expected to foster the emergence of expanded consciousness beyond the polarities of the two cultures.

## **Method**

This study employs an interpretive research methodology, narrative analysis, especially as espoused by narrative psychologists Jerome Bruner (1986) and Donald Polkinghorne (1988). Eight adults students (5 women and 3 men; 5 Caucasian Americans, 2 African Americans, and 1 non-American Asian; age 31 to 53) from a graduate institute in California, who had participated in one or more Synergy Projects, were interviewed. Along with the hermeneutic research paradigm, each interviewee was viewed as a co-researcher and was interviewed twice. In the first interviews, the co-researchers told their life stories about the transformation and/or expansion of consciousness through the Synergy Projects. In the second interviews, the researcher and the co-researchers collaboratively inquired the deeper meanings in their life stories derived from the first interviews--especially regarding how the Synergic Inquiry framework affected their unique, transformative learning experiences, under the influence of each co-researcher's unique personhood and life context as well as encountered various cultural differences. Transcripts of these interview sessions were the main source for analysis. The researcher clarified narrative plots of the co-researchers' transformative learning experiences and further compared them with the theoretical framework of Synergic Inquiry, which was viewed as the ideal narrative plot, in order to access in a qualitative manner how effectively it enhanced their transformative learning.

## **Results**

Due to the limit of space, only a small portion of one co-researcher's narrative in China and its brief analysis will be presented. Although it cannot reveal the full complexity and richness of her experience, it will convey some qualities of the participant's transformative learning experience commonly seen in the Synergy Projects.

### Narrative of Lisa

Lisa is an European American woman in her mid forties who has been a school teacher for nearly 20 years. The main episode in her narrative is a few-hour interview with Chinese teachers. At the beginning of the interview, she thought that they had the same heart-felt care for children as she had. She was just very happy to sense deep connection with them as a teacher. She said:

These teachers really cared about the children. The things that they were saying really echoed how I was feeling. Their hospitality was beautiful. They had real hearts that were open to someone who was a colleague. I was a teacher and so were they.

She soon realized, however, that she and they did not necessarily share the same heart and mind. Asking them deeper questions based on her assumptions about the translated words, she kept receiving different answers from what she intuitively assumed were in their replies. Eventually, she noticed that they were using the same words with different meanings. She said, for instance, "Their motivations were really about punishment and reward. Very different from my internal motivations. It was very different from what I had originally thought." That difference in the meaning of motivation was surprising to her. She told me how she actually felt about the Chinese way of using punishment and reward for motivating children with the following example:

They were talking about a handicapped child that the other children took care of. Well, in my way, the taking care of would have come from the children wanting to be with that child, and this was, they were given points and buttons and flowers for taking care of that child, you know. This is reward again, this whole kind of thing of reward. So when I listened to them talk about taking care of, it had a real different aspect. For me, it comes from the heart, or this was my assumption. And their caring comes from duty. And I don't want to make a judgment on which is better, heart or duty. But it's still there. I mean, the caring for is still there, but it just wasn't in my way. And I was assuming that this was my way.

She could not accept their way. Even though she did not want to judge it wrong, it did not make sense to her. She felt disappointed because their way of motivating children focusing on conformity and settlement in the group seemed to repress the personal growth of each individual child, which is the most important aspect of education from her perspective. Then, she further explored internally why she felt so disappointed and noticed her underlying expectation for the encounter with the Chinese teachers.

I wanted to find similarities. Especially this camaraderie of teachers trying to teach children. I really wanted to find similarities.... Wanting to say yes, we are the same. And then a bit of a disappointment at finding that we're not necessarily the same. You know, I kept looking for the similarities.

In her mind, she was trying to convince herself that each perspective was valid in its own cultural environment. It was difficult for her, however, to feel at ease with the idea that she and they were just different with no right or wrong. It was hard for her not to judge them from her perspective because she kept expecting to see similarities. In such disequilibrium, the disappointment perplexed her.

Having some nonverbal support from a colleague interviewing with her, however, she consciously attempted to give up the pursuit for similarities and to just listen. Then, she gradually stepped into a new stage of learning--being with a different culture in a fully open manner, without framing it from her perspective and making any judgment. She described the feeling of being in such openness as follows:

When you are open and just be, there's children's song about that, you know, you can have it all if you let yourself be. It's a Donovan song actually. Then you see more. It's like you have eyes in the back of your head, you know. More comes in because you don't have so many filters of trying to make it the same. So more sense perceptions, more observations, more .. essences come into your soul in a way, you know. Rather than trying to frame them.

By removing the "filters," she started to experience the differences of the Chinese teachers more freely. The deeper openness, however, was also a painful experience. She said, "When you're so open, in a way, you're almost raw." It felt too raw to be fully exposed to the Chinese cultural reality by suspending all of her judgments because she felt it was like "having no skin." She sometimes wanted to put back her own, familiar filters to protect herself from the rawness. Yet it was not a constant disorientation. Rather she repeatedly went back and forth between the feeling of openness and the feeling of rawness and gradually got used to that sense of rawness. Then, her disappointment was finally resolved. Although her yearning for the familiar did not change and the feeling of rawness never dissolved totally, she became able to feel comfortable with the differences, especially at the end of the interview. That comfort further led her to a deeper sense of connection with the Chinese teachers.

### Analysis of the Narrative in the Light of Synergic Inquiry

During the few-hour interview, she obtained deep open-mindedness toward the Chinese teachers. It was not a sudden shift in her mind, but rather a gradual process of learning a new way of being with differences, which was accompanied by painful feelings of becoming aware of her own perspective and attempting to detach from it.

At first, hearing the Chinese teachers' talks based on her own assumptions as a teacher, she simply sensed that they had the same feeling of care for children. Yet, she soon became disappointed to realize that there were some serious gaps between her and their perspectives. In such an interaction, as the first Self- and Other-Knowing, she became aware of the assumptions in her teaching style as well as their different style.

Through a further Self-Knowing attempt of exploring intentionally why she was feeling so disappointed, she then noticed that she had a compelling expectation for finding similarities with the Chinese teachers. Intellectually, she was trying to follow the Synergic Inquiry process and accept the Chinese perspective as her Other-Knowing, but she was emotionally judging the Chinese teachers because they went against her expectation of finding similarities.

Noticing such an expectation and the imbalance between head and heart, however, she could try to detach from the unconscious pursuit for similarities. Then, she stepped into much deeper Other-Knowing with fuller open-mindedness, which was accompanied by another uncomfortable feeling of rawness; she wanted to put back her own perspective to protect herself.

Going back and forth between the openness to the different perspective and the withdrawal from the pain of rawness, she finally reached a state of being comfortable with differences without losing the yearning for her own perspective. It could be seen as the beginning of Differences-Holding, in which she tried to hold the two perspectives as equally as possible.

## **Discussion**

The data as a whole indicate that all the co-researchers, during and/or even after the project experiences, went through transformation and/or expansion of their original perspectives. The contents and depth of their learning experiences are quite diverse, based on their cultural backgrounds, personal life contexts at the time, expectations for the projects, past life histories (including cross-cultural experiences), and general self- and world-perceptions. For instance, Frances obtained a new identity as a dark-skin person beyond her African-American identity and even decided to change her profession, through her encounter with the non-materialistic life of the Tamil people in India. In contrast, Tracy just accumulated her experience of openly hearing and letting in Chinese collectivistic perspectives and deeply reflected on it after coming back to the U.S., which eventually transformed her individualistic perspective. Ichiro, a Japanese, deepened his understanding of the American perspective in China, through his involvement in the interaction between Americans and Chinese with whom he identified more strongly as an Asian.

The further analysis of the data suggests that Synergic Inquiry played an important role in such transformative learning experiences, particularly by encouraging, both explicitly and implicitly, a continuous process of "action" (embracing culturally different perspectives) and "reflection" (questioning their own assumptions) as shown in Lisa's narrative. That is, it seems to have provided them with a basic guideline for how to act against cultural differences in learning. Further it facilitated how to deal with various internal reactions, including negative feelings, against inescapable immersion into differences.

Still, the data also show that many of them occasionally had difficulty or even forgot to follow the Synergic Inquiry framework, especially when the other's way of being went against strongly held beliefs and/or when co-researchers experienced intense emotional resistance against the encountered differences. Rita, for instance, tried to accept a new idea of human unity in India, but could not really hold back her judgments because she had been seriously pursuing a totally different image of human unity as a social activist. Diane promptly perceived the relationship between Europeans and Tamils in India as oppression from her African-American perspective, felt very angry with that, and was able to explore deeply, neither their different perspectives nor her own.

It is also notable that the project participants implicitly encouraged each other a great deal during the trips by sharing the same process for transforming and/or expanding their perspectives. Lisa was nonverbally supported by a colleague in attempting to give up her expectation for similarities. Rita was also encouraged to hold back her judgments and embrace different perspectives as well as her own by just observing her peers; she said, "If they can do it, I can do it." Such a collaborative context for the projects seems to have helped them be more able to resolve the judgments and discomforts accompanying the Synergic Inquiry process of transformative learning.

As a result of such transformative learning experiences, they seem to have obtained some lasting capacities which are applicable to their daily lives--such as, withholding judgments, openly accepting different perspectives, tolerating ambiguous situations, consciously exploring assumptions as cultural conditioning, and holding different perspectives. In addition, most of them shifted their perception of differences in general, from a negative image reflecting

difficulty and obstruction to something less uncomfortable. Their shifted perception contains potentials for learning. Some are even willing to actively learn from differences and further, want to help mediate conflicts among people with differences.

These capacities, however, are mainly related only to Self-Knowing and Other-Knowing stages of Synergic Inquiry. In the analysis of the data, the narrative plot of Differences-Holding is seen less often and that of Differences-Transcending is even less. It seems that many of them, again as seen in Lisa's narrative, at least stepped into the stage of Differences-Holding, but mostly did not reach the state of holding two perspectives equally. This could be chiefly attributed to the shortness of the three-week project design as well as the more demanding and time-consuming nature of these two tasks.

Overall, it is concluded that Synergic Inquiry served as an essential driving force for transforming and/or expanding the project participants' perspectives in different cultures. Although the encounter with different cultures itself embodies high potentials for both learning/growth and stressful alienation, Synergic Inquiry can be a practical tool for smoothing and accelerating the transformative learning aspect of cross-cultural experience.

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