An Interview with John Heron:

Exploring the Interface between Cooperative Inquiry and Transpersonal Studies

John Heron and Olga Sohmer

Abstract

In this interview, John Heron—the founder of cooperative inquiry (CI; Heron, 1996, 1998)—discusses this experiential, participatory approach to research and learning with participatory research special issue guest editor Olga Sohmer. After presenting a summary of cooperative inquiry, Heron and Sohmer discuss CI in the context of transpersonal studies, including past and prospective future applications. Questioning the emphasis on "trans" in transpersonal, Heron unfolds the three dimensions of human spirituality that CI engages and offers a vision for transpersonal studies in light of CI ideals. Additional themes that are explored include cultivating authentic relationships in CI, the role of the nonhuman natural world in CI, practices based on CI principles that can be used in daily life, applying extended epistemology and radical assessment in education, self-generating culture, and the role of CI in human evolution.

Keywords: cooperative inquiry, participatory research, transpersonal studies, holistic learning, self-generating culture, authentic relationship, extended epistemology, radical assessment

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Exploring the Interface between Cooperative Inquiry and Transpersonal Studies

Cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996, 1998) is an experiential, participatory approach to research and learning that offers a creative challenge for transpersonal studies. The approach reclaims all dimensions of human experience as a valid basis for research and empowers all participants as active researcher-subjects capable of generating knowledge about themselves and their world. Embracing an extended epistemology, CI intentionally engages multiple ways of knowing and recognizes the co-creative nature of knowledge itself. Through its emphasis on collaboration and group process, CI provides unique access to the intersubjective field between co-inquirers (Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017) and has been described as a relational spiritual practice regardless of the inquiry focus (Heron & Lahood, 2008). Finally, a skillfully implemented CI provides informative and primarily transformative outcomes with the intention to foster human flourishing in sustainable relation with all of life (Heron, 1996).

In what follows, Olga Sohmer invites CI founder John Heron to discuss the approach in the context of transpersonal studies, offering a vision for participatory methods of research and learning for the future of the field. Heron provides a conversational response to Sohmer's questions informed by nearly four decades of experience developing and implementing CI in the realms of human spirituality, psychology, and holistic professional practice. After sharing an overview of CI and clarifying the relationship between CI and transpersonal studies, Heron and Sohmer explore a variety of themes including the roles of authentic relationship and the nonhuman natural world in CI, applications of CI principles in daily life, extended epistemology and radical assessment in education, self-generating culture, and the role of CI in human evolution (i.e., the process of human development and social change in relation to the Earth and Cosmos).

Overview of CI

Olga: Thank you for your willingness to engage this conversation, John. As CI becomes increasingly familiar in the transpersonal field, I am honored to dialogue with you about this promising method of inquiry and some of the unique issues pertaining to CI in transpersonal studies. Before we dive into more specific questions, could you share a little background information about the approach?

John: Yes, I would be happy to. In CI all the participants work together as co-researchers and as co-subjects. This is not research on people or about people, but research *with* people. I developed the model between 1971 and 1981 and thereafter with the strong support of Peter Reason (see References for a comprehensive CI bibliography). The defining features and fundamentals can be summarized as follows:

(a) The inquiry is launched by a trainer/facilitator with a full grasp of the model, who is also from the beginning a full participant, and who progressively moves out of the facilitator role as co-inquirers internalize the method.

(b) The process has several cycles of co-inquiry, each cycle consisting of a reflection phase and an action phase. The inquiry starts with a reflection phase to clarify the purpose and to plan the exploration of it in the first action phase. The second reflection phase

reviews the first action and, in the light of that, plans the second action phase. This process continues for some more cycles with a final reflection phase review of the whole sequence, its validity and informative and transformative outcomes.

(c) All the participants are fully involved as co-researchers in all the reflection phases in all research decisions about purpose, content, method, and outcomes; and they are fully involved as co-subjects in all the action phases.

(d) There is explicit shared attention to the validity of the inquiry and its findings. The primary procedure is managing the number and content of inquiry cycles and of balancing divergence and convergence in inquiry strands. Other procedures attend to sustaining authentic collaboration, challenging consensus collusion, managing inquiry counter-transference, balancing reflection and action, managing chaos as the precursor to the emergence of a new level of insight and order (cf. complexity theory [Lewin, 1993]; also, for an in depth discussion of CI validity see Heron, 1996).

(e) There is also a radical epistemology for a wide-ranging inquiry method that integrates experiential knowing, presentational knowing, propositional knowing, and practical knowing (how to exercise appropriate skills). These forms of knowing are brought to bear upon each other, through the use of inquiry cycles, to enhance their mutual congruence, both within each inquirer and the inquiry group as a whole.

(f) The inquiry method can be both informative about and transformative of any aspect of the human condition that is accessible to a transparent body-mind, that is, one that has an open, unbound awareness.

(g) Primacy is given to transformative inquiries, where people change their way of being and doing and relating in their world in the direction of greater flourishing. This is on the grounds that practical knowing-how consummates the other three forms of knowing—propositional, presentational, and experiential—on which it is grounded.

(h) The full range of human capacities and sensibilities is available as an instrument of inquiry. (Heron, 1996)

The full practice of CI, as summarized above, necessarily emerges through the doing of it. A new group of co-inquirers (or even an experienced group convening for a new inquiry) will not manifest all these characteristics at the start of their work together. However, many if not all of them can be nurtured through an extended inquiry process. I call the radical epistemology discussed here an 'extended epistemology' because it is a theory of how we know which goes beyond the ways of knowing of positivist oriented academia, which is based primarily on abstract propositional knowledge and a narrow empiricism. I distinguish between the process of knowing and its product.

Experiential knowing arises by being present with, by direct face-to-face encounter with, person, place, or thing. It is knowing through the immediacy of perceiving, through empathy and resonance. Its product is the quality of the relationship in which it participates. Imaginal (or presentational) knowing emerges from experiential knowing, by intuiting significant form and process in what is met. Its product reveals the significance of the experience through the expressive imagery of movement, dance, sound, music, drawing, painting, sculpture, poetry, story, and drama. Conceptual (or propositional) knowing 'about' something is intellectual

knowing of ideas and theories. Its product is the informative spoken or written statement. Note, imaginal and conceptual are process-oriented terms while presentational and propositional are product-oriented. Practical knowing is knowing how to do something. Its product is a skill, knack, or competence—intrapsychic, interpersonal, manual, political, technical, transpersonal, and more (Heron, 1981b, 1992, 1996).

People are already familiar, de facto and in daily use, with these four kinds of knowing and interweave them in all sorts of ways, with deft unawareness of the tacit sophistication that is afoot. In CI they become intentional, and knowing becomes more valid if the four ways are congruent with each other: if our knowing is grounded in our experience, expressed through our images and stories, understood through theories which make sense to us, and expressed in worthwhile action in our lives. This intentional use of the ways can also be thought of in terms of a virtuous circle: skilled action leads into enriched encounter, thence into wider imaginal portrayal of the pattern of events, thence into more comprehensive conceptual models, thence into more advanced skills, and so on.

Transpersonal Inquiry

Olga: Perfect. This is a succinct, yet detailed summary of CI and the extended epistemology underpinning the approach. Let's turn now to the interface of CI and transpersonal studies. What are some of the transpersonal topics that you have seen fruitfully explored through CI?

John: In my current view, CI does not explore purely transpersonal topics. Let me explain. Transpersonal refers to, for example, states of consciousness beyond the usual limits of the ego and personality. In the past I have used the term loosely as a synonym for spiritual as do many others in the established fields of transpersonal psychology and transpersonal studies. However, I now think this is bad practice, because it sustains a limiting spiritual focus on "trans." My view is that human spirituality is tripartite—the intrapersonal within, the interpersonal between, and the transpersonal beyond—and that the spirit between persons is the central and primary dimension. It is the mediating middle ground at the threshold of, defining the status of, both the spirit within and the spirit beyond, providing a forum for their complementary kinds of opening and cocreation.

I also now believe that the CI method in its full form manifests the spirit between, poised at that dipolar threshold, and that any CI purpose if appropriately addressed will be transformed by and included within this tripartite spiritual dynamic. My basic point is that all CIs, whatever their purpose, have the potential to be an expression of, and an exploration of, a tripartite human spirituality. This assertion is, of course, subject to rigorous experiential inquiry.

Finally, I have come to see the term "topic" as somewhat inappropriate for a CI as well (although I have described inquiries in this way in the past). A topic is the subject of a speech, essay, thesis, or discourse. In academia a transpersonal topic is the subject of a thesis about higher states of awareness. A mature CI, however, is not about a topic, it is about a purpose, an intention to do something, to take transformative action. The primary outcome is not a thesis but enhanced human behavior in the unfolding of personal, social, and environmental development. A written account of this primary process is a secondary outcome.

With this clarification in mind, here are few brief sketches of early CIs with an explicitly spiritual focus. Some of the inquiries were held in five-day retreats with all reflection and action phases done within the retreat. Others had from half to one-day reflection meetings spread over time with action phases in everyday life between the meetings.

(a) Uncovering and releasing the bliss nature, alongside another strand of inquiry into transtemporal regression - journeying through planetary time and space to locate affine persons and events from past cultures.

(b) Integrating individually chosen spiritual practices into everyday life such as opening to spiritual life and subtle energy, being in relation with what is, exercising charismatic presence, finding one's spiritual heart, attending to one's coming into being (out of Being), and others. Also, liberating ourselves in group life by collectively chosen spiritual practices such as charismatic toning and movement. The extended focus included injecting individual spiritual activities into everyday culture, and creating a sub-culture of people intentionally inquiring into these kinds of social transformation.

(c) Other spiritually focused inquiries have explored a range of overlapping themes: improvising spontaneous charismatic expression of the spiritual life within; charismatic celebration—through percussion, ritual and procession—of divine life and its planetary manifestations; participation in universal mind through group toning and meditation; identifying and exercising knacks involved in entering individually chosen altered states; celebrating, through exchanges within a ritual procession, the soul as imago dei; and more (see Heron, 1998).

Olga: Could you share a highlight from one of these inquiries that stands out to you?

John: Here is the first highlight that comes to mind about spontaneous animal participation. In the first inquiry above, we were all in the moon temple (a converted underground barrel-vaulted storage room) gathered round a woman lying flat on her back with eyes closed, dipping in and out of her transtemporal regressions to different times and places. A swallow pair (whom I knew well – they would join me when I was meditating there alone) had a nest high up on the end wall. The female flew in from the garden, ignored the gathered group, hovered for a while high above the woman, then flew in a vertical circle right down to her body and back up to the top of the vault, repeated this intimate, elegant, and entirely non-aggressive loop several times, and then flew straight out of the temple. The woman found this to be a potent kind of facilitation and had a revealing session.

Olga: Fascinating! This brings up an interesting question about the role of the nonhuman natural—and perhaps supernatural—world in CIs. Would you consider the natural environment, place, and/or other living beings present in the context of a CI as a part of the inquiry? Can, for example, the presence of a place become a co-inquirer? What is your perspective on all of this?

John: Yes, I do indeed hold that the presence of place can become a co-inquirer. This belief was launched in 1976 when I attended a weekend seminar with Tarthang Tulku, the Nyingma Buddhist luminary, at the Nyingma Institute in Berkeley, California. In a private talk with me, he casually suggested I might find it fruitful to spend thirty minutes every day speaking out loud in an isolated place in the midst of nature, giving voice to whatever it was in me to

say in such a circumstance. I noticed that the proposal made an immediate appeal. At the same time, I thought it was disconcerting, impractical, and rather mad. I have since learned its deep wisdom. In 1990, I went to live on an elegant promontory of land in central Tuscany and began to practice regular conversations with the immediate local panorama of planetary presence.

When I talk out loud, in an empathic creative way, to the world and with the world, in a specific place in the world, I quickly discover what questionable preconceptions and assumptions I am bringing to the dialogue, because the very presence of the whole perceptual field will throw them into relief. The world's own utterance—its co-shaping of my perceiving—will transfigure my assumptions, when I next speak, into a form more consonant with how nature is being present at this time and in this space. In this way, it interrupts the tyranny of unilateral verbal commentary on what there is.

The worldview fruit of this practice was published as *Feeling and Personhood: Psychology in Another Key* (Heron, 1992) and the practice has since been developed and elaborated as *primary theatre* (Heron, 2001a), which is regularly used in our inquiry group here in New Zealand. In primary theatre each member takes a turn to talk to, with, or as, any part, feature, dimension of nature and the given cosmos, in the place where we are; and this process can unfold in various fruitful ways. There is indeed a great and exciting potential for primary theatre to be developed into a variety of full-blown CIs.

From a broader perspective, I can add that I believe there is a subtle energy field embracing any and every physical place. The field varies in density and quality from place to place, the variation resulting from a lot of interacting variables which include density of human population and the cumulative impact of local history and culture.

After taking early retirement from the University of London I went to live, as mentioned above, in central Tuscany within the triangle of the Renaissance cities of Pisa, Florence, and Siena, because I could feel the qualitative ethos of the Renaissance hanging in the subtle field, still potent despite less elevated imprints from other sources. This subtle ethos was very conducive to writing, within the ten years I was there, *Feeling and Personhood* (1992), *Co-operative Inquiry* (1996), *Sacred Science* (1998), *The Complete Facilitator's Handbook* (1999), and various papers and chapters. It was also conducive to developing—in human behavior over a long series of workshops—the sacralization of nature launched by the artists of the Renaissance, as well as the conversations with the presence of place in Tuscany I described above.

Where I now live in New Zealand the subtle field is noticeably porous because of a small population (only 4.7 million spread over two large islands), an indigenous culture still alive to wider realities, and a warfare history dwarfed by the centuries of military mayhem in densely populated Europe. This porosity has greatly facilitated our setting up empowering spiritual vortices—dynamic centres for human transformation—for many years inland on the top of a hill, and for the last two years on the coast beside the Pacific Ocean.

CI has played a very central role in all this work in both Italy and New Zealand. So, yes, I think you are absolutely right, CI has a great future in co-creative engagement with the presence of place.

The Three Dimensions of Human Spirituality

Olga: I appreciate hearing your perspective on this, John. It sounds like this is fertile area for future exploration. Returning to your earlier comment regarding the three dimensions of human spirituality, could you elaborate the dimensions? How does CI engage all three dimensions?

John: As stated previously, my view of human spirituality is that it has three interdependent dimensions, the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and the transpersonal. These are, respectively, the spirit within persons—the divine ground and living root of human motivation; the spirit between persons—the co-ontological reality of their immediate shared presence; and the spirit beyond persons—cosmic consciousness beyond the current limits of ordinary mind. I call human cocreation with these three dimensions, respectively, enlivenment, engagement, and enlightenment. I do not mean by "enlightenment" any kind of final end-state of spiritual realization as in the old traditions, but a progressive opening to cosmic consciousness calling for integration with both engagement and enlivenment, all manifest together in our social process.

We can open to these differing and distinct spiritual animations through intentional and aware participatory cocreation, and we are in the early dawn of exploring a treasure trove of fruitful ways of doing this (Heron & Lahood, 2008). One well-tested method in a group inquiry is to move from enlivenment to engagement to enlightenment. So if we spontaneously express together the idiosyncratic *life-force* (i.e., the spirit that animates living creatures) within each of us through movement, posture, gesture, sound, percussion, and then pause attentively within the quality of our shared life-field, the presence between manifests, and if we dwell attentively within that presence, as it intensifies it opens to a backdrop of all-embracing awareness. This is just one way whereby co-inquirers in their reflection phase can empower their inquiry, whatever it is about, by taking time out to cocreate rituals and practices which evoke, invoke, and integrate the three dimensions.

In an individual action phase out there in the world—say where the action is to do with a professional working with a client—the inquirer can prepare the ground for the planned intervention by (a) psychophysically sensing the quality of the life-field shared with the client, and (b) modifying that quality by her or his posture, gesture, timing and tone of voice, so that some micro-sense of the shared presence between them emerges within an expanding awareness, and thereby creates an openness for the planned intervention and for relevant insights about it. Whatever the relational purpose of the CI may be, it can always involve some degree of integration of the three dimensions within both reflection and action phases.

I have noticed that participatory perspectives may differ in their approach to these three dimensions. For example, Ferrer (2018) gives special attention to "the creative link between intrapersonal and transpersonal cocreation," (p. 14) and develops this link into a theory of participatory pluralism that affirms individualistic different, even incompatible, spiritual ultimates. In my perspective, interpersonal co-creation enacts a spiritual presence that is shared—a unitive spiritual relation between everyone present that is also grounded in the spirit within and open to the spirit beyond.

Interesting questions arise here in the contrast of my own perspective that gives primacy to many people in a group being in interpersonal engagement with the one immediate spiritual

presence between them all, and Ferrer (2018) giving primacy to many individuated people busy with different transpersonal enlightenments about different ultimates beyond them. Can persons who are individually cocreating different ultimates cocreate together one immediate presence? And, vice versa, can those who are cocreating one presence between them individually cocreate different ultimates beyond them? These are important questions for future inquiry.

Authentic Relationship in CI

Olga: This is an interesting point regarding the primacy of engagement, the spirit between or the interpersonal domain, in human spirituality. It seems to me that fostering the capacity for genuine relationship—relationship in which individual expression and authentic collaboration are cultivated equally—is one of the major gifts and challenges of engaging in a CI process. How do you see this? Is learning to be in authentic relationship at the heart of CI? Or would you articulate this in another way?

John: Yes, I believe that learning to be in an authentic co-creating group relationship is at the heart of a CI.

The grounding relationship for such a group is the intersubjective life-world of pre-conceptual perception, the shared feeling of consciousness-world union which is the foundation of experiential knowing of the world and of the emergence of language (cf. Heron, 1992; Leslie Paul, 1961; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Whitehead, 1926, 1929). This life-world will be buried below the verbal preoccupations of conventional CI behavior, but radical co-inquirers can consciously access its underlying harmonic resonance (i.e. felt sense of underlying vibratory signals) through enlivenment and related practices. Then they can mindfully attune to the presence-between, which provides a shared basis for owning and processing the emotional, conceptual, and decision-making issues that surge through the inquiry surface above it. Grounded in this relationship here are further guidelines for achieving authentic group development:

> (a) Emotional and interpersonal competence. There is no blind negative transference going on between co-inquirers, participants are aware of their distress and have the ability to manage it appropriately (e.g. they know how to own and report mindfully on down/dark states, and to seek support for cathartic release and insight). This is why I have recruited, for many of the CIs which I have initiated, experienced co-counsellors trained within Co-Counselling International, founded by myself and others in 1974 (Heron 2001, pp. 247-248.)

> (b) Authenticity. This means being true to oneself, having the self-determining ability to choose to be soul-revealing charismatically and emotionally, and to be transparent in an aware, open and honest co-creative relation with others. This extends to political sensibility, being able to practice and sustain authentic collaboration.

> (c) Uplift. The refreshment of a sense of humor and of sharing with co-inquirers intermittent states of enthusiasm, enjoyment, excitement, elation, exhilaration, exaltation.

> (d) Challenge. Being open to accept states of chaos, disorder, disorientation, and confusion within a reflection phase and the potential of these states to resolve into new kinds of insight and order.

(e) Being non-dogmatic. Exercising internal spiritual autonomy in a spirit of inquiry, not being a spokesperson for any external spiritual authority, developing a personal phenomenology of spiritual experience and action to contribute to the collaborative inquiry and its outcomes.

(f) "Heron's beard." The ability to give unusual experiences the initial benefit of the doubt, to let them unfold their full potential, without the premature application of Occam's razor, which may lead to misplaced reductionism (Heron, 1998).

(g) No meddling. No tinkering with another person's soul-revealing check-in.

(h) Commitment. To regular consistent participation, being an active contributor in reflection and action phases of the inquiry process, and attending all the reflection-action cycles.

(i) Confidentiality. With respect to the radical and intimate self-disclosures of co-inquirers.

All the items above are fundamental. They provide the groundwork to support the four basic pillars of the CI process and their corresponding components:

1. Four basic ways of knowing

Experiential, presentational, propositional, practical as defined above in the opening overview of CI.

2. Four key collaborative decision-making positions

Collaborative decision-making is possible when the inner life of feeling, with its dynamic thrust toward individual distinctness of being within a participative field, unfurls as a practical interplay, within each co-inquirer, and between all, of four basic political values: autonomy, active hierarchy, passive hierarchy, and co-operation. Each person, in contributing to group decision-making, can move freely between the following four positions, the first three of which are precursors to, and components of, the culminating fourth:

(a) Autonomy: I can identify my own idiosyncratic true needs and interests.

(b) Active hierarchy: I can identify options that promote the true needs and interests of all of us, individually and collectively

(c) Passive hierarchy: I can identify an active-hierarchy proposal made by someone else as one that I can freely and authentically follow.

(d) Co-operation: I can co-operate with—that is, listen to, engage with, and negotiate agreed decisions with—my peers, celebrating diversity and difference as integral to genuine unity.

I give the word "hierarchy" a radical new meaning. Active hierarchy here is the creative leadership which seeks to promote the values of autonomy and co-operation in a peer-to-peer inquiry. Such leadership is exercised in two ways. First, by the one or more people who take initiatives to set up the inquiry. And second, as spontaneously emerging and moving leadership among the peers, when anyone proposes initiatives that further

enhance the autonomy and co-operation of all participating members. This second way is also where the principle of the "holonomic focus" (Heron, 1999, p. 69) can apply: the idea that the destiny of the whole group can manifest at a particular time through the individual perspective of one person.

The skill required for an individual person to manage these four positions, and to keep them in creative interplay while at the same time interacting with several other persons each of whom is busy with the same multiple interplay, is considerable. It can be regarded as a prime discipline in immanent, embodied, relational spirituality. There can be agreed procedural guidelines, and a rotating facilitator-chairperson, to support the process. Yet the challenge to egoic contraction combined with lack of skill is considerable. Hence there can be occasions when confusion, chaos, individual frustration and interpersonal tension become acute. Such occasions are also fruitful for egoic deconstruction and for remarkable liberating zest when the breakthrough into creative and expanded social synchrony (i.e., the felt sense of group cohesion) occurs.

3. Four different distinctive qualitative states of the shared intersubjective life-field

 I have correlated these with four different kinds of taste.

(a) Golden silence/sacred nectar (sweet) tells us that group is being nourished by the spirit deeply and intimately immanent within its shared life-field, "the ocean of shared feeling…where we become one with one another" (Alexander, 1979, p. 294); evoked by the simple and profound intentional practice of co-attunement, co-presencing, either in silence or with a sounding bowl or choral toning or full-on enlivenment practices (Heron, 2006).

(b) Blight/pall/dark covering (bitter) announces the imminent potential return of the repressed, the disavowed, the disowned, and calls for someone in the group to adopt the devil's advocate role—to ask whether the group is busy not attending to something which is being denied and disowned, which is pressing urgently at the barrier, and to suggest what it might be. This may lead over into managing distress or to uncovering hidden forms of consensus collusion.

(c) Elan/panache/zest (salty) tells us that appropriate creativity-in-inquiry is out and about. An important practical principle here is the role of the spontaneously roving holonomic focus; that is, the rotating initiative, the impromptu circulating leadership, the enlightened insight which moves around the group.

(d) Confusion/chaos/frustration/tension (sour) declares that egoic contraction (i.e., attempts to return to prior understandings or structures) is challenged and that there is an opportunity for new degrees of the four ways of knowing to emerge. This often, but not exclusively, arises in the context of decision-making, it calls the group to the subtle art of identifying and owning the confusion, and wrestling with it awarely, in the flames of burning ego, until in its own good time it transforms into an inquiry breakthrough.

These qualities are modulated by use of the extended epistemology: from encounter in resonant depth (i.e., experiential knowledge), to imaginal appraisal of the pattern of interaction (i.e., imaginal knowledge), to conceptual discrimination of its quality (i.e., conceptual knowledge), to co-evaluation and co-planning, to modulating action which

alters the pattern of interaction, to a qualitative change in the meeting. The key phase in this sequence is co-planning: the transformative know-how of collaborative decision-making in the pursuit of human flourishing.

4. Weaving eight validity procedures into the expanding fabric of the inquiry.

(a) Managing the number and content of inquiry cycles.

(b) Balancing divergence and convergence in inquiry strands.

(c) Sustaining authentic collaboration.

(d) Challenging consensus collusion.

(e) Managing inquiry counter-transference.

(f) Balancing reflection and action.

(g) Managing chaos as the precursor to the emergence of a new level of insight and order (cf. complexity theory, Lewin, 1993).

(h) Congruence within the extended epistemology.

CI in Daily Life

Olga: These guidelines for achieving authentic group relationship in CI are helpful and certainly have broad applications for groups and personal relationships beyond a formal CI container. In this vein, I know that you and you partner offer a "cookbook" of relational inquiry practices that bring the principles of CI into daily life. Could you share a couple examples that readers can try in our own lives?

John: I will answer in the form of suggestions offered to a couple in relationship.

One core spiritual practice is about your decision-making. On many conjoint choices before you, whether major or minor, you first of all decide privately what your personal preferences are. When each is inwardly clear about your preferences, you disclose them to the other, outline your reasons, and in the light this, proceed to a negotiated shared decision.

If the preferences are quite different, then depending on what the decision is about, you can use one or the other of the following procedures:

(a) You light upon a third option that motivates each of you.

(b) You find a plan that combines both preferences.

(c) One of you graciously yields to the other.

(d) You each silently score the strength of your own preference, share the scores, and the lower score yields to the higher.

(e) You spin a wooden top between you and go with the choice of the one toward whom it points when it stops.

As well as being rigorous—don't allow each other to avoid the first crucial step of determining personal preference privately—you keep the process light and easy. And yes, it can be a lot of fun. It is also intrinsically interesting and liberating. On matters large and

small, each of you continuously discovers who she or he is and who the other is, where he or she stands and where the other stands. This process keeps the relationship enriching and entertaining, clear and clean, creative and respectful, challenging and radical, and avoids collusion, control, and muddling along. It ensures that cooperation is authentic and not cobbled together in a habitual fudge.

It means that each of you can check in with the deep inner ground of your motivation, in the belly and the body, to get a sense of where you truly stand as a basis for creative collaboration. Thus immanent, embodied spirit is a spacious co-creative partner to the contractual engagement. Autonomy is the liberating ground of cooperation: the intrapersonal dimension of spirituality upholds the interpersonal dimension. This leads on to a radical theology of autonomy.

Honoring each other as autonomous beings in this way roots you in sacred energy. The divine presence that creates the universe manifests ultimate autonomy. Creative human autonomy is the core of the person as imago dei and is the foundation of authentic collaboration in a one-to-one relationship; and, on the wider canvas, of human rights within an enlivened, engaged, and enlightened society.

Now for an important point. You may discover after you have used the above process for some time that there have been a number of extemporary authentic co-decisions, which were not made in a formal way, were self-evidently not fudge, but emerged with spontaneous dyadic clarity within the immediate cocreativity of a shared life. This flourishing of the dynamic Dionysian is a robust complement to, transformative outcome of, and validation of the formal Apollonian process described above.

Another core spiritual practice is about face to face communion which has two phases. You sit opposite each other and for the first phase gaze into each other's gaze in total silence for a variable period of anything from five to fifteen minutes, and thereby enter the spiritual we-space of the threefold presence. This is the Presence between you embracing the presence of each of you.

The second phase is launched when out of this relational reality one of you gives voice to an unqualified appreciation of the other, who after a pause reciprocates. You repeat this process two more times so that at the end of it each of you has shared three different, quite specific appreciations of the other. These may cover any aspect of your partner's behavior and presence. Continued regularly over a long time, this practice will bring about a remarkable kind of in-depth spiritual solidarity between you. I suggest trying out an interval of seven to ten days between sessions.

Prospective Contributions of CI in Transpersonal Studies

Olga: Thank you, John, for these enlivening practices that we can use in the dynamic and intimate world of our personal relationships. Based on our earlier conversations, I have tried the first decision-making practice you offer with my husband and can attest to the deeper self-reflection, intimacy, and creative collaboration that this approach enables in contrast with the typical way of "muddling" through decisions in partnership.

Returning our conversation to transpersonal studies, I would love to discuss the unique contributions CI makes to the field. In your perspective, what opportunities does your approach to participatory research offer the next generation of transpersonal studies?

John: As I have already said, my approach moves past the limits of the "transpersonal" (refering to spiritual experience beyond the personal) and adds to it spiritual experience between persons (the interpersonal), and within persons (the intrapersonal). It explores the interdependent dynamic between these three basic dimensions of human spirituality—which I also call enlightenment, engagement and enlivenment—and finds the interpersonal dimension of engagement to be central to the process.

It also moves beyond the limits of "studies," which in the context of education means the scholarly acquisition by each individual student of intellectual knowledge about the transpersonal from books, articles, lectures, discussion, debate, and writing essays. My approach complements this scholarship with students participating in cooperative holistic inquiries. These may explore the dynamic interplay of the three mutually enhancing dimensions of human spirituality: for example, how this form of enlivenment interrelated with that kind of engagement and this degree of enlightenment is appropriate for this specific focus of transformative action inquiry.

These inquiries initiate students into an extended and integrated epistemology of experiential, presentational, conceptual, and practical knowing and into the deep significance of human collaboration in both generating and validating multidimensional practical wisdom.

The implications of this are considerable. In the field of spiritual inquiry within academia, the central role of interpersonal spirituality that I propose, calls for a cooperative expansion of method for researchers. Interpersonal spirit is the one presence between unique and distinct persons: it is shared, immediate, and co-ontological. It is co-evoked with spirit, with each person in the inquiry, and with significant interacting elements of the intrapersonal and transpersonal dimensions. It has great potential for generating social change initiatives. All this is open for systematic, experiential, CI by whole-person researchers.

The major challenge to the prevailing academic system and to the educator within it, is that she or he needs to acquire the skill of combining initiating students into the inquiry method with participating fully in the inquiry as co-subject and co-researcher. This, of course, is a valuable start to moving out of the current neo-liberal university model of selling "valid" knowledge to competing individual students based on the unilateral assessment of their work by their teachers.

Olga: Yes, it sounds like the collaborative, non-hierarchical principles of CI could initiate some radical shifts in the way psychospiritual research and education are conducted in academia and beyond. Of course, changes of this magnitude can be challenging to implement. I wonder, what do you think would help the transpersonal community embrace CI, and by extension, other types of participatory inquiry?

John: The transpersonal community has understandably sought to achieve acceptance and respectability in academia. It has done so by promoting spirituality as a discipline in the sense of a branch of intellectual learning, but then inevitably transpersonal promoters get caught up in the competition of intellectual spiritual scholarship, in the pursuit of publishing status and

academic rank; in short, in the demands of cognitive capitalism, where staff exercise unilateral assessment power in selling valid intellectual knowledge to subordinate students. Unfortunately, student intellectual spiritual knowledge declared valid by staff assessors is not valid integral spiritual knowledge; for it is dissociated, not grounded in the students' autonomous spiritual experience.

So, I think there is a calling for some existing transpersonal institute to name itself a spiritual inquiry institute, to make a bold commitment to the cultivation of practical wisdom in a student community based on experiential learning, where staff promote bilateral academic power that invites progressive student participation in whole-person learning using an extended epistemology, in radical assessment, and in educational decision-making (e.g., Maxwell, 2007, 2014).

From a CI point of view, the extended epistemology embraces experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical knowing. This means that some significant degree of scope for students' personal spiritual experience is included within the curriculum as the ground and foundation of their presentational, propositional, and practical knowing.

This practice of extended epistemology calls for a radical assessment of student performance both during and at the end of the course. It is essential that there is a vital space for student self-assessment interwoven with peer and faculty assessment. This vital space is, at its core, about students exploring the soundness, the validity, of their personal spiritual experience. Can they take their stand upon the witness of the inner light, the authority within their own souls? Is the last word with the interior monitor, the divine animation which is present deep within? And how can peers and faculty enhance and strengthen this profound self-assessing inquiry without crude and misplaced interference?

So fully holistic learning involving the extended epistemology calls for radical assessment involving self, peer, and faculty. Neo-liberal transpersonal institutes will be inclined to do the former without doing the latter, which is highly sophisticated and challenging for all involved. Cognitive capitalism—selling valid knowledge by unilateral assessment of subordinate students—is very threatened by radical assessment. But, I believe, it is spiritually damaging to do extended epistemology without radical assessment, as I have defined them.

Jorge Ferrer (2017; Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017; Osterhold et al., 2007; Sohmer et al., 2020) has introduced extended epistemology on some of his CIIS courses, but not yet radical assessment. However, he does acknowledge in his new book, *Participation and the Mystery* (Ferrer, 2017), the relevance, importance, and considerable challenge of implementing radical assessment.

Another closely related way for some existing transpersonal institute to make a bold commitment to the cultivation of practical wisdom in a student community of experiential learning, is through radical research. One version of this is to include CI as an acceptable research format within post-graduate programs.

Peter Reason, now retired, did this for several years, with a bold and steady flow of CI Ph.D.s emerging from his Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, based within the Department of Management at the University of Bath in the UK. This sustained radical initiative made a large contribution to the spread of CI ideology and practice.

However, CI Ph.D.s do raise important issues about the propriety of awarding a degree only to the initiator of an inquiry whose outcomes are collaboratively generated by everyone in the inquiry group. The role of the initiator is to be a full participant while training the group how to do a CI, and her or his goal is progressively to become an equal peer among co-competent peers. How much of the initiator's motivation to fulfill the role and the goal is warped by the pursuit of an exclusive Ph.D.? And to what degree, however small, do co-inquirers feel invalidated by the exclusion?

I think a better way forward now is for some innovative institutions to develop a pioneer protocol for awarding the same degree to everyone—initiator and co-researchers—involved in a valid CI. (Whether that is a Ph.D. or, preferably, a novel alternative degree or qualification.) This would motivate co-researchers thoroughly to grasp CI practice and theory, especially with respect to validity procedures. Also, the award would be based on co-assessment of the CI by the initiator, all the co-researchers, and suitable faculty representatives of the institute. Such an award would affirm to the wider society the significance and importance of collaborative knowledge generation.

A second version of a research focus for transpersonal institutes breaking out of neoliberal cognitive capitalism is for faculty to do a CI with colleagues about introducing both extended epistemology and radical assessment in their own institute. Included as offshoots within this initiative, there could be faculty-with-student CIs. At a later stage inter-institute CIs about extended epistemology and radical assessment would be fruitful. But these exciting possibilities are some way off into the future.

One major primary area for the application of CI is in the peer-to-peer domains of the commons, the post-capitalist collaborative economy, and the vast potential of what I call a self-generating culture. But this takes us well beyond the domain of transpersonal institutes. In a self-generating culture, cooperative inquiries in diverse forms applied in major kinds of human association would be the everyday fabric of practical wisdom in a flourishing society.

CI and Self-Generating Culture

Olga: Great. Thank you for elaborating your vision of integrating the participatory ethos of CI into transpersonal studies. Your concept of radical assessment raises important considerations for the way knowledge is generated and evaluated in academic contexts. It sounds like there are numerous worthwhile avenues to apply this approach, along with an extended epistemology, with students and amongst academic staff that I hope we will see emerging more and more within bold transpersonal institutes, as you say, and elsewhere.

I also appreciate your gesture toward self-generating culture more broadly. Could you share more about CI and self-generating culture? How might CI contribute to human evolution and building true community?

John: A self-generating culture is the name I give to a society each of whose many cultural forms are consciously and spontaneously created by autonomous peer groups, and these forms are reviewed and altered in the light of experience, reflection, and deeper vision by the periodic use of CI. The society in each of its diverse cultural strands—including the management of natural resources—is in a process of continuous co-creativity, learning, and development which is enhanced, at variable intervals, by intentional cycles of cooperative

living action-inquiry by citizens with equal rights. This is a vision of an advanced civilization of the future.

However, it is already emerging, in its very early dawn phase, as the post-capitalist peer-to-peer commons movement, where "the commons" includes both nature and culture, to all aspects of which everyone has equal rights. There is a remarkable amount of very early exploratory breakthrough going on. (For full details see the online annals of the P2P Foundation.)

A significant kind of development, in which I have been involved, is the new cultural strand of peer-to-peer participatory spirituality. One example here in New Zealand has unfolded as our Inquiry Group. I will offer my account to illustrate some of the potential of this development. The IG was independently formed by people who had been in one or more CIs, but is not itself a fully formed CI; it operates within the broad ethos of a CI, but does not require new members to have participated in a CI.

In the early 90s I was commuting each year from Italy to New Zealand for the southern summer to initiate—as well as co-counselling and other things—a series of participatory spirituality CIs. After the first of these in 1993 (Knacks in Entering Altered States; Heron, 1998), and after I had returned to Italy, eight participants in that event set up on their own initiative an autonomous peer inquiry group, which met regularly to continue sharing, exploring, and inquiring into their spiritual unfolding. When I returned to New Zealand from Italy in 1994, they invited me to join their group, which I did every southern summer visit for two or three months, and they continued meeting throughout the year. I moved from Italy to New Zealand in January 2000 and have attended all the meetings since then. We currently meet fortnightly throughout the year with a six-week break in the southern summer.

Just below is a summary updated account of what the Inquiry Group is, and has been, about. The summary is based on a comprehensive conceptual map of our inquiry process co-generated by the whole group (see Heron & Lahood, 2008). My basic point now is that the Inquiry Group progressively increases skill, between our meetings, in grounding our social action in the living spirit of our embodiment. This living spirit is cultivated in the meetings, and overflows into the quality of everyday life. And this, as I see it and feel it, is a first step on a long and challenging radical road to a spiritually grounded self-generating culture of diverse other strands.

The inquiry group: A nuts and bolts account. The charismatic format, which evolved as a mode of dynamic inquiry during 1994-5, has continuously been explored and developed for the past twenty-two years. It has become established as a mode of practice, in which our basic energies as embodied living beings are opened to manifest and celebrate the living spirit within and between us, and between us and the wider reaches of being (Heron & Lahood, 2008).

The basic elements are:

    a) Posture, gesture, facial expression, movement.

    b) Toning.

    c) Mutual resonance.

d) Relative position between us in the space of the room.

e) Speaking out of altered states.

f) Mutual trust and regard.

g) Artistry, elegance, exhilaration.

h) Charismatic disinhibition of these seven modalities to open to the living spirit as it moves within and between and beyond. This all-important charismatic disinhibition includes continuous internal adjustments of awareness: keeping open to what there is, locating and dissolving blocks, aligning energies, modulating idiosyncratic expression, attuning with others.

The further tools are:

(a) Freeform conversation and structured dialogue.

(b) A check-in round at the outset of a meeting.

(c) Spontaneous crescendo/diminuendo cycles in the toning.

(d) Musical rhythms with a variety of percussion instruments.

(e) Erotic energy refined as a component of mutual resonance.

(f) Creative mimesis—building on what others do.

(g) Co-creating lean rituals and primary theatre—spontaneously structured formats for shared declarations and transformation.

(h) Silent hand-holding after the charismatic expression, to bear witness to, and be enfolded in, the sacred presence between us.

(i) Feedback, conceptual review, and authenticity checks.

Interwoven with these tools, there are three types of inquiry with which we engage. The first is our bedrock inquiry process which occurs at every meeting. The second and the third are procedures we adopt at varying intervals.

(a) Our bedrock is the active discrimination and collaborative engagement, exercised on-the-hoof during emergent charismatic expression and lean rituals, with regard to what we are expressing, how we are doing so in interaction with each other, and in relation with presences and presence.

(b) Co-deciding an intentional project beforehand about how we do our charismatic expression and lean ritual, doing this, sharing feedback on it, and building on this in a second action-reflection cycle, and so on.

(c) Using part of a fortnightly meeting to plan individual or agreed spiritual issues/practices to be taken as an action-inquiry into daily life before the next meeting, when each of us report back on our shared and/or personal inquiry strand. The chosen practice will be taken through several cycles of report and action.

The second and third types of inquiry above are structured forms of CI. The third type bridges the gap between the meetings and our engaged life in the world, runs for a specified period of time, and have occurred intermittently over the years. Shared inquiry themes, all focused on application in everyday living, have been: empowerment, coming into the fullness of being, gender issues, Shekinah, presences and authentic intuition, authentic authority, terror, speaking from the heart, practical wisdom, and many more. As well as co-inquiry domains, there have been a whole range of idiosyncratic individual lines of action-inquiry into transformations of daily living in current society.

So the Inquiry Group is a peer-to-peer collaborative self-generating mini-culture of participatory spirituality, which—to realize further development—periodically extends its practices into full form CI.

But CI is not just about spiritual inquiry. It has been applied within a wide range of helping, teaching, and other professions to transform professional practice on the job. Existing professional applications of CI have spanned a variety of fields including medical practice and nursing (e.g., Heron & Reason, 1985; Hills, 2001; Jenkins, 2007; Lloyd & Carson, 2005; Walsh et. al., 2015), community mental health (e.g., Fieldhouse & Onyett, 2012; Van Lith, 2014), community organizations, leadership, and social activism (e.g., Godden, 2017; Lavie-Ajayi et al., 2007; Ospina et al., 2008; Scher, 2007; Yorks et. al., 2008), education (e.g., Bower-Phipps et. al., 2013; Bray, 2002; Howard et. al., 2015), local governance (Takanen, 2013), and more. One of the earliest CIs was among doctors who engaged in a nine-month inquiry on introducing whole person medicine into their daily medical practice (Heron & Reason, 1984, 1985; Reason, 1988c). Afterwards, several of them set up a self-generating mini-culture as the British Holistic Medical Association. Any profession can adopt this sequence from CI to form a self-generating mini-culture. And any existing peer-to-peer mini-culture in any field can review, extend, and deepen its practices by the periodic use of a formal CI. Adult educators Yorks and Kasl (2002) and others, for example, have adopted a CI variation that they call *collaborative inquiry* that has become influential in their field (Bray, 2002; Bray et al., 2000; Yorks & Kasl, 2002).

It is also important to remember that the procedural form of any CI about any kind of professional practice can be interwoven with a greater or lesser degree of tripartite spirituality; and can indeed be initiated in terms of purely naturalistic humanism.

In a holistic sense, I see all of these strands of CI application in the context of self-generating mini-cultures—from peer-to-peer participatory spirituality groups to professional groups—as potentially contributing to human evolution in the sense that engaging in CI facilitates greater consciousness (i.e., increasing awareness of self, others and world), intentionality, and community within these groups, which can then contribute to society at large.

The Future of CI in Transpersonal Studies

Olga: I appreciate this broader perspective on self-generating culture and the living example your New Zealand Inquiry Group offers. Looking toward the future now, I wonder about what could be on the horizon for CI. If you could inspire future CIs what kinds of focus or purpose would you love to see addressed using this approach?

John: Here are some first thoughts among many, plus an overview.

In higher education, I would like to see faculty initiate, and participate fully in, CIs which address the integration of whole person learning with enhanced autonomy in learning; in other words, which use an extended epistemology, integrated with students having a progressively increasing say in what they learn, how they learn it, and whether they have learned it.

In the work place, I would like to see senior staff participate in and initiate teams into the use of a self and peer review audit format with regard to performance on the job (Heron, 1999). This, when established, can intermittently readily and rapidly evolve for a set period into a full CI on specific management-worker cocreated, work-related developmental proposals.

In the spirituality and religious realms, I would like to see believers who are committed to different transpersonal ultimates explore within a CI their co-engagement with the same interpersonal immediate spiritual presence and their views on implications and applications of this exploration. This engagement with the relational spirituality of the Between is, I believe, of central importance in our awakening to ecologically sustainable cultures (Heron & Lahood, 2008).

The overarching all-inclusive focus for the future is "practical wisdom here and now in this situation where we are." This means action that can be taken to transform a specific social situation into greater human flourishing in the direction of:

(a) Enhanced personal autonomy, integrated with co-creative collaboration and rotating hierarchy (where hierarchy is defined as the creative leadership which seeks to promote the values of autonomy and co-operation in a peer-to-peer community).

(b) A sustainable enclosure-free management of natural and cultural resources.

(c) An equitable distribution of both wealth and well-being.

(d) The cultivation of elegance, splendor, and ecstasy of form.

(e) All of this grounded in, and a manifestation of, dynamic co-creation with the living spirit between, within, and around us all.

It is important to note, of course, that all these initial guidelines for an inquiry are provisional, and are subject to confirmation, modification or rejection at the inaugural meeting of co-inquirers, and thereafter, in the light of their lived and shared experience.

Olga: The possibilities are abundant and inspiring indeed! Thank you, John, for this rich discussion. I think your vision offers the transpersonal community important considerations for the future of the field, both internally and in relation to the larger social context in which we are a part. Do you have any closing remarks before we conclude? And if not, could you leave us with a brief snapshot of what you are most passionate about these days?

John: And my deeply grateful thanks to you! I'm happy to close our dialogue with an answer to your final question: I am most passionate about the primacy of engaging with situational spirit, co-creating the here and now reality of the presence between all of us in this place and on this occasion.

Olga: Beautiful! Thank you again for this spirited discussion!

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Author Bios

John Heron is an independent researcher, author, facilitator and trainer, and since 2000 has been a Co-director of the South Pacific Centre for Human Inquiry in New Zealand. He was Founder and Director of the Human Potential Research Project, University of Surrey in the UK 1970-1977, exploring holistic forms of education and inquiry in a wide range of experiential workshops. He was then invited to be an Assistant Director, British Postgraduate Medical Federation, University of London 1977-1985, in charge of an innovative program of personal and professional development for hospital doctors and GPs, out of which the British Holistic Medical Association was formed. John was also an active co-founder in the UK of the Association of Humanistic Psychology Practitioners (AHPP), Co-counselling International (CCI), Institute for the Development of Human Potential (IDHP), New Paradigm Research Group, Research Council for Complementary Medicine. He took early retirement from academic life in 1986 and moved to Italy to launch an International Centre for Co-operative Inquiry near Volterra in Tuscany 1990-1999. His books include *Feeling and Personhood*, 1992; *Group Facilitation*, 1993; *Cooperative Inquiry*, 1996; *Sacred Science*, 1998; *The Complete Facilitator's Handbook*, 1999; *Helping the Client*, 2001; and *Participatory Spirituality*, 2006.

Olga Sohmer, Ph.D. is a scholar and holistic counselor passionate about encouraging the depths of human potential. Weaving her background with intergroup dialogue facilitation, holistic counseling, yoga and mindfulness instruction, and participatory inquiry, Olga brings a multidimensional approach to her teaching, counseling, and research.
She has published on the practice and outcomes of Embodied Spiritual Inquiry (ESI) (Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017; Sohmer, 2018; Sohmer et al., 2020) a participatory approach to transpersonal education and her doctoral dissertation in East-West Psychology at CIIS explored the value of Cooperative Inquiry for transpersonal psychology, education, and research. Born in Russia, Olga now resides in Northern California with her husband and four-year-old son. Through her work and daily life, she hopes to contribute to healing the way human beings relate to ourselves, each other and the Earth, our home. olgasohmer.com