Interactive Meditation Practice
as Research Method:
An Introduction to
Embodied Spiritual Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This article presents Embodied Spiritual Inquiry (ESI), a participatory approach to integral education and transpersonal research that has been offered since 2003 as a graduate course at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), San Francisco, by core faculty Jorge N. Ferrer. Inspired by elements of participatory research (e.g., Reason, 1994a; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) and cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996), ESI applies Albareda and Romero’s Interactive Embodied Meditations (Ferrer, 2003) to access multiple ways of knowing (e.g., somatic, vital, emotional, mental, spiritual) and mindfully inquire into collaboratively decided questions about the human condition. Past inquiries have included diverse psychospiritual topics including the experiential features of relational spirituality (Osterhold, Husserl, & Nicol, 2007), the nature of human boundaries within and between co-inquirers (Sohmer, Baumann, & Ferrer, 2018), felt-sensed markers discerning genuine versus unreliable spiritual knowledge, experiential understandings of the personal and collective “shadow,” and the multidimensionality of the human condition. After presenting an overview of the ESI methodology and two case studies, this article discusses the merits, limitations, and future horizons of this approach for integral education and transpersonal research.

KEYWORDS

Transpersonal Research, Integral Education, Multiple Ways of Knowing, Interactive Embodied Meditations, Cooperative Inquiry, Participatory Research, Embodied Spirituality.

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When research delves into the subtle, nuanced territory of human psyche, spirit, and relationships, it is challenging to find methodologies that can access and express the complexity of such an inquiry domain. In support of this effort, the third annual Transpersonal Research Colloquium held in Prague, Czech Republic, in 2017 invited a collaborative exploration of spiritual practices as research methods. Presenters at the colloquium discussed a variety of novel, spiritually informed approaches to research with the intention of contributing to the growing body of transpersonal research methods. This article shares one of these approaches, Embodied Spiritual Inquiry (ESI; Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017) - a participatory approach to integral education and transpersonal research that has been offered since
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2003 by Jorge N. Ferrer as a graduate course at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), San Francisco. Specifically, ESI uses interactive embodied meditations (IEMs; Ferrer, 2003; Malkemus & Romero, 2012) to inquire into collaboratively determined questions regarding psychospiritual experience in the context of a participatory research process inspired by elements of cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 1997). IEMs involve mindful physical contact between co-inquirers to activate multiple ways of knowing (e.g., somatic, creative, emotional, mental, spiritual) and access both deep individual experience and the intersubjective field between co-inquirers. After presenting an overview of the ESI methodology and highlights from two case studies, this article discusses the merits, limitations, and future horizons of this approach for integral education and transpersonal research.

ESI Background and Methodology

Embodied Spiritual Inquiry (ESI) was developed by Ferrer as a research method and a graduate course in the East West Psychology program at CIIS. To date, the majority of ESIs have been conducted within CIIS graduate courses and two have been developed into published research reports (Osterhold et al., 2007; Sohmer et al., 2018). Given this history, ESI has functioned primarily as a holistic learning opportunity, with an embedded participatory research process whose outcomes have been analyzed by self-selecting co-inquirers after the formal inquiry phase. However, as discussed below, ESI shows promise as a transpersonal research methodology that could be expanded beyond a strictly academic context.

At its core, the methodology of ESI integrates two streams of holistic inquiry: (a) the holistic transformation practices of Spanish psychospiritual educators Marina Romero and Ramon Albareda (2001; Malkemus & Romero, 2012), and (b) the participatory research paradigm (Reason, 1994a; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) inspired in particular by Heron’s (1996) cooperative inquiry. The former contributes interactive embodied meditations (IEMs; Ferrer 2003) as primary inquiry tools, while the latter serves as the epistemological framework and methodological structure within which the inquiry tools are applied. In alignment with the participatory paradigm in philosophy, spirituality, and religious studies (e.g., Ferrer, 2002, 2011, 2017; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013; Heron, 1998, 2006; Tarnas, 1991), knowledge gained in the ESI process is considered relational,
embodied, and enactive (see Ferrer, 2002, 2008; Malkemus, 2012). Because the ESI method has been described in detail elsewhere (Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017), this account offers a summation of its inquiry tools, structure and outcomes before turning to the case studies, merits, limitations, and future horizons of the approach.

Inquiry Tools
Interactive embodied medications (IEMs), developed by Marina Romero and Ramon Albareda (Albareda & Romero, 1991; Ferrer, 2003; Malkemus & Romero, 2012; Romero & Albareda, 2001), serve as the primary ESI methodological tools. These practices use mindful physical contact between two or more co-inquirers to activate multiple ways of knowing associated with five fundamental human dimensions: the body, vital center, heart, mind, and consciousness. Decades of experience with workshop participants and students support Romero and Albareda’s contention that conscious physical contact with different areas of the body can activate the unique epistemic potential associated with that region (Ferrer, 2003; Malkemus & Romero, 2012). Specifically, the mind is accessed through contact with the head and forehead; the heart, through the center of the chest, arms, hands and back; the vital, through the lower abdomen; and the body, through the feet and legs. By intentionally activating these interconnected yet unique faculties, IEMs facilitate multidimensional knowing beyond the type of mind-centered knowledge that is typically privileged in Western education and research.

In the basic format, IEMs involve one person an active role offering physical contact and the other in a receptive role experiencing the contact. For example, in a meditation focused on the heart, the receptive partner lays supine while the active partner places their hands, chest, or forehead on the receiver’s center of the chest. The epistemic focus and corresponding point of contact is determined in advance of the meditation.

After establishing agreed upon boundaries for physical contact between partners\(^1\).

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1 Knowing that physical contact can be sensitive, ample care is taken throughout ESI to enhance the safety and potential of growth for inquirers. First, all prospective participants are well informed about the frequency and type of contact involved in IEMs during the introductory meeting before ESI begins. Anyone with concerns is invited to consult with the ESI facilitator or assistant privately to determine the appropriateness of their involvement in ESI at that time. Then, at the beginning of the inquiry process self-responsibility in the assertion of boundaries around acceptable physical contact is discussed. For example, in a meditation on the heart the receptive partner can optionally receive contact at the center of their chest from the active partner’s hands,
both are invited to focus on their own experience, with curiosity and openness to any sensations, thoughts, emotions, memories, and visions that may arise. Participants optionally wear blindfolds to facilitate this inward focus. The facilitator verbally guides the meditation, weaving in prompts or questions related to the inquiry. Halfway through the practice, inquirers change roles, reestablish boundaries for contact and repeat the meditation. Once inquirers gain familiarity with IEMs greater complexity can be introduced such as inclusion of multiple centers of awareness in a meditation, more meditation partners, and/or divergence of inquiry focus within the group. Evocative background music is played throughout that seeks to activate the center of awareness that is the focus of each meditation. After the meditation period, participants have five to ten minutes to draw or reflect independently. Nonverbal contemplation is encouraged during this time to avoid seeking premature conceptual understanding, although poetry or key words are welcomed. Meditation partners then discuss their experiences and drawings. Often, shared themes emerge. Finally, the whole group convenes to share drawings and highlights, sometimes involving movement, creative vocalization and/or gesture in lieu of verbal articulation. At this point, the meditation cycle comes to a close and is followed by a break.

chest (i.e., heart), or forehead (i.e., mind) and it is up to both to determine in advance of the meditation which of these configurations they will practice. Participants are also reminded before engaging in IEMs that they can stop the practice for any reason at any time. Finally, inquirers always have the option to engage in an inquiry cycle in individual meditation rather than through IEM.

With this sensitivity to the potential risks of physical contact, the power of mindful touch to facilitate multidimensional learning, growth, and healing cannot be understated. ESI cohorts have repeatedly affirmed the value of touch in both their personal development and the cultivation of holistic inquiry outcomes. As Osterhold et al. (2007) describe, “Through touch, the internal experience is widened and deepened in multiple layers of consciousness. At the same time, touch creates a dynamic and fluid common field of energetic, emotional, physical, and mental exchange between practitioners” (p. 23).

Background music during IEMs is either neutral ambient or aligned with the center of awareness that is being activated. For example, rhythmic percussive music is played when accessing the body, melodic emotionally evocative music when accessing the heart, and more ephemeral spacious music in relation to the mind or consciousness. Music is always instrumental or non-native vocal to avoid activating excessive mental involvement. At this time, choice of music has not been systematized or catalogued. While supportive music is recognized as an important element of IEM facilitation, the extent to which music choice impacts inquirers has not been thoroughly investigated. Certainly, music alone has a profound effect on human experience, warranting further exploration of this dimension of ESI, whether through ESI or other means.
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Fig. 1 - IEM focused on the vital center

Fig. 2 - IEM focused on the body
Inquiry Structure

The fundamental structure of ESI is inspired by John Heron’s (1996; Heron & Reason, 1997) cooperative inquiry, involving alternating cycles of action and reflection in the context of a participatory research framework. Co-inquirers participate in multiple stages of decision and meaning-making regarding the inquiry—such as selecting the inquiry domain, gathering experientially grounded insights about the topic, drawing preliminary conclusions, and shaping the inquiry actions at later stages. Unlike the

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3 It is important to emphasize that although ESI is inspired and has the potential to evolve toward the full form of Heron’s (1996) cooperative inquiry (CI), the ESIs conducted thus far have had three major discrepancies with the full form of CI. First, in CI the facilitator is either an outsider to the inquiry culture (i.e., as in the partial form of CI; Heron, 1996) or must join as a full researcher-subject. In ESI, the educator/facilitator is arguably too close to the inquiry culture to be considered an outsider, so she/he/they would need to be fully integrated to attain the full participation essential to CI. Second, Heron (1996) recommended five to eight cycles of inquiry while most ESIs have had three cycles due to the time constraints of the academic schedule within which most have taken place. Finally, CI has an extensive repertoire of validly procedures that have only been partially applied in ESI, again, in large part due to time constraints. With awareness of these discrepancies, ESI is better understood as a participatory research and learning approach more broadly, while CI serves as both the originating inspiration and offers possibilities for ESI facilitators to consider.
full form of cooperative inquiry, however, the facilitator of past ESIs has remained partially outside of the inquiry process to hold a container for the research arc and to guide the IEMs during action phases. Although logistically challenging within an academic semester, a longer ESI could feasibly incorporate the facilitator as a full co-inquirer once co-inquirers are proficient enough with IEMs to practice independently or rotate leadership. Action phases are primarily comprised of IEMs. In some cases, however, co-inquirers might take on additional actions between ESI meetings (e.g., trying an action in their daily lives related to the inquiry) or include alternative actions at later stages (e.g., meditations in nature, an act of social activism) if determined optimal for their inquiry topic. Reflection phases include opening meditations and games, drawing and sharing after IEMs, individual reflection and journaling between inquiry sessions, various forms of group dialogue (e.g., check-in at the beginning of ESI meetings, small and whole group discussion to select the inquiry question/domain; dialogue based on inquirers learning about their topic), and the composition of a final paper on the inquiry process. Typically, reflection phases consist of two parts: (a) sharing and integrating insights gained from past actions, and (b) determining the course of action for the next cycle. If desired by self-selecting co-inquirers, a final reflection phase can be conducted to analyze collected data and report inquiry findings.

The majority of past ESIs have included three inquiry cycles unfolding over 45 hours of group meetings (i.e., the typical meeting time for one semester), in addition to individual reflection and writing in between sessions. However, the timeframe of ESI is fundamentally flexible depending on the inquiry context and purpose. Used as a research method outside of a formal learning environment, for example, more inquiry cycles could be used to bolster the richness and validity of inquiry outcomes. After an introductory meeting, the inquiry launches into a preliminary cycle focused on introducing IEMs and selecting the specific inquiry domain. Then, the inquiry formally begins including two cycles that invite more concentrated immersion in the inquiry topic. Finally, the process culminates in collaborative and individual assessment of inquiry outcomes - either ending in final papers or extending beyond into systematic data analysis and reporting.

Inquiry Data and Outcomes
In alignment with broader fields of participatory, action (e.g., Reason &
Bradbury, 2008), and transpersonal research (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Braud & Anderson, 1998), ESI acknowledges both the informative and transformative dimensions of research and cultivates both in the inquiry data and outcomes. Informative outcomes respond directly to the inquiry question, while transformative outcomes refer to the holistic impact of the research process on inquirers and their worlds (Heron, 1996). Through the cyclical ESI process, preliminary informative and transformative outcomes are shared amongst co-inquirers at various stages in the form of group check-ins and dialogue and are incorporated into the evolution of the inquiry process. For example, inquirers may share provisional insights related to the inquiry question after an IEM and elucidate connections between the inquiry process and their daily lives when they check-in at the beginning a cycle. Any further data analysis and reporting necessarily attends to both types of inquiry outcomes.

Relatedly, ESI intentionally creates opportunities to express and collect a variety of data in alignment with Heron and Reason’s (1997) extended epistemology, including experiential, presentational (e.g., poetry and drawings), propositional (e.g., conceptual statements), and practical knowledge. All four types of knowledge are honored throughout the experiential ESI process as well as in data collection (e.g., audio recordings of group sharing, drawings, creative writing, and final papers) and analysis. This framework has proven to be complementary with IEMs, which activate the unique expressions the body, vital center, heart, and spirit; knowledge centers that are less likely than the mind to communicate in propositional terms. Together, the extended epistemology and IEMs serve to counterbalance the cognicentrism to the modern Western world over other ways of knowing, for example, somatic, vital, emotional, aesthetic, imaginal, visionary, intuitive, and contemplative” (Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, pp. 326-327). The term neither connotes that the other human dimensions are not “cognitive” (i.e., not being able to apprehend knowledge or creatively participate in its elaboration) nor reduces the mind's powers to rational-analytical ones.

### Learning from Case Studies

At the time of writing this article, two ESI case studies have been published: an exploration of the experiential features of relational spirituality...
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(Osterhold et al., 2007) and an inquiry into the nature of human boundaries within and between co-inquirers (Sohmer et al., 2018). As described above, the possibility of developing inquiry outcomes into a shared report is always offered as an option at the beginning of the process, but is left up to the motivation of individual co-inquirers to actualize. In both cases, two co-inquirers from inquiry groups of twelve CIIS graduate students from diverse cultural, educational, and professional backgrounds took on this task with the support of the ESI assistant and facilitator. The remaining co-inquirers participated by offering feedback on later article drafts. The accounts offered in these case studies enliven our understanding of the prospective value of ESI as a research method and give voice to the lived impact of ESI on those involved.

Relational Spirituality

Osterhold et al. (2007) describe the rich learning outcomes of an ESI that took place in 2005 “broadly centered on the experience of the self, the other, and the mysterious space ‘in-between’ that can emerge during conscious relational encounters” (p. 4). The inquiry process unfolded over twelve weekly three-hour meetings and one introductory weekend retreat. During the first cycle of inquiry, the group held the shared question “What is the nature of relational spirituality?” (Osterhold et al., 2007, p. 4) and then diverged into more personalized questions related to the theme during the second cycle. Taking both inquiry cycles into account, Osterhold and his colleagues (2007) discerned “oneness, communion, and nonduality... [as]... three distinct experiential areas of what was often referred to as the ‘space-in-between’” (p. 11). After elucidating the experiential terrain of each of these three domains of relational spirituality bolstered by co-inquirer statements, drawings, and poetry, the authors described the transformational and practical outcomes of their inquiry. Prominent themes of this type included the integration of embodied knowing through IEMs, modulation of personal boundaries, longing for communion versus fear of engulfment, and exploration of the wisdom of the unique centers of inquiry. While acknowledging the contextual limitations of their inquiry findings, Osterhold et al. (2007) concluded that their inquiry into relational spirituality elucidated the paradoxical quality of the “space-in-between”, characterized by a coexistence of polarities such as “me and not-me, trust and fear, solid body awareness and no-boundary awareness, union and
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separation, intimacy and isolation, containment and spaciousness, joy and sadness…” (p. 23). They reported that engagement in the inquiry eased the experiential tension between these polarities, enabling inquirers to hold a more nuanced perspective on how individuals in conscious contact interrelate. Beyond specific responses to the inquiry question, the authors acknowledged the significance of co-inquirers’ non-ordinary experiences during IEMs, which were akin to spiritual states esteemed in many contemplative traditions, speculating that “the practice of the IEMs facilitates the access to such states through some kind of synergetic resonance between the multidimensional energies of two or more individuals” (Osterhold et al., 2007, p. 22). Further, Osterhold et al. (2007) reported that “Through engagement in and reflection on the IEMs, the inquirers learned to recognize, access, and utilize multiple levels of knowing and processing beyond the familiar mind-centered paradigm in education” (p. 22). Overall, their account emphasized the transformative dimension of ESI and suggested that the intentional integration of all human attributes in the inquiry process affords a more integral, inclusive, and holistic approach to education and research.

The Nature of Human Boundaries
The second ESI case study was based on an inquiry conducted in 2013 focused on the nature of human boundaries within and between co-inquirers—an inquiry in which the author of this article was a part (Sohmer et al., 2018). In this case, the group convened during one three-hour introductory meeting followed by three weekend intensives (comprised of seven-hour sessions on Saturdays and Sundays alternating weekends). Both cycles of inquiry engaged the question, “What are the experiential differences between dissociation, merging, and integration-contingent on boundary firmness and permeability-within both interpersonal and intrapersonal domains?” (Sohmer et al., 2018, p. 7). The authors clarified that “the interpersonal domain opened to the exploration of boundaries between persons while the intrapersonal axis addressed the experience of boundaries between different dimensions within the person (e.g., body and mind)” (p. 7). Although inquirers engaged the entirety of this question throughout the process—or rather, whichever aspects were most compelling for individual inquirers at any given time—Sohmer et al. (2018) organized their presentation of findings into three parts: (a) the identification
of experiential qualities of dissociation, merging, and integration, (b) a
discussion of the role of boundaries and their degrees of firmness and
permeability in relation to the above states, and (c) a presentation of
practical knowledge gained about boundaries with real-life applications
and the transformative impact of the inquiry process.
Regarding the experience of boundaries, the study outcomes emphasized
the dynamic effects of boundaries rather than static qualities. Sohmer et
al. (2018) elaborated:

[S]uperseding the discovery of an ideal boundary, these outcomes suggest
that developing flexibility and the capability for conscious self-regulation
of firm and permeable boundaries—and therefore merged, differentiated,
and integrated states—may be the greatest measure of a boundary’s optimal
functionality or health (p. 30).

Drawing heavily on inquirer accounts, including drawings and poetry, the
authors discussed the recursive relationship between fear and trust in
the modulation of boundaries and the phenomenon of “shared emergent
experience” amongst inquirers, which they posed as a fertile area for future
research. Sohmer et al. (2018) also described transformative and practical
inquiry outcomes, highlighting self-knowledge and transformation of
patterns, discovery of inner authority, and self-regulation of optimal
boundaries as the major themes. Like Osterhold et al. (2007), Sohmer et
al. (2018) concluded by affirming the potency of including multiple human
dimensions in the inquiry process.

Merits and Limitations
These accounts of ESI case studies provide an important insider perspective
regarding the merits and limitations of this novel approach to integral
education and transpersonal research. While it will take replication with
diverse populations and engagement of different inquiry topics for the full
spectrum of ESI potentials and challenges to be fully realized, the following
discussion explores some evident themes.

Merits
Perhaps the most robust and unique feature of the ESI approach is the
intentional, and reportedly effective, engagement of multiple ways of
knowing associated with the five basic human dimensions. As Osterhold
et al. (2007) asserted, “Through the embodied contact in the IEMs,
participants recognized and connected to their own energetic centers and were able to tap into insights beyond the scope of what they had known to be accessible on purely cognitive [i.e., mental] pathways” (pp. 17-18). This fundamental capacity of IEMs - and, by extension, ESI - to activate the epistemic power of the body, vital center, heart, mind, and consciousness has radical implications for holistic education and research. That is, if one recognizes the diverse knowledge streams of these additional human faculties and consciously cultivates them, the prospective outcomes of learning and research multiply fivefold from the conventional mind-centered approach. Stated more precisely, the outcomes become more integrated, holistic, and accurate in furthering the understanding and evolution of the human condition. Participant reports suggest that the use of IEMs, along with the underlying recognition of multiple ways of knowing in the ESI epistemology, does in fact facilitate more holistic inquiry outcomes than is usually possible through conventional education and research means (Osterhold et al., 2007; Sohmer et al., 2018). This holistic approach is significant for not only the validity of inquiry outcomes but also for the potential growth of inquirers.

ESI also affords unique access to the intersubjective field between co-inquirers through mindful physical contact along with the types of dialogical engagement that are more common in learning and inquiry environments. Ferrer and Sohmer (2017) pointed out that through IEMs and related activities, this contact occurs on not only on verbal levels but on somatic and energetic levels as well. The reflection phases of ESI then provide opportunities for co-inquirers to unfold and corroborate their intersubjective experiences. In their inquiry on human boundaries, for example, Sohmer et al. (2018) reported eight accounts of shared experiences ranging “across kinesthetic, imaginal, and intuitive domains” (p. 22). In addition to cultivating the second-person, or intersubjective, field often excluded from research and education (Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017; Gunnlaugsson, 2009, 2011; Heron & Lahood, 2008), Sohmer et al. (2018) noticed that noticing shared experiences also reinforces inquirers’ confidence in the power of nonmental epistemic faculties. The value of leveraging intersubjective experience in the context of inquiry appears multifold and further exploration of this feature should contribute to a better understanding of ESI mechanisms in the future.
The ESI posture toward knowledge as co-created, or participatory (i.e., subjective-objective; cf. Heron & Reason, 1997), may also be an underlying strength of the approach (Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017). As Tarnas (2007) compellingly conveyed in his parable of two suitors - in which one suitor expects to engage with a disenchanted, inert Cosmos, while the other shows up with the attention and affection of a lover - the stance one takes towards the “objects” of knowledge necessarily influences their disclosure. In light of this participatory perspective (e.g., Ferrer, 2002, 2017; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013; Heron, 2006; Heron & Reason, 1997; Tarnas, 1991, 2006, 2007), inquirers are encouraged to engage the inquiry domain, their own faculties of knowing, and each other with an invitational attitude of humility - a marked shift from the objectivist thrust characteristic of Western empiricism. While the influence of this participatory stance on the validity of inquiry outcomes requires further assessment, co-inquirers’ accounts suggest that it plays a meaningful role in their experience of ESI (Sohmer et al., 2018).

In addition, by involving co-inquirers in multiple stages of the participatory research process - such as selecting the inquiry domain, gathering experiential data, and making meaning of outcomes - ESI empowers inquirers to be active agents in the elaboration of knowledge. In the context of research, this empowerment of co-inquirers arguably enhances the authenticity and validity of inquiry findings because they are generated by free, creative agents (e.g., Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2008). Of equal importance, in the context of education, ESI invites students to be active inquirers rather than passive consumers of knowledge (Freire, 1970), capable of accessing novel insights and emergent knowledge (Romero, Albareda, & Ferrer, 2005). In both cases, co-inquirers are more likely to experience personal benefit when they are regarded in this way.

The benefits experienced by inquirers lead to the final merit addressed in this discussion: the transformative dimensions of ESI as reported in both case studies (Osterhold et al., 2007; Sohmer et al., 2018). Parallel with the greater movement of participatory (Heron & Reason, 1997) and transpersonal research (e.g., Anderson & Braud, 2011), ESI engages the axiological question - the “why” of human inquiry - with transformative and emancipatory aspirations (Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017). Beyond insights gained regarding inquiry topics, it is significant that inquirers themselves
report positive changes in their ways of being, relating, and acting in the world. Although longitudinal research would be necessary to assess the longevity of transformative outcomes, inquirers repeatedly speak of transformative or healing aspects of their experience during and after ESI (Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017). If, as Reason (1994a) posited, "...the purpose of human inquiry is not so much the search for truth but to heal, and above all to heal the alienation, the split that characterizes modern experience" (p. 10), then ESI contributes an approach capable of furthering this primary inquiry purpose.

**Limitations**

Because the majority of ESIs have been facilitated within graduate courses, the limitations specific to ESI in the academic context are addressed first before turning to those of ESI as a research method in general. First, ESIs to date have unfolded within two cycles of inquiry (in addition to one preliminary cycle during which the inquiry tools are introduced and the domain delineated) due to the time allotted in one academic semester. Heron (1996), however, suggested five to eight inquiry cycles in the full form of cooperative inquiry. Although this abbreviated duration has proven sufficient for generating meaningful inquiry outcomes and inquirer experiences, ESI would likely be enriched if extended over a longer period. In addition, ESI in an academic context is not fully cooperative in Heron's understanding insofar as the facilitator guides inquiry activities, selects the inquiry tools, and supports the articulation of inquiry questions. Under these conditions, there are inevitable power dynamics that prevent ESI from attaining the nonhierarchical ideals of cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996). Given more time (e.g., one prerequisite semester during which inquirers are trained in the IEMs and participatory research protocols followed by a pure inquiry semester), ESI could feasibly move toward the format of a full cooperative inquiry even within an academic environment. Irrespective of context, ESI is subject to all the validity challenges of cooperative inquiry (e.g., Heron, 1996, 1998; Reason, 1994b). For example, Reason (1994b) emphasized *unaware projection* and *consensus collusion* as the most prominent threats to cooperative inquiry validity. Unaware projection is essentially self-deception rooted in the anxiety of changing ones' worldviews, which can obscure authentic inquiry. Inquirers can then join together in consensus collusion to avoid, or inadequately address,
areas of inquiry that challenge their shared worldviews. In a full cooperative inquiry, these challenges are mitigated by enacting validity procedures such as the “Devil’s Advocate” (Heron, 1996, 1998) and repeating numerous cycles of inquiry. The same efforts could be applied in ESI but have been limited to date in large part due to time constraints.

Limitations inherent in the selection and suitability of inquiry topics are also important to address. As has been the case in all ESIs to date, collaborative selection of inquiry topics using facilitator-selected inquiry tools, arguably sways inquirers toward certain topics (Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017). Further, as Ferrer and Sohmer (2017) acknowledged, more assertive or dominant inquirers can overly influence the selection and formulation of inquiry questions. An interesting alternative format that has yet to be explored is to gather interested inquirers around preselected inquiry topics or offer ESI to address existing inquiries within established communities (e.g., to inquire into the experiential dynamics of Hatha Yoga amongst practitioners). In addition, ESI is not necessarily suitable or ideal for all inquiry topics. As with any research method, it is important to assess the productive fit between ESI and the inquiry topic and purpose at hand.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that the outcomes of any ESI group are limited in the sense that they are not generalizable. As Ferrer and Sohmer (2017) explain, “The findings of each ESI are based on the particular experiences of a specific group of individuals and the group’s unique intersubjective field, making the nature of ESI validity strictly contextual” (p. 25). Thus, research projects seeking broadly generalizable knowledge would not be optimally served by ESI. Although making universalist claims is not a primary goal of ESI (or participatory research in general), the method could play a supportive role in the elaboration of generalizable knowledge through comparative analysis with existing theoretical perspectives and findings from other research modalities.

**Future Horizons**

After fifteen years of application, the future of ESI in integral education and transpersonal research contexts is ripe with possibilities. As an integral and transformative pedagogy, ESI could be further applied as part of graduate curriculum in holistic departments of psychology, education, and religious studies. As mentioned in relation to time constraints of past ESIs, the method could be extended into two parts: first, immersing students...
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in IEMs and participatory research, and then, formally engaging in a fully participatory inquiry. By integrating the educator as an active co-researcher in the group while inviting greater student autonomy in inquiry design, this approach would further radicalize the experience of ESI students and achieve greater fidelity with cooperative ideals. Other variations, such as assembling inquiry courses around preselected topics or incorporating other inquiry tools in action phases, could also be explored. In addition, instead of unilateral assessment of student learning by the facilitator as is typical in higher education, future ESIs could employ self and peer-assessment to evaluate learning outcomes (Heron, 1988). Beyond formal academic environments, ESI could also be applied to facilitate learning and personal growth in other contexts (e.g., a community workshop series or supplementary program within established organizations, institutions, and psychospiritual communities).

Emphasizing the function of ESI as a participatory, transpersonal research methodology illuminates additional opportunities. Countless domains of psychospiritual inquiry well suited for the ESI approach remain. For example, Ferrer and Sohmer (2017) and Sohmer et al. (2018) highlight the phenomenon of transpersonal morphic resonance (i.e., participation in shared emergent knowledge amongst ESI participants, in the group as a whole, as well as within each ESI group in relation to prior groups; Bache, 2008; Ferrer & Sohmer, 2017) as an important topic for future inquiry. Other fertile research domains include inquiries along the following lines: phenomenological (e.g., the nature of various expanded states of awareness; the unique epistemic qualities of the body, vital center, heart, and mind; the experience of connection with the nonhuman natural world), psychological (e.g., the experience of giving and receiving; exploration of psychological archetypes like “masculine,” “feminine,” and sacred marriage; exploration of attachment styles), practical-transformative (e.g., how to facilitate authentic self-expression, how to bridge spirituality and activism, how to activate holistic awareness in daily life), and social (e.g., inquiries around intimacy and conscious relationships, inquiries responding to the particular needs of established communities). As with cooperative inquiry, the breadth and variety of prospective topics are mainly limited by the imaginations of co-inquirers (Heron, 1996). Given more time, ESI would be well served to adopt more validity procedures from cooperative inquiry (Heron,
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1996; Reason, 1994b) to enhance the strength of inquiry outcomes. Finally, comparison of ESI outcomes with established theoretical perspectives and research on similar topics using divergent methodologies would be fruitful. Conversely, the ESI approach could be valuable to explore topics that evade, or generate conflicting findings, using other research methods. With these prospective areas for future learning and research delineated, ESI is poised to evolve alongside, and in support of, the growing integral and transpersonal fields.

REFERENCES

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