

Human Science Beyond Form?

Impressions from the 15th International Human Science Research Conference¹

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I felt excited and thrilled when I first read of the title of the conference in the announcement sent out by the coordinator and host Cynthia Taylor, Professor of Art Education at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design: *Beyond Form - Transformation Through Imagery and Action*. Human Science tries to reach out for a dimension of knowledge and understanding which cannot be fully grasped by the syntactic form - a very difficult and challenging task. I was looking forward to meeting colleagues who work in areas described by terms like tacit knowledge, intuition, embodiment, experience, perception and action, colleagues who share a common interest in a phenomenologically and hermeneutically oriented approach to a transformation process where imagery and action are suggested as key words. Especially the dialogue between people from different areas like art and more traditional academic disciplines like psychology and education raised my expectations.

Halifax, the capital of one of the Maritime Provinces in Eastern Canada, was a wonderful place to host the conference in the middle of August. The temperature was perfect - not too warm to work, but pleasant to be outside during the free hours. All the important places in the city center were within walking distance. The college as the conference site seemed to be the heart of the city. The conference hotel, the dormitories, shopping areas and the harbour were situated close to it. Nobody had to waste time with transportation and other hazards which can make life difficult for conference participants. The conference facilities were not wholly satisfactory. It was very warm in the different lecture rooms, and participants in the different localities had to cope with other minor problems. But bearing in mind that Nova Scotia is one of the economically backward areas of Canada with a high unemployment rate, things can be excused. In a way these slight irregularities seemed to enhance the spirit of mutual understanding which was also promoted by frequent possibilities for social gatherings and by the charming hospitality of Cynthia Taylor, her colleagues and student helpers.

The program was organized mainly in different time sessions. This time routine was interrupted and enriched by one invited speaker (Henry A. Giroux, Pennsylvania State University) and several key note speakers (Peter Ashworth, Brian Goodey, Madeleine Grumet, Bernd Jaeger and Alphonso Lingis). I personally regret that the sessions were not organized on the basis of common interests,

¹ Rejsen blev støttet af Kulturministeriet.

i.e. presenters who work in a similar area or with a similar approach sharing one session so that their presentations could be put in relation to each other. This possibility existed though in five symposia organized by cooperating scholars with the following titles:

- *A dialogic response to the invitation of phenomenology: Transformative effects on the researchers themselves*
- *Culture, ethics, and communicative action*
- *The transformative power of poetry*
- *Training novice human science researchers: Content and process*
- *L'acadie: Formes nouvelles traditions et modernite.*

How did the participants approach the theme of the conference? What was their focus in relation to *transformation*? I will try to give an overview of the presentations by looking through the proceedings and by ordering the titles of the presentation in more general categories. During this procedure of "searching for the essence" (Giorgi) I reduce the uniqueness of the single presentation and will be able to give a better orientation of the different fields of research interests on transformation. The "essence" can be described by the following headlines and can be exemplified by the selection of single presentation titles:

1. Transformation as part of an educational process

- Resistance and transformation in teacher education (J. Titus)
- Landscapes of meaning: Experiential, field-based ecological education (C. O'Connell)
- Tracing a pedagogy of the flesh (S. Smith)

2. Transformation as part of a healing process

- Words of emotion (B. Knizek)
- The body as the access to life (K. Dahlberg)
- The transformation of traditional medicine: Neo-traditional healers (E. Pretorius)

3. Transformation as part of the research process

- The transformation of body experience into language (R. Stelter)
- Photography: A method for observing and analysing social change (K. Flanagan)

4. Transformation as part of the artistic process

- Songs of the self. Passion: A painter's perspective (R. Watrin)
- Music and painting as a ground for ethnic identity (J. Ling)

5. Transformation as part of the developmental process

- Transforming school grounds, transforming children? (L. Primeau)
- Becoming an independent woman: A case study in loss, grief and widowhood (M. King, B. Nunley & R. Steeves)

6. Transformation as part of the therapeutical process

- Transformation through imaginative play in child psychotherapy (B. Mook)
- An architecture of hope: Exploration of the lived experience of life-threatening illness through body-centered therapy (K Krycka)

7. Transformation as part of social change

Tourism: A study of identity and social change (N. Webb)

Transformation and self in the new economic order (B. Bezdek)

On the other hand it has to be said that there were too many participants who did not ask themselves how their work fitted in with to the title of the conference. Transformation can be understand as a basic theme in human science research. Transformation can be associated with change, development and learning. The phenomenologically and hermeneutically based theory of *meaning and understanding* can be related to the process of transformation. In my own words the theory can be described as follows: *Meaning is based on interpretation and understanding of the environment. Meaning evolves from the co-dependency of the subject and the environment. Meaning emerges through embodiment of the environment. Different human activities (like thinking, remembering, sleeping, visualizing, walking or playing tennis) are in that sense just different relational modes which describe a specific and meaningful relation of the subject to the environment.* The interesting question is then in relation to the conference theme: What kind of special status has *imagery* in this process. I think the conference could not provide me with a satisfying answer. Human scientists have to make further efforts in their research to answer this question which can be related to terms like *empirical knowledge, intuition, embodiment and practical consciousness* which can give the concept of action a status that goes further than the description of goal-directed behavior.

The 16th International Human Science Research Conference will be held August 16-20, 1997 in Trondheim/Norway. Title: *Challenges for the Human Sciences in a Techological World*. Contact: Birthe Loa Knizek, Dept. of Psychology, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, N-7055 Dragvoll, Norway, fax: +47 73596649, e-mail: ihsr97@sv.ntnu.no