Chapter 4

Accessing the Blind Spot: The U Process as Seen Through the Lens of Developmental Action Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

The complexity of our current social, environmental, and economic realities requires conceptual frameworks that help us chart transformative pathways of collective action. Otto Scharmer’s Theory U is one such framework, offering a profound synthesis of relevant theories and practices related to systems thinking, organizational learning, and leadership. Theory U is also a rich, multi-layered framework that is challenging to apply in action due to its conceptual complexity and because of the demands it makes of both facilitators and participants. As a means of facilitating the skillful use of this theory and its practices, the authors find it helpful to examine and explore Theory U through the lens of a distinct, yet related framework: Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry (Torbert, 2003, 2004). CDAI is a methodology based on action science that integrates adult development theory, first, second, and third person inquiry, and transforming action.

INTRODUCTION

The complexity of our current social, environmental, and economic realities requires conceptual frameworks and developmental practices that generate transformative pathways of collective action. Otto Scharmer’s Theory U is one such framework, offering an exceptional synthesis of relevant theories and practices from the fields of phenomenology and systems thinking, organizational learning, and leadership. At the same time, Theory U is a rich, multi-layered framework that is challenging to apply in action due to its conceptual complexity and the cognitive and affec-
tive demands that it asks of both facilitators and participants. For this reason, we find it helpful to explore Theory U through the lens of a distinct, yet related framework: Developmental Action Inquiry (Torbert, 1991, 2003, 2004). Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry, or CDAI, is an Action Science (Lewin, 1948; Argyris, 1976, 1982) methodology based on collaborative inquiry (Reason, 1994a, 1994b; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) that integrates adult development theory, first, second, and third-person inquiry as well as single, double, and triple loop learning and transforming action.

In this chapter, we use Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry as an analytic lens to see more deeply into the opportunities and challenges of the U-Process for generative change to discover what Scharmer calls, “the blind spot”, from which genuinely creative action flows. We will explore how for the three main phases of the left side of the U-Process (seeing, sensing, and presencing), CDAI sheds light on the nature of the relationship between first, second, and third-person research, single, double, and triple-loop learning, and transformation. We highlight the importance of what Torbert calls triple-loop awareness, a temporary state of personal and collective consciousness necessary for the U process (Starr & Torbert, 2005, p.85). In this chapter, we will also examine how, at any phase of the U-Process, CDAI helps facilitators understand the demands that this sophisticated model of action research makes of participants’ developmental capacities. In particular, we focus on the challenges of learning and acting through experiences of complexity, conflict, and ambiguity. Our intention in offering this analysis is not to make Theory U and the U process more complex or challenging, but rather, in taking a careful look at these distinct elements, to help facilitators take perspective on the demands made on them and their participants as action researchers, and to create more effective scaffolds to support their generative work.

EXPLORING FIRST, SECOND, AND THIRD PERSON RESEARCH: SINGLE, DOUBLE, AND TRIPLE LOOP LEARNING, AND KNOWLEDGE GENERATION

Senge and Scharmer (in Reason & Bradbury, 2001) describe how the action research model used as a basis for Theory U employs a third-person approach to organizing that gives explicit attention to first, second, and third-person research and practice. In other words, Theory U combines subjective, inter-subjective, and objective dimensions in framing challenges, examining relevant data, exploring collective needs and intentions, and prototyping creative pathways for change, or the realization of shared vision. Scharmer’s (2007) contribution in Theory U is the turn from third-person organizing typical of prior, past-oriented research to a new form of first, second, and third-person organizing that enacts the “highest potential future” (p. 52). In this section of our chapter, we use CDAI to explore both the interweaving of first, second, and third-person research, and the three loops of learning and knowledge generation, as they are involved in Scharmer’s U-Process. In discussing these three levels of engagement, we explore how research, learning, and action are simultaneously distinct and critically interconnected through the U process.

The overarching aims in CDAI overlap with those of Theory U in that they are intended to increase one’s own and others’ capacity to enact integrity, mutuality, justice, and sustainability for ourselves, our communities, organizations, and social institutions (Scharmer, 2007; Torbert, 1991). CDAI not only helps researchers distinguish between valid and illusory patterns in prior data, but also allows researchers to identify patterns and incongruities between strategy and performance in the present, as well as to articulate possible visions, strategies, and specific goals for the emergent future (Chandler & Torbert, 2003;