

## BOOK REVIEW

# Synergy, Empowerment, and Healing: Insights From Cultural Diversity

Review by Michael Epstein, PhD



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Richard Katz, Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu, editors.

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**Key Words**

Synergy, cultural diversity, integrative, self-help, mixed-treatment paradigms

**About the Reviewer**

Michael Epstein is managing director, Centre for Integrative Medicine, University of Saskatchewan, Canada, and national director, Canadian CAM in UME Project. His interdisciplinary training includes decision science and organizational change.

**Disclosure**

The author completed the ICMJE Disclosure Form for Potential Conflicts of Interest and had no conflicts to disclose.

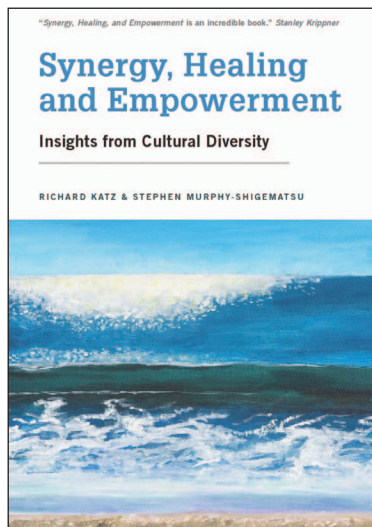
This book will interest change agents and thought leaders who are committed to addressing the really big challenges facing healthcare systems in the 21st century. The book is intended to (1) challenge several deeply rooted and limiting assumptions about economics, knowledge, authority, and professional identities in healthcare systems; (2) identify some complementary assumptions that broaden the perspective and thus the range of options available to decision makers; and (3) explicate the role of synergy as an integrative theme in transcending these limiting assumptions, thus opening the doorway for new and innovative strategies for creating change at the individual, system, and societal levels.

Synergy is a process by which 2 entities interact to create a third entity, in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Where synergy prevails, what is good for one, becomes good for all; opposition is replaced by complementarity; and diverse belief systems exist in harmony, maximizing each other's potential.

The book contains 13 chapters by 7 authors with diverse backgrounds, including medical anthropology, indigenous studies, community psychology, social work, and education. Each chapter applies the concepts of synergy, healing, and empowerment to specific challenges facing healthcare.

The chapter on self-help groups explains the importance of storytelling, where the healing process results from the opportunity to tell one's story, to truly be heard. The healing resources are the qualities of authenticity, respect, and compassion. Rather than being intrinsically scarce, these resources can be accessed by everyone. In fact, the more they are applied, the more they expand.

The chapter on mixed-treatment



paradigms describes a community-based mental health center in which biomedically trained practitioners work with traditional healers and clients to formulate comprehensive treatment plans involving psychotherapy, meditation, self-help groups, and traditional healing rituals. In this mixed-healing environment, the combination of approaches appears to produce an outcome, which is better than the sum of the individual outcomes.

The chapter on the training of indigenous healers emphasizes the importance of deep, personal growth and the cultivation of values such as humility, service, compassion, and community. After undergoing a process of "education as transformation," traditional healers embody an unswerving dedication to healing and reaffirm the community's self-healing capacity.

Other highlights include chapters on "teacher as healer," "synergistic community," and vulnerability in the patient-practitioner relationship. A major theme is the role of respectful dialogue in building shared understanding and respect across cultures, disciplines, and healing paradigms.

Many of the book's chapters were originally written as full-length

articles for peer-reviewed, discipline-specific journals. Consequently, there is some use of technical terminology that can be difficult for readers outside of the discipline. This does not represent a huge impediment but may slightly affect the reader's ability to gain immediate comprehension of the authors' intentions.

In addition, the chapters do not interface quite as seamlessly as they would in a book with a single author. This necessary consequence of multiple authorship is, however, far outweighed by the benefits that are achieved by synthesizing multiple disciplinary perspectives on the topics of synergy, healing, and empowerment.

The concept of synergy is at once simple and profound, and its principles apply equally to the healing of individuals, families, healthcare systems, and entire societies. It is thematic in the work of change agents from all walks of society, including healers, teachers, and community leaders. All are concerned with removing blockages, resolving conflicts, and restoring synergy, which is the natural state of healthy functioning.

The proposition that 2 seemingly incompatible bodies of knowledge can be mutually synergistic is one that I have found to be extremely useful—for transforming adversarial debates into constructive dialogues, for designing integrative learning activities to simultaneously address student learning objectives from multiple disciplines, and for finding strength in diversity within social change coalitions.

The topic of synergy could not be more timely. If the 20th century was about specialization and division of labor, then the 21st century is about putting Humpty Dumpty back together, albeit in new and different ways. This book will alter your perception of what is possible.