

June 2015

Partnership Studies in Transformative Education

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Recommended Citation

Carter, Susan G. (2015) "Partnership Studies in Transformative Education," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 7. Available at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps/vol1/iss1/7>



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PARTNERSHIP STUDIES IN TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

Susan G. Carter, PhD

Abstract

This article provides a brief overview of Eisler's Cultural Transformation Theory and domination/partnership models. Its main objective is to share ways in which these important ideas and constructs can be included in educational curricula, with a focus on university teaching, to encourage and support personal development and positive social change. It offers examples of effective learning activities developed over nearly a decade of teaching partnership, as well as ways in which students have included partnership in their life, work, and studies.

Keywords: cultural transformation; Cultural Transformation Theory; partnership; Partnership Studies; transformative education

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Introduction

One of the joys of the partnership model and partnership work, as introduced by social scientist and activist Riane Eisler, is that it encourages individuals to start "where they are" and bring many areas of interest or study to it. Partnership Studies is an emerging field, and it is also a process. This dynamism helps make Partnership Studies ideal for educational programs of all kinds, and particularly transformative education.

At its best, transformative education provides a foundation for developing broader and deeper knowledge and the formation of new ideas. It challenges us to deeper critical and creative thinking, and provides many opportunities for practical application and for integrating our learning into our daily lives. Such education has the capacity to transform not only the students engaged in learning but also the

larger world, as these students apply what they have learned in their communities. The study and practice of partnership can be an integral part of such an education, as it encompasses and supports all of these opportunities and possibilities.

The objective of this article is to briefly explain the foundation of Eisler's work and provide examples of how it can be used in educational settings.

Cultural Transformation Theory

Many believe that the current state of the world, filled with turmoil and strife, is inevitable and a normal part of the human condition. The horrors of war, mass destruction, social injustice, violence and abuse, poverty and hunger, and degradation of our natural environment all seem overwhelming and ever-present, and cause so many of us to feel spiritually bereft with little hope. However, a number of scholars claim that human culture has not always been this way.¹ Also, visionary social thinkers and activists have confidence that we *can* create a better future.²

In her groundbreaking book, *The Chalice and the Blade*, Riane Eisler (1987) drew upon research in fields such as archaeology, myth, archaeomythology, art history, religion, and history (including pre- and protohistory) to describe a past in which societies enjoyed greater gender parity and were more harmonious, with little or no evidence of warfare. In these societies, social relations were based on a principle of *linking* disparate group members in an egalitarian system, with mutual regard, respect, and care as a foundation of interactions (Eisler, 1987, 2002). These were societies oriented toward what Eisler termed "partnership." While the partnership model involves some hierarchy, since social organization is not entirely flat, relationships and leadership *empower* group members toward greater functioning in *hierarchies of*

¹ A number of scholars put forward that social organization and women's roles in society were not always as they are today, and point to the possibilities of more egalitarian and matrilineal-oriented societies in the past. See for example: Eisler, 1987, 2002, 2008; Carter, 2009; Marler, 1997, 2005, 2009, 2011; Haarmann, 2013, 2014; Sanday, 1981, 2003; Gimbutas, 1974, 1989, 1991; Ehrenberg, 1989; Mellaart, 1967.

² See for example: Eisler, 1987, 2002, 2008; Macy, 1991, 2007, 2012, 2014; Wheatley, 2009, 2011.

actualization (Eisler, 2002, p. 212). Partnership, according to Eisler, was the direction of our cultural evolution in ancient times.

At some point this all changed. Eisler (1987) posits:

Following a period of chaos and almost total cultural disruption, there occurred a fundamental shift. The greater availability of data on Western societies (due to the ethnocentric focus of Western social science) makes it possible to document this shift in more detail through the analysis of Western cultural evolution. (p. xvii)

However, we now know that this shift was paralleled in other parts of the world (Chinese Partnership Research Group, 1995; Carter, 2009).

A shift in the direction of cultural evolution toward what Eisler termed the "domination" model resulted in a *ranking* system that privileged males and resulted in positioning half of humanity over the other half: male over female. This set the stage for growing inequities and greater social stratification, with groups designated as "superior" dominating those groups designated as "inferior." To maintain this authoritarian model and its strict *hierarchies of domination*, the use of fear tactics and force, along with socially accepted violence—even valorized violence—was required.

Eisler's (1987) development of the domination and partnership models reexamined human society "from a gender-holistic perspective" and resulted in "a new theory of cultural evolution" (p. xvii), which she called Cultural Transformation Theory. Cultural Transformation Theory "contradicts the conventional notion of a linear progression from 'barbarism' to 'civilization'" and claims that ancient civilization was oriented toward partnership (Center for Partnership Studies, n.d.).

While it is true that a more peaceful past is no guarantee of a more peaceful future, the vision of such a past does provide an example of what is possible. It allows us to envision something different than what is in place today, and then to work toward it. Thus, we can renew hope, imagine better options, and work toward the possibilities of a more just, caring, partnership-oriented world.

The Domination/Partnership Continuum

In her book *The Power of Partnership: Seven Relationships That Will Change Your Life*, Eisler (2002) built on her Cultural Transformation Theory to develop a fuller picture of the domination/partnership models and how they are manifested in today's world. Eisler has been persistent in pointing out that no social system exists entirely at one or the other end of the spectrum; rather, these models work on a *continuum*. Because human societies are a mix of both partnership-oriented elements and domination-oriented elements, they are not fixed, and at any given time might be situated differently on this domination/partnership continuum. With this in mind, and with the overall goal of working toward greater partnership, she has provided examples and a model, including a set of practical steps to help catalyze and sustain the personal and cultural transformation so vitally needed to address our world's problems today.

***The Power of Partnership* in Curricula**

The Power of Partnership (Eisler, 2002) is organized in a way that makes it an excellent primary text and basis for discussion in the classroom. Eisler explores seven universal relationships we all have in our lives, with a chapter devoted to each:

- Your Relationship with Yourself: Body, Mind, and Spirit
- Your Intimate Relations: The Heart of the Matter
- Your Work and Community Relationships: The Widening Circle of Caring
- Your Relationship with your National Community: Why Politics Matter
- Your Relationship with the International Community: The World Around Us

- Your Relationship with Nature: From Mother Earth to Biotechnology
- Your Spiritual Relations: Putting Love Into Action

In each chapter, Eisler discusses the importance of the particular relationship of focus, and provides examples of how partnership and domination may manifest within it. At the end of each chapter is a checklist of suggested action steps.

The book contains additional partnership tools at the end, in addition to a logical progression of real-life examples of the relationships or elements in partnership. The organization of the text into eight chapters makes this book ideal for a one-term class of 10 weeks. To expand the course to a 15-week semester, or to further augment the conversation, other reading and activity assignments can be added according to the length and focus of the course and student interests.

The examples shared in the book are often familiar, such as pay inequities and intimate violence, and sometimes surprising or alarming, such as continuation of bride burnings and female genital mutilation.

While the book was written over a decade ago, the material remains relevant because so many of our societal woes persist. The names or specific circumstances may change, but the ways in which partnership can serve as a catalyst and support for social change are as applicable as ever. Daily news items and ongoing world affairs provide up-to-the-minute examples that are readily available for use in the classroom. In addition, examples of partnership-oriented organizations can be researched to demonstrate the applicability and versatility of these ideas and to determine the longevity of their successful use in both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors.

It is obvious to most people involved in Partnership Studies that the *concept* of partnership is simple. However, as is often the case with transformative education, it

is the *implementation* of these ideas—day by day, and over time—wherein the true challenges reside!

Partnership Is a Process

The study of the partnership model is not an end, but rather a means to work toward a better life and a better world. The emerging field of Partnership Studies has much to offer transformative education. It is a process with multiple steps and direct applications that progressively deepen and broaden understanding.

A number of metaphors prove effective to describe the partnership process—ripples on the surface of a pond, a spiral staircase, the facets of a jewel, threads of a tapestry, or a new lens. One can imagine a pebble dropped into a pond, causing ever-widening ripples. These ripples are separate and yet connected, just as the seven relationships of partnership are—from partnership with oneself, ever outward into the larger world. The process might also be imagined as a spiral staircase, with each turn of the stairway a different element of partnership relationship. As one moves up and down, the vantage point changes as one gains more experience with greater partnership living. Partnership might also be considered as a faceted jewel, with each facet representing a different element or relationship of partnership or another approach to partnership. With just a slight turn of the hand, the light strikes and highlights a different facet, and yet each facet continues to add to the overall beauty of the jewel. Alternatively, one might picture a tapestry or a web in which many separate strands are woven together. Each strand is equally important to form a strong interconnected fabric. With a partnership perspective, one sees relationships and the world in new ways, looking with a new lens. Indeed, one may never look at the world in the same way again.

Partnership Activities and Projects

As already mentioned, one of the strengths of partnership work is that one can approach this model in many different ways and in multiple areas of one's life and work. It is possible to explore and apply the partnership model intermittently and in

sections, both for personal growth and to make a difference in one's communities. It is also possible to apply academic rigor in an interdisciplinary manner, with interesting and inspiring results. The idea is to begin, even in small ways. Eisler (2002) reminds us, "This doesn't mean that every one of us has to do everything. But wherever we are and whenever we can, every one of us can do something to move us from domination to partnership" (p. xxi).

Examples of activities to assign to further partnership understanding and application:

- After reading each chapter in *The Power of Partnership*, choose one or two action steps to undertake in the coming week (and beyond). Journal about your experiences and/or share with the class (online or in a class meeting as assigned).
- Looking in the media, find examples of the domination model and the partnership model. Comment on these and share with the class (online or in a class meeting as assigned).
- Go to the Center for Partnership Studies website (www.partnershipway.org) or to Riane Eisler's website (www.rianeeisler.com) to see what resources are available there. Choose 2-4 resources (videos, articles, and so on); summarize and compare them in a short report.
- Reach out to a family member, friend, or colleague, and explain your developing understanding of the domination and partnership models. Engage in discussion and conversation.
- Be aware of the use of language and note how many terms perpetuate domination orientation. Think of alternative terms that further partnership orientation, and make a conscious effort to use them in conversation.

In transformative education, students often take learning materials deeper and apply them more broadly when they develop a meaningful topic and application for academic work of their own choosing. Partnership Studies in curricula allow for flexibility and student choice in final projects. In nearly a decade of teaching

partnership in several universities at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, I have been privileged to witness exciting projects undertaken by students on a wide variety of topics and with impressive results.³

Focus on partnership with self and intimate others (and beyond):

- Examine a difficult event or relationship in your life, apply the partnership model to it, and create a plan for change.
- Engage your children in the creation of partnership activities and projects the family can enjoy together; document them and note any resulting changes in family relations and other relationships.
- Create a blog on partnership with friends and family (password protected) to learn about partnership together.
- Draft a "conscious consumer spreadsheet" to track consumption in your household; emphasize using resources and companies that are partnership-oriented.
- Develop a handbook of intercultural respect in intimate relations to study intercultural couples through the lens of Eisler's Four Cornerstones.⁴ Provide discussion questions and activities to help heighten awareness of the partnership/domination continuum and how it applies to relationships.

Focus on partnership in one's community (and beyond):

- Write a manual/workshop guide for groups that want to start partnership communities.

³ Some of these examples were previously included in the following publication: Eisler, R., & Carter, S. (2010). Transformative leadership: From domination to partnership. *Revision: A Journal of Consciousness and Transformation*, 30(3/4), 104-112.

⁴ The four cornerstones as described by Eisler serve as a foundation on which to build a more partnership-oriented society, and include childhood relations, gender relations, economic relations, and stories, beliefs, and spirituality. To read a short article written by Riane Eisler about these cornerstones see "Building a Just and Caring World: Four Cornerstones" (full URL/access information can be found in References). For more information see The Center for Partnership Studies website: <http://www.partnershipway.org>

- Develop a multi-media presentation for young men about partnership systems.
- Develop a partnership audit to assess and improve the policies and practices of a major U.S. city. (Implementing the recommendations of such an audit can become a goal for a number of civil society groups.)
- Develop and host blogtalk radio shows that include guests who speak on partnership and related themes.⁵
- Create a blog about intercultural experience and partnership.

Focus on partnership with nature (circling back to community and self):

- Develop a rite-of-passage program in nature for young people based on partnership with nature and partnership with self and community.
- Develop a workshop integrating partnership elements with the practice of Yoga (that includes a focus on unity—connection with nature, self, and others).
- Make the connection between bullying and lack of connection with nature and develop a curriculum to increase this connection for healing trauma in youth.

Focus on partnership with spirit (our stories, myths, and beliefs):

- Rewrite a myth or fairy tale to remove misogynistic or violent strands so that it is more partnership-oriented.
- Look at themes in movies or stories that demonstrate partnership, but which have not been previously analyzed with the application of a partnership lens, in order to bring greater awareness to partnership-oriented literature or film.

⁵ See the following examples on "The Cathy Bennett Show" on Blogtalk Radio (full URLs/access information can be found in References): "What has a Hold on You? Domination or Partnership? - with Riane Eisler and Susan Carter" (March 14, 2012); "The Economics of Partnerism: The Real Wealth of Nations - with Riane Eisler and Susan Carter" (Oct. 3, 2012); and "Caring Economy Leadership Program: Small but far reaching" - with Susan Carter and Sara Saltee (Aug. 28, 2013).

Finally, here are examples of capstone, thesis, and dissertation work directly informed by Partnership Studies:

- A thesis student applied the partnership framework to a specific Andean population who practiced deep reciprocity and with whom she lived for a number of years.
- A doctoral student, who founded a children's camp focused on healing for survivors of abuse, documented stories from 20 years of the organization's operation through a partnership lens to provide a template for others.
- A doctoral student working in the field of medicine looked to partnership systems for ways in which partnership can positively impact patient care outcomes and improve nurse satisfaction in a time of dire nursing shortages.⁶

As Riane Eisler (2002) states, "Change involves two things: awareness and action" (p. xix). Integrating Partnership Studies into transformative educational curricula offers rich opportunities for both—awareness (learning) and action (application)—often with exponential results.

⁶ This dissertation project grew and several years later was developed into the book, *Transforming Interprofessional Partnerships: A New Framework for Nursing and Partnership-based Healthcare*. (Eisler, R., & Potter, T. M. (2014). *Transforming interprofessional partnerships: A new framework for nursing and partnership-based healthcare*. Sigma Theta Tau International.)

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