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Julie de Azevedo Hanks
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BRINGING PARTNERSHIP HOME: A MODEL OF FAMILY TRANSFORMATION

Julie de Azevedo Hanks, PhD, MSW, LCSW

Abstract

Eisler's cultural transformation theory suggests that the global crises we face can be addressed only through movement to a partnership model of social organization. Drawing on cultural transformation theory and systems theory, a partnership model of family organization (PMFO) is outlined as a practical framework to guide families toward partnership relations. Eight components of PMFO are presented and expanded on as a path toward furthering familial and societal transformation. The eight tenets of a PMFO are: 1) cooperative adult leadership, 2) connecting orientation, 3) caretaking emphasis, 4) collaborative roles and rules, 5) celebration of unique contributions, 6) compassionate communication, 7) conscious language use, and 8) collection and creation of partnership stories. Finally, specific strategies of application of the PMFO will be discussed.

Keywords: Cultural transformation theory, marriage and family therapy, family organization, partnership model, dominator model, partnership model of family organization, family life, partnership studies, partnership families

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Introduction

Humankind faces many seemingly unsolvable dilemmas, such as threat of nuclear war, depletion of natural resources, increasing health-related problems, chronic violence, a sense of social disconnection, and numerous other crises that have yet to be solved. Riane Eisler's work suggests that many of the crises we now face are related to our fundamental model of social organization, and that the solutions to these problems lie in a movement from a dominator to a partnership model of social organization.

According to Eisler's Cultural Transformation Theory (CTT), societies organize themselves around one of two models: the *dominator model* or the *partnership model*

(Eisler, 1987). Staik (2005) suggested, “The manner in which masculinity and femininity are culturally defined determines which of the two value systems is embraced” (p. 197).

Societies that define masculinity as power *over* others through physical force and violent conquest, and that minimize caring, emotionality, and connectedness (frequently associated with femininity), tend to organize toward a dominator model. Societies that define masculinity and femininity fluidly instead of rigidly, in which a wide range of possibilities are available to men and women, and in which caring for others is highly valued and exhibited by both men and women, tend to orient toward a partnership model.

Dominator societies value masculine characteristics and contributions over feminine, and are organized around a system of rigid ranking that exploits women, children, and nature. Eisler’s (1987) research indicated that dominator societies limit the actualization of all interconnected systems. Dominator systems contain “in-groups” and “out-groups”, and the former try to control or eradicate the latter through institutionalized violence and fear.

Hallmarks of dominator families include top-down authoritarianism wherein men are “in charge” of the family decisions; violence is an acceptable and often-used means of maintaining the compliance of women and children; and gender distinctions and expectations are rigid, such as the distinction between “men’s work” and “women’s work”, with men’s work deemed more important and valuable. Masculinity is valued above anything associated with femininity (Eisler, 2008b). In dominator families, physical punishment and other punitive parenting practices are common; conflict is addressed through emotional and physical violence; vulnerability and emotionality are discouraged or even punished; and scapegoating of vulnerable family members may be a common occurrence. Caretaking is viewed as a solely feminine activity and is not a priority in family life.

On the other end of the continuum, a *partnership model* of social organization is oriented toward hierarchies of actualization. Characterized by mutually respectful and caring relations, actualization hierarchies are democratic and equitable to all members of the system, allowing spontaneity and creativity to flourish. Linking (instead of ranking) is a high priority, and the contributions of men and women are equally valued (Eisler, 1987). In partnership-oriented societies, gender roles are fluid. Family relationships are egalitarian, with communication flowing in all directions. These two basic templates for organization (dominator model and partnership model) are not rigid opposites, but form a continuum, with social systems, including families, orienting toward one of two directions.

Few social scientists would dispute that childhood relationships are central to individual and societal well-being. Early relationship patterns lay the framework for identity development, social interactions, and our assumptions about others. It is in the formative childhood relations that human beings first learn respect for human rights and/or the acceptance of human rights violations as normal, inevitable, even moral (Eisler, 2007). Additionally, early relationship experiences play a role in brain development, preparing children to enter and survive in either a dominator- or a partnership-oriented culture (Eisler, 2013).

A Partnership Model of Family Organization (PMFO) is offered as a possible path for individual families to orient toward partnership configuration and, in doing so, to address intergenerational cycles of intimate partner violence, child abuse and neglect, and gender inequality in family life and in the larger culture. Human relations underscore all other aspects of society; therefore, Eisler (2014) suggested that cultural transformation can occur “through a systemic approach that takes into account the totality of a social system, including the primary human relations as the substrate on which all social organization rests” (Eisler, 2013, p. 286).

A Partnership Model of Family Organization (PMFO)

While much has been written on the characteristics of childhood and family relationships within the dominator/partnership continuum, this author has found no cohesive and practical frameworks for how families themselves might create a fundamental shift in their organization and interactions from dominator to partnership patterns in day-to-day life. Montuori and Conti (1993) suggested, “As a microcosm of society, the family can act as a crucible for the creation of partnership. It seems the most obvious place to start, with the people we love most and are closest to” (p. 126). Using Eisler’s CTT as a reference point, a partnership model of family organization (PMFO) will be outlined to show specifically how families can organize differently, and in turn, move the larger culture toward a partnership configuration.

While the word “family” has traditionally been conceptualized as a married husband and wife with children, as of December 2014, less than half of American children lived with a married heterosexual couple (Livingston, 2014). Only 16% of households consist of a married male and female raising their own biological children (Krogstad, 2014). For the purposes of this article, “family” is broadly defined as a group of people living in the same household who self-identify as a family. Because family research has historically been focused on heterosexual couples with children, many of the citations in this article reference this traditional family constellation. This author is aware of the variety of family situations, and suggests that the tenets of a PMFO have broad application to a variety of relationships, and encourages the reader to adapt the following eight basic tenets, or the “8 Cs” of a PMFO to her or his particular family.

The 8 Cs of a Partnership Model of Family Organization

1) Cooperative adult leadership. In a PFMO, the parent, adult, or adult partners work together to lead the family toward actualization goals. The term “self-actualization,” originally coined by Maslow in the 1940s, was used to describe people who are actively creating meaning and are fully engaged in the use of talents, capacities, and the development of their potentialities (Maslow, 1973). Expanding

Maslow's definition beyond the self to larger systems, Eisler (2008a) suggested that actualization is the realization of our highest human potential to inspire, support, and empower others and ourselves. To that end, family members' values and needs do not need to be ranked in order of importance or power, but decisions are made with the welfare of all in mind. In this structure, the belief that the child's or an adult's needs should take precedence over the others is challenged.

In partnership families, the adult or adults guide the family toward individual and collective goals. "Egalitarian relationships are those in which partners equally share all benefits, burdens, and responsibilities" (Reis & Sprecher, 2009, p. 482). Shared power and decision making in male/female unions has been associated with positive outcomes including relationship satisfaction, reduced conflict, and a lower frequency of depression in women (Reis & Sprecher, 2009). The division of family responsibilities and the structure of family life are created or co-created by the adults in the household in an egalitarian manner, with children being fully respected as individuals.

The benefits for children of cooperative adult leadership are already well understood by social scientists. In the arena of parenting, the combination of high parental expectations with high responsiveness, also known as an authoritative parenting style, allows for conformity to family expectations without loss of individual sense of self (Baumrind, 1966). Adults and children interact with love and mutual respect, communication flows in all directions, and expectations are explained through inductive reasoning instead of punishment. Research supports positive outcomes for an authoritative style of parenting, as it is associated with children's academic success (Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989), positive peer relationships (Dekovic & Janssens, 1992), and overall emotional health (Luyckx et al., 2011).

2) Connecting orientation. Replacing a systemic structure based on ranking of members, the partnership family is oriented toward linking - that is, connecting the various systems to one another, subsystems within the self, family members to each other, and the family to the larger society. A shift to a partnership orientation in

family life can encourage families to value the *process* of their interactions, and not just the outcome or productivity. For example, *how* the family works together to decide on household chore responsibilities is as important as getting the jobs done.

A connecting and linking orientation in family life may contribute to the development of secure attachments. The psychological concept of *attachment* refers to the emotional bond between two people, particularly a child and an adult caregiver, or adult partners. Attachment theory suggests that an individual's early familial relationships inform an internal working model or view of self and others that can potentially influence the quality of future adult love relationships (McCarthy & Maughan, 2010). A secure attachment between loved ones instills the belief that one is worthy of love and that others will be empathic and responsive to one's needs. Both adults and children who are secure in their primary attachment relationships are more explorative and confident and are able to experience a cohesive sense of self (Bowlby, 1988).

3) Caretaking emphasis. A PMFO highly values caretaking and fostering the growth of others, including children and the elderly. This nurturing of others is not considered solely "women's work," but is a shared responsibility of all family members. This caretaking emphasis includes children's participation in caring for and supporting other family members. In a rigid dominator model of family life, caretaking is seen as non-masculine, and is therefore less valued, making it unlikely that males living in the household will participate equally. By contrast, in a PMFO model, caring for others is highly valued, and male partners are more likely to share responsibility for home and parenting of children, as these activities are not viewed as diminishing their masculinity (Eisler, 2002).

There are many benefits to sharing caretaking responsibilities among genders. Men's increased involvement in tasks that are traditionally viewed as feminine may subsequently reduce gender stereotyping, resulting in the dissolution of perceiving certain tasks and traits (e.g., caretaking, homemaking, bread-winning) in

dichotomous categories as either feminine or masculine. As children grow up being cared for by caregivers and siblings, they will be more likely to develop expectations for their future families based on mutual caretaking, instead of caretaking based on gender differences.

4) Collaborative roles and rules. A related characteristic of a caretaking orientation is fluidity in roles, rules, and responsibilities in family life. Current gender norms socialize women to perform the double roles of provider and nurturer, but one of the biggest impediments to equality of women in the public world is the lack of men taking on responsibilities in the personal world (Silverstein, 1996). Currently, while many men express a desire for better balance between work and family, “there continues to be a tacit assumption that women will be the caretakers in our society, and that nurturing for women is obligatory, whereas for men it is discretionary” (Miller & Cohen, 2012, p. 107).

A PMFO can address this apparent discrepancy in any gendered expectations by creating a system in which adult partners are truly equal collaborators in their family roles and responsibilities. The author recognizes that many families do not have both male and female partners living in the household. Family forms have changed dramatically for a variety of reasons: the rise in single parenthood, in couples choosing to cohabit, in same-sex marriages, and in grandparents raising their grandchildren, to name a few. However, sex-based socialization still impacts all members of society, informing our underlying assumptions, beliefs, and expectations. The point is to help families of all forms develop a sense of fluidity and openness to challenging cultural messaging surrounding gender roles and relationship rules.

One of the first steps to achieving this aim of collaboration between partners is to explore the origin of gendered expectations. From a systems perspective, the very concept of gender roles is born out of the long-standing tradition of psychodynamic and individual language, and does little to illuminate the relational processes

between family members. Addressing this need for systemic language in family life, Jackson (1965) used the term “family rules” or “redundancies” to refer to the repetitive patterns in relationships of families. Of family rules, Jackson said,

When two people get together, they immediately exchange clues as to how they are defining the nature of the relationship; this set of behavioral tactics is modified by the other person by the manner in which he responds. . . This definition of who each is in relation to the other can best be expressed as *quid pro quo*. (Jackson, 1965, p. 591)

The concept of family rules can be helpful in understanding recursive patterns of communication in relationships and division of responsibilities in family life. It is also helpful in understanding how an individual cannot be separated from the recursive family relationships and responsibilities in day-to-day life.

As families move toward a partnership model of family organization, new possibilities emerge in terms of what is culturally acceptable or appropriate behavior, thus expanding the possible choices for both males and females in the private and public spheres. Systems theory supports the notion that a change on one level can have a ripple effect throughout interconnected systems. Coltrane (1997) emphasized the connection between cooperative parenting and gender relations in the larger societal systems:

Whichever way the causal arrows run, we need to acknowledge the interplay between parenting and overall gender relations in the society. Given women’s biological capacity to bear and breastfeed children, men’s participation in the care of infants necessarily entails a level of cooperation between men and women. Conceptualized in this way, task sharing between genders, or between partners of the same gender who may assume a certain “masculine” or “feminine” role, becomes the most important focus of concern, and we can begin to analyze the ways in which cooperative activities between men and

women contribute to the organization of social life on non-biological bases. This approach de-emphasizes biological differences by focusing on the ways in which men and women respond similarly to the structural features of daily activities such as parenting (Coltrane, 1997, p. 191-192).

5) Celebration of all contributions. In systems organized toward the dominator end of the continuum, “masculine” traits, behaviors, and activities are ranked more highly than “feminine” traits, behaviors, and activities (Eisler, 1987, 2008a). On the other hand, a family organized by a partnership model equally values what has traditionally been considered masculine and feminine, and deemphasizes the differences between them. Jackson (1965) questioned the very assumption of individual differences based on sex roles and suggested that stresses of family life are due to difficulties in collaboration on rules, not roles.

Cybernetic thought suggests that the act of punctuating our experiences, or drawing distinctions through language in certain ways, perpetuates the existing frame, thus participating in its continuation (Keeney, 1983). Altering habits of punctuation regarding masculinity and femininity to emphasize that both males and females are capable of exhibiting a broad range of human characteristics and behaviors can transform the imagination of what is possible for all.

Eisler’s research suggests that nurturing, compassion, and connectedness are not inherently “feminine” characteristics, but exist as possibilities in all human beings (Eisler, 2013). Jung’s work supports the notion that within every male is the anima, or unconscious feminine aspect, and conversely, within women’s conscious feminine is the animus, or unconscious masculine aspect (Hopcke & Maidenbaum, 1989). The anima / animus, or soul images, are archetypes of the collective unconscious; they may serve as guides to the unconscious mind and are the “inward personifications of one’s psyche” (Hopcke & Maidenbaum, 1989, p. 93). Jung considered the soul to be “the wellspring of true relatedness and creative power” and “the source of identity and our fulfillment” (Hopcke & Maidenbaum, 1989, p. 93).

With the exception of biological reproductive differences, socialization is primarily at play for the existing and deeply embedded masculine/feminine dichotomous stereotypes. Eisler's work (2008a) suggests the following systemic viewpoint:

I here want to emphasize that what we are dealing with are *stereotypes* of masculinity and femininity based primarily on gender-specific socialization processes, *not* with innate biological differences between women and men. I also want to emphasize that none of this is a matter of blaming men for our problems. Indeed, most women, like most men, have in domination systems not just been passive victims but often active collaborators in maintaining rankings of domination—including the ranking of man over woman—in conformity with religious and secular teachings that such rankings are divinely or genetically ordained. What we are dealing with are systems dynamics in which the social construction of the roles and relations of the female and male halves of humanity play a key role in shaping social and economic institutions and the values that guide policies and practices. (Eisler, 2008a, p. 59)

By deemphasizing the socially constructed gender-based differences, the behavior, gifts, ideas, and contributions of all family members can be celebrated. Distinctions based on sex are minimized, allowing a broader range of possibilities for both sexes.

6) Compassionate communication. In contrast to the use of violence that is characteristic of dominator societies, PMFO utilizes peaceful communication. Families organized in a partnership framework are not free of conflict. Conflict and competition are present in all social organizations; however, Eisler (2008a) described partnership organizations as places where conflict and competition exist, and where non-violent and respectful solutions are sought after and valued. When individuals have more autonomy and power to make decisions and solve problems together in a safe environment, there is greater flexibility and creativity (Eisler, 2002).

Relevant to this discussion of nonviolence and peace in family life is the development of compassionate communication skills. While violence is often thought of in terms of physical aggression, much of the violence that happens in intimate relations is less visible, such as emotional abuse, yet is still destructive.

Nonviolent communication (NVC) is a process-oriented model developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s to facilitate clear communication while remaining connected to the compassionate part of our selves. The emphasis is on cooperation and power *with* instead of exerting power *over* others. This model resonates with Eisler's partnership configuration wherein power is seen as the ability to influence, rather than the ability to coerce.

The following skills are central to the practice of NVC:

- observing without evaluating or judging, and specifying behaviors and conditions that are affecting us;
- differentiating feeling from thinking, and expressing internal states without blame, judgment, or criticism;
- connecting with the core needs and values of humanity and linking them to our observations and feelings; and
- making clear and specific requests (not demands) of what we *do* want to have happen. (Rosenberg, 2003)

NVC skills encourage self-awareness, improved communication with others, compassionate responses, and recognition of our interdependence with each other through empathetic listening and sharing (Burleson, Martin, & Lewis, 2012). In a PMFO, NVC can be used as a tool to help families gain practical skills in observing and communicating without judgment, and remain connected to one another in spite of conflicts or disagreements that will arise.

It is relevant to our discussion of peaceful relations to include not only interaction with others, but also interaction within the self. In dominator societies, women, in

particular, are often taught to internalize anger, negative emotions, and demeaning gender-related messages that then turn into self-criticism (Eisler, 2002). Peaceful communication includes an awareness of our learned dominator patterns of self-violence (Eisler, 2002). Nonviolence in family life includes nonviolence toward one's self, also called self-compassion. Neff (2011) defined and expanded the concept of self-compassion to include three distinct aspects:

- self-kindness (including kind words, thoughts, and actions);
- common humanity (the awareness that suffering is common to all humans); and
- mindfulness, or the ability to experience what is present without judgment.

7) Conscious language use. Words are the epistemological knife with which we make distinctions about our experience. Therefore, the words we choose to communicate our thoughts are important in the creation of a partnership family. Consciousness of language encompasses sensitivity to gender, cultural, and sexual stereotypes, and refrains from demeaning others. An awareness of, and a shift in, the language used in family life can encourage fluidity in rules and in behavior and characteristics based on culturally constructed gendered expectations.

Eisler and Loye (1990) suggested that the use of the words *mankind*, *man*, and *he* to include both sexes “unconsciously conditions both men and women to think in male-centered ways, effectively teaching that women are secondary” (p. 189). Thus, in families organized by a partnership framework, members develop an awareness of the impact of their word choices. Replacing the word *mankind* with *humanity*, *spokesman* with *spokesperson*, and *sissy* with the term *sensitive boy* are a few examples of how families can begin a shift toward partnership language (Eisler & Loye, 1990).

In addition to gender sensitivity, partnership language in family life includes the use of words that imply shared responsibility and mutuality among family members. For example, the phrases *our children* instead of *my children*, or saying “my partner is caring for the children” instead of “my partner is babysitting” indicates partnership in

family responsibilities. “The terms in which we conceptualize reflect the prevailing consciousness—not necessarily the truth about what is happening” (Miller, 1986, p. 94).

Consciousness of language also indicates the capacity of holding a complexity of viewpoints, tolerating uncertainty, withholding judgments, and valuing self-exploration. Complexity entails a shift in our description of phenomena, which at minimum recognizes mutual, recursive, and circular causality. Our understanding of complexity emerges out of the inclusion of relationships as a constitutive part of the phenomena we want to understand (Montuori & Purser, 1997).

The language used in family life includes words that point to an awareness of circularity in relational processes and a systemic view of family relationships. Using this circular, recursive, and relational lens in familial conversations can aid in reducing blame, shame, scapegoating of family members, and an *us versus them* mentality often seen in dominator constellations. As individuals are viewed as interconnected parts of a system, family members are seen as contributing to the construction of family rules and maintenance of interactional patterns, and thus are viewed as possessing resources to be part of the solution or transformation.

8) Creation and collection of partnership stories. According to Eisler (2008b), humans live by the stories we have inherited from previous generations:

Unfortunately, many of the stories we inherited from earlier times teach that dominating or being dominated are the only alternatives. That there are today stories offering a partnership alternative of relations built on mutual benefit, mutual respect, and mutual accountability is a sign of a major revolution in consciousness...We need a concerted effort through the arts, music, and literature, as well as through science, to show that a partnership way of structuring human society is a viable possibility...We must spread the new

language for describing societies offered by the partnership system and domination system. (Eisler, 2008b, p. 7)

Families organized in a partnership framework intentionally include mythology, stories, and creative works in family life that include themes of caring, actualization of all members, and peaceful interactions. In partnership organizations, feminine characters are also represented equally in religious teachings and symbols (Eisler & Loye, 1990). Bishop (1990) illustrated that the power of thematic elements in literature can serve as windows, sliding doors, or mirrored reflections that impact the development of the self and worldview.

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Bishop, 1990, par. 1)

As families collect and create artifacts based on partnership values and disseminate them throughout their communities and the larger society, families can play a role in transforming the larger culture toward a more peaceful and equitable existence. Additionally, as families orient toward a partnership model, children grow up with a new template of what is “normal” in family life. Early family relationships are where we learn our patterns of interaction. Children who experience a partnership relationship style will carry that framework into their future families and their adult lives.

Conclusion

Cultural transformation theory has been presented as the basis for the development of a partnership model of family organization. This practical framework outlines “8 Cs” of a PMFO that provide a possible path for families to move from domination toward a partnership constellation. This model has very broad application to many areas of individual, family, and cultural transformation, including promoting secure attachments in individuals and families, increasing the value of caretaking activities and professions, decreasing violence in the home, and addressing gender inequality in the broader culture.

One particularly relevant and pressing concern to families is the gendered experience of poverty. One in three women in America (and consequently, their children) live in poverty or are teetering on the brink, and women are almost two-thirds of the minimum wage workers (MSNBC, 2014). In partnership families children will grow up with more connection, compassion, and caring for others. These children will grow into more caring leaders, workers, and parents as adults. As families move away from rigid gender role prescriptions, all children can be encouraged to develop caretaking skills *and* to prepare for a financially stable future. A change in one system changes the interconnected systems. A shift toward partnership in families can lead to partnership patterns in communities, workplaces, economic structures, and governments.

In addition to application in families, the PMFO might also be adapted to other systems as a guide to developing partnership relationships. An example of adaptation might be revising this model for systems beyond the family. The PMFO may be customized for other organizations, such as businesses and workplace environments, school systems, and church congregations who desire to shift their social organization toward the partnership model.

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Julie de Azevedo Hanks, PhD, MSW, LCSW, has 20 years of experience as a clinical social worker in outpatient settings. She founded Wasatch Family Therapy, a private outpatient therapy clinic, where she currently serves as director. She is author of *The Burnout Cure: An Emotional Survival Guide for Overwhelmed Women*, a sought-after speaker and presenter, private practice consultant, media

contributor, top online influencer, and performing songwriter. Hanks' doctoral studies focused on creative systemic studies, cybernetic thought, and wisdom-based transformation in the field of marriage and family therapy. The model outlined in this article is part of her dissertation study *(Pro)Creating: Transforming Constraints to Creative Productivity of Mothers Through a Partnership Model of Family Organization*. Hanks is an active part of the Partnership Learning Community and is a Certified Caring Economy Community Advocate. A native Californian, Hanks currently resides in Salt Lake City, UT with her husband and their four children. Correspondence about this article should be directed to julie@partnershipfamilies.com or on her websites:

JulieHanks.com

WasatchFamilyTherapy.com

PartnershipFamilies.com

PrivatePracticeToolbox.net

HighlyCreativeWomen.com