

# Being AND Doing: The Challenge of Integrating Domains

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**ABSTRACT:** *Over a period of four years, our peer partnership has afforded us deep learning opportunities. In this paper, we reflect on a stage of transition within the original group and bring insights to bear on other participatory situations from which we can learn. Bakan's concepts of agency and communion provide a structure for this reflection. The insight gained is that transitions in relationship between being and doing require articulation of the criteria of association on which each phase of the relationship rests. Such criteria are subjective to the persons concerned, but serve to orient interaction, enabling clearer articulation of purpose and meaning, thereby serving to enhance our understanding and appreciation of the holistic and intentional nature of human relationship.*

*Keywords: Being, doing, group learning, agency, communion, peer partnership, reflective practice*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is one of a series of explorations into aspects of relationship, as experienced in a peer partnership of four people, over a five-year period. Whilst our experience has been one of developing deep understanding of ways of being together, the question arose within our peer partnership as to what contribution prior experience of being together in group relationship made to the capacity for collective action. We had earlier reflected on the difficulties we found in trying to write as a foursome (McMorland et al., 1999). We saw the need to confront the issue of whether or not the very nature of the intimacy we discussed at length in the earlier papers, in fact disabled us from working together effectively on new proposals. This paper reports Susan and Judith's reflections on the challenge of integrating being and doing and proposes that a shift in peer group purpose is difficult without the intentional renegotiation of the criteria of association on which such peer relationship is founded. The influence of Bakan's, (1966) distinction between *agency* and *communion* in informing our discussion is explained and suggested emergent properties of systems of action (doing) and systems of reflection (being) are compared. The paper ends with suggestions as to how the two dimensions of being and doing might be integrated through group process.

## THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSITION

Over the years of the peer partnership we have noted that 'projects' mooted by one or other of us have seldom been taken up. Though enthusiastically talked about, projects such as a daylong meeting for more intentional focussed experimental research, writing together as a foursome, a weekend desert retreat, climbing a mountain, even enrolling in further study together have not happened. The only work related projects that have been successfully completed from within the peer partnership have been the conference presentations and papers given by Susan and Judith. As we are both academics, we are peers within another context. We also noted that the Peer Partnership had lost its energy. Each of us has moved on to new activities. The original focussing question "How do we learn to learn together?" seems to have been exhausted. This experience has stimulated a number of questions. Is there a natural lifespan for a group predicated on a single purpose? Has the Peer Partnership reached this point? Or can the energy of a group be re-animated by new action? What can our experience contribute to knowledge of group process?

Agency and communion are deemed by Bakan (1966) to be dualities of human existence. The communion aspect of peer partnership has been firmly attested to (Byrne & McMorland, 1999; McMorland & Byrne, 1998; McMorland, et al 1999). Given our observation that we chose not to (or did not) make a transition into another

mode of action, we sought to use Bakan's concepts to understand why this was, and to better understand the dynamics of our group. Can transitions be made between communion and agency? Does our experience support the duality of existence to which Bakan refers? Such questions motivated our current inquiry.

In the next section we discuss the relationship between agency and communion as exemplified in the Peer Partnership. First, we revisit our understanding of peer partnership dynamics and, second, expand this understanding through application to different groups within our experience. The purpose of our analysis is to explore the relationship of *being* and *doing* in group process and to suggest a dimension of group transition that may have been overlooked in the literature of group dynamics. The confines of the conference paper permit only a brief statement of our proposition.

## INTEGRATING THE DOMAINS: THE CHALLENGE OF BEING AND DOING IN THE PEER PARTNERSHIP

In our 1998 study we exemplified the cycles of peer relations as we experienced and practised them around the central question of 'How do we learn to learn together?' These are presented in Figure 1. However, we did not spell out the significance of the focusing question for shaping our peer-relatedness in the original diagram (McMorland et al 1999). Our purpose then was to articulate the emergent properties of this system of inquiry, within the dynamics of individual group meetings.

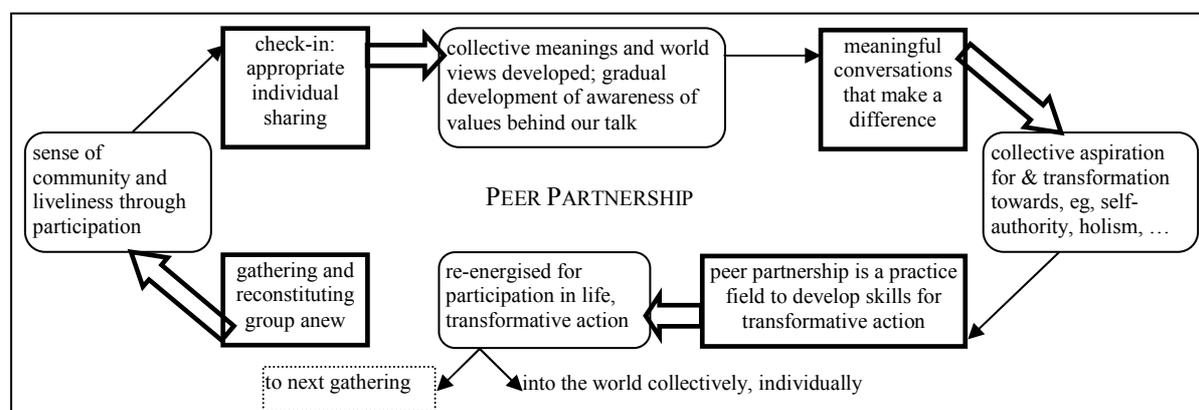


Figure 1. Cycle of Practice and Emergence (from McMorland et al 1999)

In trying to understand the shifts in group focus over time, we have come to appreciate, afresh, the importance of that central concern. Reflecting on how we could work together on projects, we have realised that the criteria on which our original sense of peership was predicated no longer held. The desert experience was suggested by one of us with substantial prior knowledge and experience of wilderness living. The mountain climb would have been more difficult for the women than the men because of fitness levels, health, and age. Conversely, writing papers was problematic for the men who had no experience of academic conferencing. We understood that focusing on different criteria of agency within the group would change the essential ground of our original association and highlight our differences, rather than our equality. We realised a need to reassess the importance of the 'focussing question' in the Peer Partnership as setting the criteria by which we related to both the task of that inquiry, and to each other in the fulfilment of that task. When either the focus of activity or relationship changes within a group, then articulation of the bonds that hold the system of interaction together is needed. Communion was an emergent outcome of our peer partnership activity. We were not, at that time, aware of the need to establish new criteria of association to carry the group forward into new domains of action. This insight has led us to ponder the importance of articulating changes in the criteria of association for any peer-based activity – be it a partnership such as a marriage, a political alliance, a research team, a sports team or a complex arrangement such as a matrix organisation or a new voluntary agency – as activities evolve and relationships and contexts change.

In the peer partnership we learnt the importance (and skill) of withholding judgement. It was the capacity to listen to others' stories from within the story itself that enabled us to 'dive deep' (McMorland & Byrne, 1998) and to appreciate the quality and texture of our intimacy of being-in-relationship. We developed the specific disciplines of the inquiring self, of observing our own thinking as we listened, and of epistemic learning. We also appreciated that the **process** of peer partnership centred on stories we told of ourselves, to ourselves, co-

created within the group. Stories told in the check-in process are stories of the present. We earlier stated that part of the check-in process is “rediscovering ourselves within as much of our lives as we are able to embrace within the present moment of our check-in...the intention is to ...declare the fullness of what each brings so that it may be part of the experience and richness of encounter” (McMorland & Byrne, 1998). We have identified the withholding of judgement as a characteristic of communion within the peer partnership. When the focus is on the quality of being together, there is absence of advice giving, problem solving, or information seeking. When the focus is on agency, such actions are turned on their head: finding a best way to accomplish something practically involves problem solving, and the application of expertise. The process of learning by doing, trial and error, is essentially governed by feedback loops – positive or negative reinforcement, performance appraisal. And focusing on task evokes specialisms, competencies, a division of labour, because we do not stand in relations of equality in our capacity to do things. The assumption that members of a group can move easily from one set of relations to another is, we believe, unjustified, without specific attention being paid to the reconstitution of the grounds of group formation.

Our conclusion, then, on the lack of development within the peer partnership is that we did not at the time recognise the important transition required of the group and so did not make the necessary commitment of time and energy to creating different ways of being and doing. Old habits of relationship prevailed and were not strong or creative enough to carry us forward into new types of activities. In rejecting an outright agentic approach at the outset of the group’s life (McMorland and Byrne, 1998), we discovered the power of communion in freeing us for more authentic relationships as we carried out one specific task. We have also discovered that lack of agency in communal relations can become stifling. Thus we arrive at the proposition that in shifting to a different task, not only is the work of the group different, but the nature of the group itself is changed. Articulating the separate criteria of association required for accomplishing different tasks or phases of group life, recognises the dynamic of group process and gives meaning to the changing patterns of contingent relationship mitigating, thereby, agentic forces that might otherwise override relationship. When doing the task becomes more important than staying in relationship with one another, then human being is vulnerable. When relations preserving being together override issues of effectiveness, the group no longer sustains its capacity for action.

## **COMMUNION /AGENCY TRANSITIONS – FURTHER EXPERIENCES**

Accepting our own experience as a legitimate realm of inquiry, we report four further everyday examples of transitions that have similar categoric shifts to those experienced in the Peer Partnership. We use these to explore further our tentative proposition about the need to articulate new criteria of association for transitions between agency and communion.

### *1. The Women's Support Group*

One of us has been in a women's support group for fifteen years. Throughout that time many major personal transitions were experienced. As the years wore on, energy for the group dwindled as the issues were resolved or accepted. At this time, the idea arose of a book telling the story of the group. It was thought that this would be a satisfying way of celebrating the journey taken by the group, and could be of interest to other women. Many days were spent together telling and retelling the stories. Energy for the group lifted again, and some time was spent in the support role. But this gathering of stories has not yet made it into book form. The fragments lie on computer disks and paper. The skills for such transformation surely are available in the group. Yet the project lies uncompleted. Perhaps it is because the nature of the relationship, the criteria of association have not been articulated for this new phase of the group's life.

In this example, the criteria of association have been established for two different phases of the group’s life: the long period of support, and the shorter period of data gathering. In both these phases, we were equals as participants (except for the one person who left to go overseas). At first we were protagonists in our own journeys; next we were researchers into our own stories. In neither of these phases is experience censored or judged. The writing up phase however requires new tasks of discernment and evaluation – of what should be included, as well as the standard of individual pieces. In the data-gathering phase, we spent a lot of time trying to identify a suitable ‘voice’ or voices for the different things we each and collectively wanted to say. Giving the project, and the group, a name was a significant outcome of the research phase; it also perhaps reinforced the former privacy of our intimate world. Producing a publishable manuscript required putting ourselves into a public domain and being potentially vulnerable as prominent women in a small society. Writing and publishing was therefore a very different task from that which brought us together originally. With the insights gained so far, we can perhaps suggest that the book will only be written if both the nature of the task (what actually needs to be done next) and our respective relationship to that task **and** each other in the doing of it is clearly discerned.

We may have to confront the fact that this no longer is possible as peers, but that peer relations can be established in a future stage.

## *2. The Human Rights Centre project*

This project is still in its infancy, but again the insights gained of the need to make a successful transition from being to doing may be beneficial in moving the group into the next stage. Last year a much respected person in the human rights movement called together a group of like-minded people to discuss the possibility of setting up a not-for-profit Human Rights Centre, to serve as a clearing house for disseminating information to community groups, and as a watchdog to the (then National) government. Several meetings were held in different centres, and with different constellations of people. Gradually the concept was agreed to, a document was produced to aid in seeking funding, e-mail kept the network informed. Specific tasks were agreed to by individuals, but for many reasons, few have been completed. The initiator went overseas on other business, and the momentum has stopped.

In reflecting, as a member of the initial network, on progress with the initiator of the project, one of the current authors suggested that members of the network may no longer have an adequate sense of connection to the project. In the initial meetings our task was to help formulate the concept. At the earliest sessions some doubts were expressed about making a shift between the initiating vision and its implementation. Now as the vision has been expressed, unless new energies are called for, our respective usefulness to the project is uncertain. The network is made up of people with very different levels of expertise in Human Rights concerns. The change to a Labour Government has called the project as first conceived into question: the adversarial issues are less overt; the stance of Government as yet unstated. New criteria of association need to be articulated of task and relationship. This is not the mere listing of tasks. The **relationship** of people of interest and goodwill towards a fluid project needs to be spelled out, in order that the essential collaborative effort can continue. As we are not peers in relation to specific tasks, we must be peers to some more enduring central criteria of equality, for the project to survive, in keeping with the spirit of its inception. The challenge of integrating being and doing is a real one for this group.

## *3. The Cancer Support Group*

One of us has recently been through the horror of cancer and its treatment. A friend called together a support group to share the journey and support the healing in practical, emotional, and spiritual ways. We gathered as a whole group on just three occasions during the year: the initial meeting of about 12 people, a mid-year catch-up and take stock session of about 10 people, and a time of celebration of help given and health restored at the end of the year attended by about 20 people. On no occasion did all the people on the support list ever come together in one place. A fortnightly (email or ordinary mail) report was the principal means of communication and co-ordination.

In this case, the more problematic transition was perhaps from agency to communion. Peerness was established in the offering of support, not in the magnitude of the task undertaken. Task focus and commitment to it was gained right from the start. Coming together for the celebration gathering was an opportunity for more of the group to meet each other. It also gave space for sharing the significance of the journey.

The criteria of association for agency was established largely by the sufferer and the friend who called the group into existence, though this was not deliberately stated. People were oriented to the task of helping, but not perhaps to providing a set of systemic helping relations that could be sustained as needs changed. The celebratory event was wonderful with many significant experiences and insights spoken of, but energy became dissipated by the symbolism of celebration. The on-going life of the group was not maintained, and when the need for practical help gave way to the need for stronger emotional sustenance - people to be with - the transition from agency to communion became problematic. Perhaps too this was parallel to the experience of the sufferer who moved into a different phase of healing at that time, having done well with the physical phase. The need to re-articulate forms of association amongst group participants was not seen at the time.

## *4. Peer Partnership Writing Duo*

Finally it is interesting to consider the process by which papers arising from our peer partnership journey have been written. Although unarticulated at the time, it appears that we have established different criteria of association for both communion and agency phases of action. Each time we write a paper, we first write a brief 'abstract' that captures the area of interest that is to be explored. Then we come together for several two to three hour sessions where we generate ideas, observations, and reflections, making notes as we go. We bring in readings about and experiences of the topic. One of us writes these notes into paragraphs - there is no formation of sections or attention to continuity at this stage. Rather we use the paragraphs as further stimulus for exploring

the intended topic. After three or four such iterations, we review all of what has been written and usually discern the content of the paper and its structure. These seem to emerge from the process of commitment to engagement with each other and with the ideas. Then one of us takes all the material and writes a draft of the paper. The draft is very much an emergent outcome of iterations of action and reflection, but there does have to be a conscious shift from the generative to the completion stage, and differences of role and responsibility emerge. The final phase is the collective review of what we have written and formatting for publication.

Writing emerges from our intentional participation with one another, the process of engaging in reflective inquiry and the challenge of articulating what we discover for a wider audience. The process brings our differences into sharper relief. These do not interrupt the peerness of relationship, but they do have to be managed. Principles of 'just practice' have to be taken into consideration in the devolution of responsibility, in the valuing of one another's contribution, and in the shared accountability to bring the project to satisfactory completion. We sustain the peer relation through committing to the process and having shared the journey together. Whilst we both have similar pressures to publish because of our academic positions, the enterprise of writing is only in part stimulated by external expectation. This is not the sole animating force. By translating our reflections into action, so we learn more of the importance of the quality of our being-in-learning-relationship.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We saw in the Peer Partnership that in the sustained task of inquiring into "How do we learn to learn together" we experienced an integration of being and doing within every cycle of activity. This integration is expressed in a generic manner in Figure 2. What we notice is that when the level and nature of engagement shifts to different types of task, we need to articulate different things about our relatedness. We need to have much more intentionality when this new phase of action commences as a different set of relationships need to be developed, different criteria of association need to be established consciously.

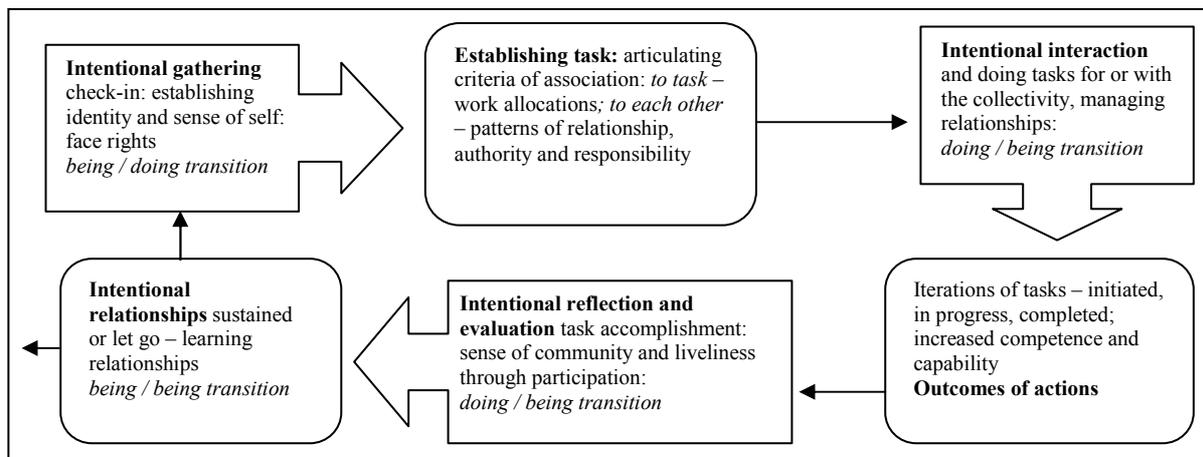


Figure 2: Being/Doing transitions in task group process

In this paper we have argued that the **peer** dimension of relationship is contingent on the criteria of association that shape the group at any point of time or purpose. We understand that in attempting to make a shift of activity within our peer group, we needed to articulate a different foundation, a different organising principle, on which to ground the group. If *peerness* (communion) is important, then the integrity of that has to be re-established in the face of differences (in skill, capability, characteristics) significant to undertaking tasks. If the *task* (agency) is important of itself, then relations amongst us and to that task also have to be specified in terms of named criteria. The criteria themselves cannot be taken for granted or assumed, because it is this that frees us to enter into participation fully. We contend that effective participation in any group situation requires articulation of the shared criteria of association as a starting point.

We have proposed the value of Bakan's concepts in bringing attention to categorical shifts in group activity, and focus. Following Bakan, we have suggested that agency and communion, whilst conceptually separate, need to mitigate one another, for effective group process, and sustainability over time. The challenge is to integrate these two domains so that transitions and developments can be made from the originating area of concern. Specifying the criteria of association which hold the group together establishes the relationships of group

members, to the task and to each other, as these are experienced in both processes of doing and being. Though a simple idea, we suggest this is a dimension of group process that has not been adequately recognised. Other researchers have identified the importance of changing patterns of relationship in group process as the locus of agency shifts. Heron and Reason, for example, in discussing the process of establishing co-operative inquiry groups address the difficult points of transition that groups must negotiate as an initiator-led project becomes one owned by a group of peers (Reason, 1988, 1994; Heron 1996). There are many models of group process indicating different stages of action or life cycle. We, however, are putting emphasis on shifting between domains of human experience. Bakan saw agency and communion as a duality. Following Midgley's (1999) use of Derrida's concept of *différance*, we suggest that the being/doing opposition can be turned into a *différance* grounded on the concept of participation, thus

being/doing  
participation.

Within the Peer Partnership that participation was grounded in our acceptance of one another as peers, inquiring into the authenticity of our own experience. In the other examples cited, participation was similarly values based. In retrospect, each example affords insight into the challenge and importance of integrating, rather than polarising, the domains of being and doing. The art of group process is to bring skills to bear on the articulation of different ways of relating to one another, and the recognition of important moments of transition as tasks change and different agentic capacities are called on.

Over the years, our peer partnership has afforded us deep learning opportunities. In this paper, we have reflected on a stage of transition within the original group and sought to bring insights to bear on other participatory situations from which we can learn. Bakan's concepts of agency and communion provided a structure for this reflection. The insight gained is that transitions in relationship between *being* and *doing* require articulation of the criteria of association on which each phase of the relationship rests. Such criteria are subjective to the persons concerned, but serve to orient interaction, enabling clearer articulation of purpose and meaning, thereby serving to enhance our understanding and appreciation of the holistic and intentional nature of human relationship.

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