

## In a relationship? It's complicated.

Does the term 'partnership' have meaning? Does it accurately describe how we work together? Some thoughts on recent research...

There have been a couple of occasions during my research when gallery staff have told me that they don't see a particular organisational relationship as a *partnership*, but rather they see it as a *collaboration*. Arts practitioners seem to be more at home with the idea of 'collaboration' than they are with 'partnership', perhaps due to the implied formality of the latter. **Circuit** uses the term 'partnership' regularly, although it is accepted that partnership takes many different forms.

As a researcher I have been trying to get to grips with possible models of partnership between arts and youth organisations. In doing this, I've started to question how much time we actually allow ourselves to properly name and define the types of relationships we embark upon.

This week at the British Educational Research Association conference in Belfast, I heard a talk by Dr Richard Davies, Lecturer in Education from Aberystwyth University, titled *Partnership: a philosophical consideration*. He offered some really thought-provoking ideas about the conceptualisation of partnership working in public services (drawing on relationships between youth services and the police). I think these ideas are worth sharing as they encourage partners to think beyond basic descriptions and provide tools with which to critically assess the terms of engagement set out in any given organisational association.

Davies highlights numerous confusions around partnership working and critiques the relatively vacuous use of the term across the public sector. In youth services, there has been a widespread turn towards multi-agency projects and an increase in one-stop shop hubs, where different youth organisations are housed within the same building. He notes the general assumption in youth services that collaboration is the best possible form of working together, while pointing out that organisations based in one-stop shops typically co-exist, but don't work in collaboration.

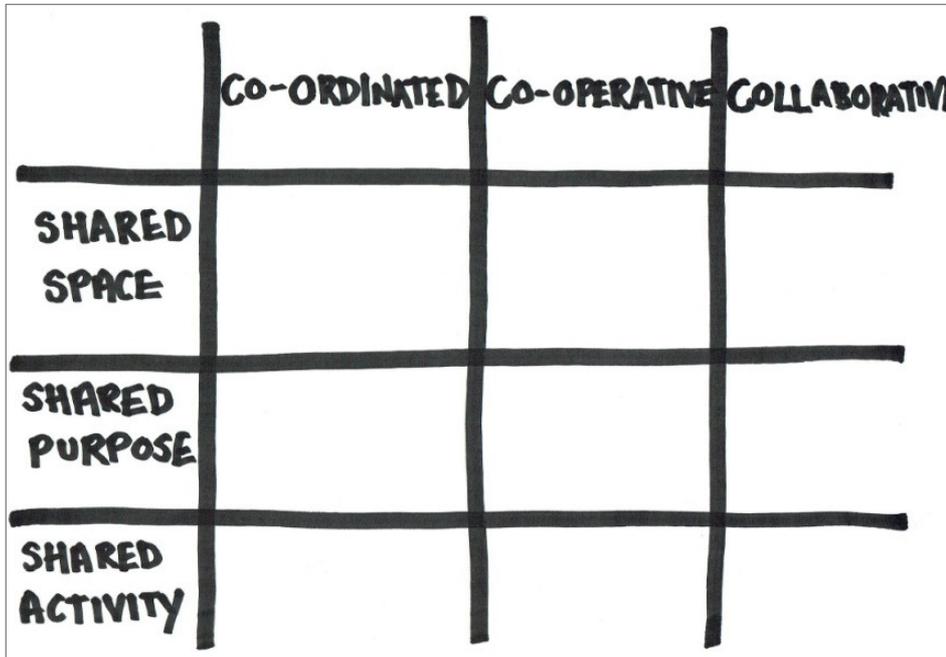
Davies argues that partnership working requires collective agreement on the partnership design, and cites the writing of [Michael E. Bratman](#) (2014) around shared agency to make distinctions between different types of (and contexts for) partnerships. He outlines these distinctions through the following categories:

Types of partnership:

- Co-ordinated
- Co-operative
- Collaborative

Contexts for partnership:

- Shared space
- Shared intentions/purpose
- Shared activity



Davies suggests that the type of partnership formed often depends on the shared dimensions of a union. For instance, the extent to which a partnership is rooted in personal or contractual relationships can have a significant impact. So if a partnership grows out of a friendship between individual professionals (which is often the case in the public sector), there will be shared obligations and accountabilities that pre-exist the partnership, and that lie with those individuals rather than the organisations' wider staff.

Davies breaks down some of the characteristics of key types of partnerships:

**Co-ordinated:** Implies individuals working in a similar arena and co-ordinating their actions in order to achieve their different goals. E.g. youth workers and the police might co-ordinate activity to reach a particular outcome but have no real interest in one another's aims.

**Co-operative:** Refers to different agents working together to achieve BOTH goals, even though they may not be looking to achieve the same goals. E.g. the police could involve themselves in youth work in order to promote youth safety, while youth workers could see engagement with youth safety issues as a means to enhance young people's personal development. So the different agents don't share the same objectives, but they need each other to meet their own objectives.

**Collaborative:** Relates to different agents sharing the same goals, and collaborating to achieve them.

Co-ordinated and collaborative models are partnerships in name only according to Davies. He sees genuine collaboration as a merger of intentions, values and practices, which cannot technically be recognised as a partnership. Collaboration is often held up as the ideal standard, however Davies reasons that well co-ordinated relationships can often prove to be very effective.

Davies explains Bratman's contention that shared agency requires shared intentions, and Davies has designed a matrix (sketched by me above) with which to build upon and flesh out these conceptualisations. However Davies warns that even when a partnership model is clarified and agreed upon at a leadership level, there is often disparity between the design and the actual activity on the ground. When a partnership has organisational leaders working on the activity, the potential for inconsistency is reduced, but when a partnership model is established at the top level, and a lot of freedoms are given to individual agents on the ground, there is potential for discrepancy and confusion. As Davies acknowledges, this problem is exacerbated in services where there is a vertical chain of command, and where there are fundamental imbalances and inequalities between partners.

Davies calls for intelligibility between agents (not necessarily consensus) and seeks to challenge the discourse around partnership, which he sees as being coded in positive (uncritical) rhetoric. By applying philosophical considerations to partnership activity, he believes partners can be prepared to comprehend the commitments and expectations that frame the relationship.

I think Davies' work is particularly useful for informal programmes and services, and I think there are many other examples of co-working practices that could be enriched by greater degrees of intelligibility at all organisational levels (for instance when partnerships are formed by practitioners on the frontline, and there is a lack of investment or understanding at a strategic level).

So I'm interested to follow this up in my writing around **Circuit**, and am keen to hear if practitioners have other concepts and systems that aid their collective understanding of partnership working.

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