

# Exploring Relationships from a Radix Perspective

Narelle McKenzie

## Abstract:

Body psychotherapists have spoken insightfully about our relationships with ourselves. Can attunement to the body enrich our understanding of the process between people? What concepts, what kinds of language, should we use? In this paper, the Radix concept of pulsation is described and discussed and then applied to three case studies to reflect on ways in which thinking and working in this way is effective with couples and relationships.

## The concept of 'Pulsation'

When working with couples or groups of people, conflicts and difficulties always arise. No two people are alike and most of us expect the other to think, feel and behave the way we do. That is what we consider normal and acceptable. The challenge when working in these areas is to develop an approach that fosters the aliveness of all members of the group, whether a large team, a family or a couple.

In Radix practice, a primary concept with which we work is pulsation: the rhythm of the life force. And I have found that both thinking conceptually using this concept and actively working with it to facilitate the pulsation of the individual and the pulsation between individuals to be very effective in addressing issues arising in couple's work and with groups.

What is pulsation? Pulsation is the rhythm of the life force. It essentially has two phases, the instroke or charging phase and the outstroke or discharge phase. On the instroke there is a gathering in of the life force or radix towards the centre or the core of the body. On the outstroke there is a movement out to the periphery of the body towards the world. So the instroke is related to self contact and the outstroke to other contact. If we are going to relate with full aliveness in the world we need both strokes.

In our practices, we see people who are very active in the world and very animated and charming and who have little sense of who they are and what they feel. Such people have placed too much emphasis on the outstroke. When you are around someone like this you have a sense that you can't quite connect with them, or that there is a quality of phoniness or acting to their behaviour.

In contrast, there are other people who know what they feel reasonably well and who are often very sensitive to slight nuances in the environment, but who have a lot of difficulty expressing their knowing in the world. They have self contact but struggle with other contact. Other people can be present or in contact with you but only if they shut off from deepening their aliveness and energy. They can be with you but only if they have a deadpan response towards you. Finally some people keep the overall charge of their pulsation so low that this prevents them from establishing a sense of contact either with themselves or others.

In all of these examples, the pulsation of the life force or radix is blocked. Unknowingly you often can have an intuitive feel for this. Watching performers whether they be dancers, singers or even someone giving a public lecture, you can feel whether the person concerned is comfortable with their pulsation and connected. If they are, there is a sense of engagement and aliveness. If not, you often find your attention wandering.

## **Relationships, Pulsation and Therapy**

Relationships are very difficult for all of us. This is because we struggle with developing a balance between inner and outer contact. In living life fully, our greatest challenge is to maintain a sense of self while wholeheartedly engaging with others.

Most of us have learned to live by restricting our pulsation in some way or another, usually quite unconsciously. Doing so has had its rewards. Usually however, when people present for therapy or growth work they are saying that this old pattern no longer works so well. In Radix training, a large focus of the teaching is on observing, recognizing and working with these different aspects of the pulsations of the body/mind to restore our natural aliveness and the aliveness of the relationship.

The aim of working with pulsation is to get an easy flow from one stroke to the other. In Radix training, there are many ways we learn to enhance this flow. Whatever way we work however, we do so to develop this flow in two directions. We want to establish a flow longitudinally through all the segments of the body unimpeded by the rings of body armor or lack of it. We are also looking for a flow from the inside to the outside and vice versa. A sense of inner contact flowing out to the world. And of the world flowing inward to the core and nourishing it.

In my work with clients both individually and in couples, I am endeavoring to help them build this sense of balance and flexibility of flow.

## **Radix Characterology and Pulsation**

In Radix theory, at least five factors differentiate people and distinguish between character structures and ways of being. These are: the location of the charge, the distribution of the charge, the depth of the charge, the tolerance of the charge and the clients' facility in expressing the charge of the life force or radix.

On this basis, Charles Kelley (1979) identified three character types: the pain blocker, the fear blocker and the anger blocker. There is much debate even within the Radix community about the value of this characterology. However, I find the detailed description of the pulsatory processes involved for each of these character types very effective for shaping some of my interventions and for assisting me to analyze how interactions in sessions get stuck and can be facilitated.

In very general terms, fear blockers block the deepening of the instroke of the pulsation. Anger blockers block the outstroke and pain blockers limit both the instroke and the outstroke. There are also two other important elements in this character theory. The first is the belief that each of these three primary feelings has an antithesis and that blocking one feeling is accompanied by blocks in the antithesis feeling. Anger is paired with love, fear with trust and pain with pleasure. So to block anger implies you are also blocking your intensity of loving. The second is that most people block all three of these emotions and that the important character traits for any individual are determined by which of these emotions are blocked in which part of the body. For example, those blocking fear in the eyes and anger in the chest are quite different from those blocking fear in the eyes and fear in the chest.

## **Applying Pulsation to Couples Work**

There are many different ways that one can use pulsation in working with couples or with a group. In Case 1, I describe how useful it is to simply think in this way when deciding on whom to focus in a first session. In Case 2, I discuss how in working with the pulsation of one partner, I indirectly shift the pulsation of the other. Finally in Case 3, I demonstrate how using the concept of pulsation I directly and consciously change the 'couple pulsation.'

### **CASE 1 - Anne and Barbara. *Working with the concept of pulsation to determine whom to focus on in the session.***

General Introduction. This is my first session with this couple. I saw Anne for individual work a year or so ago. Barbara has just commenced some individual work with me. I am only beginning to understand her process. Anne and Barbara have been in a relationship for eighteen years. The first ten or so were very rocky and on again, off again.

Anne has initiated these sessions because Barbara will be retiring soon and she wants them to start to focus on what they might do to develop and deepen their relationship. She wants Barbara to engage with her, to meet her. They are both honest about who they are. They tell me that they used to have a very symbiotic relationship. They had to do everything together. They have worked hard to accept and acknowledge their differences but now they don't know how to connect in a meaningful and fun way with each other. They just keep getting stuck in a cycle of frustration and they don't know why.

From a Radix perspective. Anne is an anger structure. She has a lot of energy and loves to use her energy. She knows what she wants to do in life but she holds back doing it for fear of being too much for others. Expressing her feelings is always difficult. She hangs on then blows up. This is especially so with anger. Particularly in this relationship, she holds back a lot from expressing what she feels for fear it will overwhelm Barbara. Anne puts a lot of energy into keeping Barbara energised and taken care of. That way she avoids her own feelings. Barbara appears to be a very soft fear structure. She works very hard and is always tired and exhausted. She loves Anne dearly and admires her but has no energy for sex or any real intimacy. Any spare moments she gets from work are spent sleeping.

In a strange way there is an enjoyment of each other and a deep acceptance. They laugh a lot about each other and their peculiarities. So there is a charge between them but it doesn't build or deepen.

What did I do in this particular session? Watching their interactions, I decide to focus on Barbara, the fear structure. I have her settle herself in the chair, ground her feet on the floor and her arms on the arm rest. I then suggest that she take a little time to go inward and connect with herself. Whatever that means to her. She finds it difficult to do especially in the presence of Anne and me. She keeps coming out of this contact and saying to Anne, 'I will do anything that makes you happy' to which Anne replies, with increasing exasperation, 'I don't want you to do that.' I keep bringing Barbara back to her own experience. In quite subtle ways she uses humour and seduction to try and shift the focus back on Anne and Anne's needs. Anne becomes more and more despairing.

### **An analysis from the perspective of pulsation.**

When Anne and Barbara arrive for the session, all the charge is with Anne. Barbara is physically present in the chair but there is little sense of presence. Anne is the one who has proposed having the sessions and Barbara is used to Anne doing the work in their relationship. I can see that this pattern could very easily repeat itself in this session. When I ask Barbara why she is there, it is because she wants to make Anne happy. Anne keeps coming back to this sense of wanting to 'be met.'

From a Radix perspective, a number of criteria have to have to be fulfilled for an individual to feel 'met.' Firstly, both people in the relationship have to have a sense of self separate from the other. This is created by each of them sustaining and containing a reasonable charge within their body. They also need to be able to discharge in a manner that matches the intensity of the discharge of the other person whilst staying in contact with themselves and the other person. I have strong doubts about Barbara's ability to do this. Primarily I doubt whether Barbara has enough charge in her body to have a strong sense of self. If Anne shares what she wants from Barbara, Barbara will agree to do it, just to make Anne happy but I am not sure that there will be a sense of 'being met' that Anne wants because Barbara struggles to be present in what she does.

Initially Barbara is a bit shocked at my focus on her and my persistence in wanting to know about her experience. She is used to deflecting this attention elsewhere. She doesn't find my interest intrusive or hostile just unfamiliar and therefore uncomfortable. As the session progresses, it becomes obvious that Barbara really doesn't know what she wants. She can't meet Anne because there is 'nothing' there or rather that her inner charge is so low on the periphery of her body and even in the core that she has little awareness of herself. Charge brings awareness and consciousness. I don't think I have met anyone with so little charge. Barbara is quite overweight for her height and bone structure and I suspect that the weight is what gives her a sense of her being. Barbara shares that she looks forward to going home to be with Anne. She 'charges' up in Anne's nurturing presence. Even driving home imagining this contact energises her. But when she arrives home she doesn't want to give anything out or back. She wants to cocoon herself with the charge she receives from Anne.

### **The immediate result of the intervention.**

Anne is shocked at hearing and experiencing Barbara's experience and is also quite moved. Her habitual way of dealing with this is to get angry and frustrated. Of course that only makes it more difficult for Barbara to connect with herself. I don't think Anne has realized, before this session, that Barbara really doesn't have any idea what she wants. It isn't that Barbara is being deliberately difficult. She actually doesn't know. She finds it too hard to keep the focus on self long enough to build any charge and has developed ways to leak off the charge when it occurs. It also clarifies why she is such a workaholic. Her only sense of self occurs when she meets others demands. At work, people keep demanding and she keeps producing.

Towards the end of the session, Anne cries and Barbara is touched by this. Her face softens and she is able to have some soft eye contact with Anne. For a moment there is a coming together. Barbara can't believe that it matters so much to another person that she takes the time to focus on herself and her own process.

**CASE 2 - Lisa and Richard. *Working with the pulsation of one partner indirectly effects the pulsation of the other partner.***

General Introduction. Lisa and Richard came to see me about not being able to connect with each other in any meaningful way. Lisa wanted Richard just to be there for her. Richard had a script that this meant being a good provider, and giving Lisa anything she asked for. Any expression of desire from Lisa was interpreted as yet another need he had to meet. The more he did this the more frustrated she became. He didn't understand what he was doing wrong.

From a Radix perspective, Lisa is probably a high energy unbounded structure. Basically this means that she is a fear structure but presents in first encounters as an anger structure in terms of her energy output. This is a confusing structure: at the core, Lisa uses contact to charge just like the fear structure does, but this gets glossed over by her apparent high energy. Richard is a pain blocker. He grinds away at work and life with not much pleasure, but with high ideals about how life should be and how he should be in it. He postpones pleasure for the moment when he has achieved certain goals, but never achieves them because he has such high standards for himself that there are always more goals to satisfy.

With this couple there is a sense of a pulsation between them but the boundaries of the pulsation are blurred. By this I mean that for each of them the boundary of their own pulsation is very permeable. There is very little sense of separateness. This results in both of them experiencing being overwhelmed by or of overwhelming the other. Lisa overwhelms Richard every time she expresses a desire. He doesn't experience her desires as something separate from him. Rather he experiences it as something he has to fulfill. So Richard is chronically overwhelmed. Both of them have difficulty connecting with each other in a contained but present way.

What I do in this particular session? This is about the fourth or fifth session. In this session, Lisa once again is complaining about how Richard is not there for her. Richard is completely overwhelmed by this. He pulls back and spaces out in his eyes. His body stiffens and basically he starts a process of dissociation. He is sitting in the chair but he is no longer present. He is pretending to be for a while. Then he starts to cry and express how overwhelmed he feels. This is an habitual response of Richard's which usually results in Lisa either backing off or going away frustrated. I ask him what is happening. He immediately starts to tell me all the reasons why he can't be there for her. He starts with current demands in his life and then goes back into his childhood past and reports all the reasons his psychiatrist has given him as to why this is so difficult for him. I let him continue to cry but at the same time I suggest that he pull his chair up so that he is sitting facing Lisa. I instruct him to feel his feet on the ground, to breathe some gentle easy breaths in and out and to make silent eye contact with her. When he feels he is going away he is to close his eyes and simply withdraw into himself. When he feels ready to come out and make contact again he is to do just that. He says he can't do this as this will make her more angry. I tell him that we will deal with this if and when it happens. He does as I say. It takes some time for him to really tune into his rhythm of contact. A couple of times I comment that I notice him going away when he doesn't notice and he agrees and closes his eyes. With permission to go and come as he feels however, as the time progresses, he is more able to just sit and be with Lisa. Lisa stays in the process with him and appears to be enjoying this contact. He starts to cry quite deeply. He is deeply affected by her enjoyment and at how simple what she wants can be. His eyes are now mostly open and in contact with Lisa.

Lisa then starts to shift around a little uncomfortably in her seat. She is not used to this amount of contact from Richard. I can feel that she is about to defend by demanding something more. When I ask her what is happening, she admits that getting this contact is

actually quite challenging for her too and that she too is getting uncomfortable and needs to break the contact. He then reaches out to her with his hands. It doesn't feel anymore that the contact problem is only his.

### **An analysis from the perspective of pulsation.**

I set out to teach Richard how to develop a sense of a boundary on his contact and the demands of others. He finds it very difficult to stay with his own rhythm when he is in contact with another person. In his childhood he was always expected to be there for his suffering mother and would be punished if he wasn't. The only way he has learned to establish a boundary to regain a sense of self is to isolate himself, especially by working very hard. Then of course he becomes very lonely. What is interesting and also obvious but isn't of primary concern for me at the time, is that in establishing this pulsation for himself, Richard highlights difficulties that Lisa has with contact and boundaries as well.

### **CASE 3 - Bob and Hailey. *Working with the 'couple' pulsation actively in session.***

General Introduction: Bob originally came to see me for individual work. He had left his first marriage and was experiencing considerable depression and guilt about the separation and consequent divorce. Soon after he decided to leave his marriage and before he actually did, he became involved with Hailey. Hailey has seen me for quite a number of individual sessions. They went overseas and whilst there decided to get married. They then came to see me as a couple.

Hailey and Bob are a professional couple. They are both accustomed to being seen as competent and intelligent. Both are in their own way quite guarded about letting anyone be close and very uncomfortable with expressing their feelings. Hailey is especially against the expression of any 'negative' feelings like anger. She is very pragmatic and rational in her view about things. Bob is more of a dreamer. He felt very controlled in his first marriage and didn't want to be in this position again. Both of them find it very difficult to be direct about what they want. Bob attempts to get his way with charm. Hailey will not express what she wants directly and then sulks or is angry if she doesn't get it. She expects Bob to 'know' intuitively what she needs.

They are a couple full of contradictions, but despite all of the above, both are committed to creating a marriage that is expansive and which enables both of them to grow and change. Bob in particular longs for a relationship that is truly intimate.

From a Radix Perspective. In terms of Radix character structure, Bob is a fear structure with a strong overlay of pain in the upper segments of his body. In his individual sessions, I work a lot with slowly deepening his capacity to build and tolerate an instroke, his ability to take in. This terrifies him. When he was first able to achieve this he would sob deeply. As this developed in several of his individual sessions, he experienced extreme terror. He had no cognitive understanding of this or any past memories that made sense of it. When pressured or feeling intruded upon he uses anger as a superficial defence. Around Hailey, Bob is very contained in his pulsation. He has very little eye contact, he loses his sense of grounding (reality contact) and his body is constantly on alert guarding against her. In sneaky ways he seeks to have lots of independence from her but longs for a deep sense of contact with her.

Hailey is an anger structure. She too is very contained around Bob. Her body is quite rigid and her muscles tight. She often has a thin grim look about her mouth. She finds it very

hard to stay centered in herself. Her focus is outside herself. Around Bob she is constantly out loud accusing him of not doing something right. In contrast, she spends all her efforts trying to please him and then is angry when he doesn't notice or wants something different. She never expresses this anger directly. She looks at Bob but cannot soften her eyes and let Bob in. She finds it very difficult to soften in any way around him and limits her expressiveness when in his presence.

In sessions there is very little ease in the pulsation between them. Not much sense of a flow. My main aim is to break the containment so that both of them can experience more fullness in the relationship.

What did I do in session? In this session, Hailey reports that Bob is aggressive around home. When I enquire what she means by this it turns out that if he has a bad day at work, he comes home and thumps the paper or bangs a door. He has never been violent towards her and she has no fear of this. However she wants him to come home calm and even-tempered.

When I ask her what she feels when he is 'aggressive' she reports that she simply shuts down. I ask her to demonstrate this to me. She tightens her mouth, clenches her toes, breathes in and then holds her breath on the inhale, and stiffens. This is very characteristic of her. When someone does something she doesn't like it is her chronic position to shut down her own pulsation on the outstroke. As she does this she says to herself 'I can contain why can't he.'

In session, I have Bob walk around being noisy and loud. Banging cushions and shouting. I then have her exaggerate how she pulls all her energy in and becomes hostile in her head. We then work with this. I have her stand and ground her feet into the floor. Relax her knees and shake her body. The next thing is to encourage her to breath into her belly and her chest and to begin to fling her arms around in the air a little. We start gradually and soft and then build it to a stronger more powerful movement. This with some encouragement from me develops into her dancing and beginning to sing. Suddenly she says that she is not much aware of Bob banging the cushions and shouting. He in fact becomes quite distracted by what she is doing and stops doing it. He starts laughing and enjoying her. This encourages her to dance more expressively.

We talk about this a little and I suggest that she practices discharging her own energy more around the house. Not feeling that she has to be subdued all the time. She goes away willing to try. She is also amazed that Bob doesn't get upset or is angry. He says in fact that he has enjoyed seeing her having a good time and that it gives him permission to join her.

### **An analysis from the perspective of pulsation.**

The main thing I did here is break the contained pulsation. Not only the contained pulsation of each individual but the containment of the pulsation between them. I could have worked with Bob to come home and be more considerate but this would only have increased the contained pulsation that existed within each of them and between them. To be less contained Hailey needs to discharge. However she needs to discharge in a way that isn't going to cause her more problems. She is still very frightened of her body and of letting go. She has experienced her mother really losing it with anger from time to time and she doesn't want to be like that. So she not only needs to discharge but she needs to have a sense of having a boundary of some kind with the discharge. From her previous work, I know that she experiences her body as a container and that she can express herself more with sound and movement but she is not ready for anger. Also in terms of the 'couple pulsation,' if she gets

angry at Bob that just pushes Bob away more into his shell. They have been through that interaction many times unsuccessfully.

Bob on the other hand needs to charge and have contact. In arriving home, and thumping the cushions, he appears to be discharging but most probably is charging. We have talked about this in his individual sessions. That is, as he hits there is probably more emphasis on the inbreath than the outbreath. He is home. In a 'safe place' and can let in to some of what he feels. Having worked with him for a while I am also aware that he wants most to reach out and have contact with Hailey but doesn't know how. His mother experienced years of deep pain when he was a child and burdened him with it. So to see Hailey dancing and having fun is an extreme relief for him. It makes it possible for him to reach out for some contact with her. Touch also of course is often very charging.

### **Concluding Remarks and Evaluation**

Some possible pitfalls with the cases discussed. Not all of my sessions with these couples are body oriented but in my thinking in session and out of session, I am very aware how much my Radix training has influenced my practice. Of course there are no easy solutions. For example, in Case 1, the challenge will be to develop Anne's ability to maintain her aliveness whilst Barbara takes her time building a sense of self contact and charge. It will also be important for Anne to focus on her own feelings and not be drawn into Barbara's struggles as a distraction. This feels quite challenging to her. It will take considerable time before Barbara will develop a strong sense of self and Anne may become impatient but right now they stress that they are committed to staying together. There is also always the need to stay alert to the fact that one partner in the couple is not doing the work for both of them. I find I have to watch this with Hailey and Bob. My valency is to work with Hailey's energy so that she can be there for Bob. For purposes of simplicity, I am also aware that the dynamic I haven't discussed in this paper of course is my own structure and its effect on the pulsation of the session.

### **The general applicability of body psychotherapy to relationships.**

I am fortunate that I am a registered psychologist and so when I do body work with couples they often think this is just part of a normal psychological consultation and not something alternative and weird. I am aware however, that doing bodywork with couples is most effective when I have worked with each partner in the couple individually. Then I have a much better understanding of their process and so more easily can see how it effects the pulsation of the couple. This is demonstrated in Case 3 with Hailey and Bob. Both of them have done considerable individual work with me and they trust me enormously. It would be very difficult to intervene in this way with some other couples I have seen with whom I do not have this relationship.

Radix work has not emphasized work with relationships. Hopefully this paper will contribute to the development of this direction.

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Narelle McKenzie is the Director of the Australian Radix Training Centre. She completed her Radix training in the USA in 1982 and was invited to become a trainer in 1988. She is a registered psychologist with over twenty years experience working in private practice with adults, adolescents, families, couples and groups. She has a Masters degree in developmental psychology and extensive experience in and training in psychotherapy. She has led experiential and training workshops in body psychotherapy in the USA and Australia and has taught courses in in these areas at graduate and undergraduate level at Universities in Australia. She can be contacted at [narellemckenzie@internode.on.net](mailto:narellemckenzie@internode.on.net)