The Dynamics of Interorganizational Collaborative Relationships: Introduction

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1. Introduction

In all spheres of life, relationships among public and private organizations are built in order to deal with complex societal problems and to address economic challenges that cannot be dealt with by single organizations. The world has become interconnected, and many new organizational forms, such as strategic alliances, public–private partnerships, and networks have seen the light of day (e.g., Castells 2009). Because of the interdependencies, interorganizational collaboration is essential, yet working across organizational boundaries is far from simple. It involves a multitude of different organizations, each having its own interests, perspectives, and identities while also varying in power and size. Further, the societal problems that are dealt with often are wicked. The complexities are of a strategic, informational, procedural, yet also of a relational nature as in the end collaborating is a social activity that involves social systems.

The social and relational side of collaborating across organizational boundaries has been addressed by authors such as Barbara Gray (Gray 1989; Gray and Purdy 2018), Chris Huxham, and Siv Vangen (Huxham 1996; Huxham and Vangen 2005). Gray was among the first to introduce the term "collaboration" in this context, describing the conditions for engaging in collaboration and formulating which phases can be discerned in interorganizational work and what tasks need to be dealt with in each of these. Huxham and Vangen wrote about "collaborative advantage" (a very apt term in the world of management and organization where "competitive advantage" dominates the thinking) and "collaborative inertia" (making tangible that collaboration can be painfully slow and can even get stuck). They also described, among other themes, the dynamics of trust building as well as the meaning and nature of leadership where positional authority is absent (Vangen and Huxham 2003; Huxham and Vangen 2000).

The innovative research by Gray and Huxham on the social and relational aspects of collaboration has inspired a lot of research, affecting domains such as public administration, organization theory, project management, regional development studies, and supply chain management, to name but a few. Studies are nowadays being conducted on, for example, trust and its development (e.g., Swärd 2016), on the social and discursive practices in complex collaboration (Van Marrewijk et al. 2016), on joint sense making (Merkus et al. 2016), on action learning in collaboration (Coghlan and Coughlan 2015), on the social dynamics during interorganizational gatherings (for example Sharma and Kearins 2011; Solansky et al. 2014), on the deeper emotional dynamics of such multiparty encounters (Prins 2010), on collective and collaborative leadership (Ospina and Foldy 2010; Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010), and on the effect of intra-organizational dynamics on interorganizational dynamics (Brattström and Faems 2019). Still, attention to the human and relational side of interorganizational collaboration is not overwhelming, while a deeper understanding of the relational dynamics seems crucial. A well-developed psychological perspective seems especially absent.

This special issue focuses on the relational complexities of interorganizational collaboration, captured by the term dynamics. Dynamics in this context refers to: (a) the social and psychological processes (and their emotional foundations) that occur when organizations and their representatives interact to engage in cross-boundary or collaborative work (e.g., trust and distrust, intergroup stereotyping and conflict, conflict avoidance, inclusion and exclusion of stakeholders, power dynamics, leadership emergence)—occurring both within the participating organizations and between these organizations, as well as (b) the development of these processes over time, in view of external and internal events and/or as a consequence of deliberate interventions to enhance collaborative success. Thus, the emphasis is on the quality of experienced human interactions in interorganizational collaborative processes and the development thereof. The perspective put forward is largely (social and organizational) psychological and sociological, both in terms of understanding the group and intergroup processes as well as efforts to intervene to develop collaborative relationships, based on action research and an organizational development (OD, e.g., Cummings and Worley 1993) approach.

2. Interorganizational Collaboration and Its Dynamics

Interorganizational collaboration refers to the relational processes that emerge when two or more legally independent organizations engage in when coming together to deal with their interdependencies regarding a certain problem domain. They (ideally) jointly define the problem and from there arrive at a joint goal that also serves the interests of the participating organizations. In order to define and realize such a joint goal, the parties need to work with and capitalize on the diversities that are constituted by the organizations' different interests, perspectives, identities, power positions, sectors, and other differences that are relevant to their jointly defined task (Gray 1989; Gray and Purdy 2018; Huxham and Vangen 2005; Bouwen and Taillieu 2004; Vansina et al. 1998; Schruijer and Vansina 2008).

Thus, interorganizational collaboration:

- Involves two or more legally independent parties;
- Is a multilevel process, simultaneously taking place at various system levels, namely, among individuals with their idiosyncratic make-ups and experiences (individual and interindividual level), individuals who also act as representatives of their respective organizations, having their own organizational interests (intra-organizational and interorganizational level), who during their interorganizational meetings make up a temporary group (group level), and all this in a larger context that influences the interorganizational system and is influenced by it;
- Consists of participating organizations that are interdependent with respect to a particular problem domain (while all interdependencies are generally not known fully from the start, and neither is it known from the very beginning who all the stakeholders are, thus participation may shift over time);
- Implies jointly defining a problem domain and from there developing a joint goal—a goal that also is expected to serve the stakeholders' individual interests;
- Is a developmental process where relationships are built, identities and interdependencies are explored, trust is developed, and a collaborative climate is jointly shaped;
- Occurs without positional authority as the interorganizational system jointly defines and works towards the collaborative agenda and thus governs itself (while of course roles may be taken up, such as being a chairperson, yet such roles serve the common purpose);

Organizes itself as it moves from an underorganized state towards a commonly defined goal, jointly developed collaborative climate, self-governance, mutually explored and accepted roles, and validated difference.

These characteristics of successfully collaborating across organizational boundaries are difficult to realize. Collaboration is a complex endeavor, considering the often wicked nature of the issues at hand, the multiple interdependencies, the number of parties and their differences, and the underorganized nature of the setting. Working with difference, a key element of collaboration, is far from simple—and

neither is being able to tolerate the complexities and ambiguities involved. The tensions may be very difficult to contain or to address, and can get played out relationally. Rather than realizing that the complexity of the task gives rise to relational tensions, and giving space to ventilate emotions and jointly working these through, the tensions have a tendency to go underground and from there undermine the necessary relationship building. Collaboration, although genuinely wanted by stakeholders, simultaneously invokes conscious and unconscious emotional, relational, and political processes that pose various challenges to the social system (Gray 1989; Huxham and Vangen 2005; Gould et al. 1999; Prins 2010; Schruijer and Vansina 2008; Schruijer 2008).

Stresses and concerns that are experienced (although they may not be attended to at the time) evolve around a number of questions and uncertainties. For example: How can diversity be acknowledged or embraced when people fear "the other" and seem to universally value commonality? Is it safe to bring in one's uniqueness without being rejected or excluded? How can interdependence be accepted when trust between parties has not been built yet? How can trust be built where it is absent or even when distrust dominates? How can one be collaborative while also addressing one's own needs? How can one become part of the whole while keeping one's identity? How can one's role be taken up without knowing whether one's point of view will be accepted by the others? Who is the first party to make a move in a trust building process? Given the ambiguity and complexity, how should one cope with the unknown, uncertainty, and tentativeness, without feeling lost or overwhelmed and without succumbing to overorganizing or oversimplifying? How can the felt need or persistent call for a "strong leader" be resisted? How should one behave when one has little power vis-a-vis the other parties—be visible with the risk of being rejected, or, stay quiet and risk being overlooked?

These challenges, concerns, and fears come together at the collaboration table, where representatives meet so as to explore their possibilities to work together. Such representatives face a difficult task; on the one hand, they need to strike up relationships with the other representatives and build mutual trust (and manage their own tensions as a result of facing diversity), while on the other hand they are simultaneously monitored by their constituencies who want to make sure that the organizational interests are served (and who are not part of trust building or relational development and thus may not be able to correct the distorted images they have of the other organization(s)). Such dual conflicts enhance the pressure and anxieties that are felt by the representatives, who have to work with the complexity and ambiguity, as well as develop a shared goal and a shared strategy. Thus, collaboration takes place in relation to the other representatives, yet also in relation to one's own constituency. The difficulties entailed by working across organizational boundaries become clear in frequently observed phenomena such as premature closure, dissatisfaction with the process and outcomes, suboptimal performance, a climate of distrust, stereotyping, scapegoating, win–lose behavior, positional bargaining, collusion (where any conflict, even constructive conflict, is avoided (Gray and Schruijer 2010; Schruijer 2018)), and power games (Gray 1989; Schruijer and Vansina 2008).

An illustration of the relational complexities of working across organizational boundaries is provided by the observations of what happens during a simulation, that has been played for approximately a hundred times over the last 25 years, as part of open professional development programs and in-company workshops (Vansina et al. 1998; Schruijer and Vansina 2008; see also Curşeu and Schruijer 2018, this issue). It is based on real events concerning economic, social, and ecological challenges in a particular region and involves seven stakeholders. The participants (around 20 to 25 in number), experienced managers and consultants, are eager to learn experientially about the relational dynamics of working across organizational boundaries. They are distributed over the seven stakeholders according to their preference and are asked to identify as much as possible with the interests of the assigned party and try to be themselves (rather than play a role). No assignment is given—it is up to the participants how they want to spend their time (compete, collaborate, self-isolate, come to an agreement or not, etc.). The set program caters for two type of meetings: so-called "visiting", during which they are allowed to meet but never more than three parties simultaneously, and "town hall meetings" where all parties can, if they want to, come together in one room where

one representative per party can take a place at a table while the constituency can sit behind him or her. The simulation lasts for more than a full day, while the second day is spent jointly reviewing the dynamics so as to come to an understanding what happened and why.

The group and system dynamics that emerge are generally quite intense and provide for some, as it is called, "unhappy learning" (Ketchum and Trist 1992). While at the beginning of the review the participants generally are fairly happy with the outcome and their own performance, these impressions give way for different and sometimes more confrontational understandings as the joint review progresses. The joint review, after having stepped out of the "heat", helps participants to slowly see the whole system dynamics and their own role in it, to which they seemed blinded during the simulation.

Some frequent dynamics that can be observed (for more information see Vansina et al. 1998; Schruijer and Vansina 2008; Schruijer 2015; Curşeu and Schruijer 2020) are the following:

- A win–lose and distrustful climate develops quickly from the start, even before parties have a chance to meet one another;
- This climate may be played out openly or covertly;
- If this climate is not overcome, it can end in a confrontational power game;
- Alternatively, another (unconscious) dynamic seems to take over, namely one of "pussyfooting", in which conflict avoidance seems to have become the overall purpose, providing for a shared illusion that the participants are collaborating well.
- An interesting dynamic between the public authorities, one of the stakeholders and the other (private) parties, is that the public authorities almost immediately proclaim themselves to be the facilitating and chairing party. The other parties almost never question this, or even call for the public authorities to take a lead. The public authorities mostly truly intend to facilitate the process, yet halfway, mostly too late, realize they are not interest-free, thus not neutral, and have transformed into a manager or director of the process.

Other common observations pertain to:

- The failure to come to a joint problem definition;
- Working with vague shared goals only, that seem to resist any attempt at concretization;
- That hardly any process interventions are made during the simulation;
- That if adequate process interventions are made, the dynamics can change.

Comparable dynamics can also be observed in real-life cross-boundary work, as testified by the many participants of the simulation but also by (action) research conducted in ongoing multiparty projects (e.g., Gray 1989; Huxham and Vangen 2005; Sharma and Kearins 2011; Solansky et al. 2014; Gray and Purdy 2018; Schruijer 2020). It is striking that, despite genuine intentions to collaborate as well as obvious possibilities for parties to add value to one another by collaborating, relational dynamics are triggered anyhow, which jeopardizes the development of truly collaborative relationships. If these dynamics are unacknowledged, remain unaddressed, and are ineffectively handled, it will be very hard for collaboration to be successful. It is therefore necessary, in our networked world, to gain more understanding of the relational dynamics of interorganizational collaboration and to find ways to intervene for the better.

Interventions that are carried out from an OD or a systems-psychodynamic perspective have been developed and are used to stimulate interorganizational collaboration (e.g., Prins 2010; Schruijer 2020). This literature points to the importance of installing the appropriate conditions that are conducive for collaboration (such as creating a holding and containing environment and establishing a minimal structure (Vansina and Vansina-Cobbaert 2008). It also suggests the design and implementation of various interventions such as creating a transitional space (Amado and Ambrose 2001) during which stakeholders can become aware of their relational tensions and their behaviors and through joint review can bring about change (making use for example of multi-stakeholder working conferences),

adopting practices to learn from the collaborative experiences (through joint reflection (Vansina 2005)) and helping protagonists work with the diversity, complexity, and ambiguity (for example through process consultation (Schein 1988)).

3. The Special Issue

This special issue consists of seven articles that address the dynamics of collaborating across organizational boundaries. The authors present research on group and intergroup processes while collaborating and on dynamics as they evolve over time, whereas one paper reports on interventions to develop collaborative relationships. The contributions come from Belgium, England, Scotland, Finland, Romania, and The Netherlands, demonstrating that the dynamics of interorganizational relationships have captured the (research) interests across Europe. Some deal with cross-sector relationships, while three papers focus on the care sector. Three articles are written from an action research perspective, where the researchers engage in research with organizations rather than on organizations (see also Huzzard et al. 2000). Two papers are based on questionnaire data collected during simulations. The research approach in these papers is quantitative and seems more "traditional", yet the simulations are embedded in a context where there is ample time created for joint sense-making of the experienced dynamics (and are reported elsewhere). The special issue furthermore contains one theoretical paper that presents a conceptual framework, developed for empirical and practical ends, and finally, as mentioned, one paper is written from the perspective of practitioners. The individual contributions are the following.

The theoretical contribution by Dewulf and Elbers (2018) is a conceptual analysis of power dynamics in cross-sector partnerships. They argue that partnerships are not a panacea for solving complex issues as power imbalances are very likely to exist, and as a consequence, low-power parties are likely to be excluded or not have their interests served. A conceptual framework is developed on power and power asymmetries and how these affect the processes and outcomes of cross-sector partnerships, using various disciplinary perspectives (organizational psychology, business and management, governance literature). A central tenet is that context, namely the interplay of institutional fields and issue fields, determines what type of power can be exercised in and over cross-sector partnerships. Direct power is exercised in cross-sector partnerships through the deployment or withholding of resources, drawing on discursive legitimacy and (subtly) claiming authority, while power is exercised indirectly over cross-sector partnerships through setting the rules of the game (e.g., with respect to participation, defining the agenda, decision-making) and thus determining the latitude for within-partnership outcomes and dynamics (the power to set these rules are determined, again, by resources, discursive legitimacy, and authority). Dewulf and Elbers hope that their framework is used in empirical research, as well as by actors to decide whether or not to participate in partnerships.

Craps et al. (2019) present a relational approach to leadership in the context of multi-actor governance. Their work is based on a relational approach to organizational life (e.g., Hosking 2006) and on complexity leadership theory that has been developed understanding leadership within organizations (e.g., Uhl-Bien et al. 2007), leaving the focus on individual leaders and leadership positions aside. Uhl-Bien's ideas are worked with to comprehend leadership processes and practices between organizations. The case presented involves a landfill mining initiative in Belgium, with actors from government, civil society, business, and the university. The authors focus on the interactions during meetings and explore how group developmental processes and trust building are aided by relational leadership practices. They describe how administrative, adaptive, and enabling leadership practices help shape the developmental process. They argue that enabling leadership is central in coming to a joint understanding and common purpose and point to their own role as action researchers as they engage in enabling practices (bringing the diverse parties and their viewpoints together, facilitating an open dialogue, and creating space for reflection).

Cropper and Bor (2018) present a case study of an association of organizations providing pediatric services in the United Kingdom (general hospitals, specialist hospitals, community service, and primary

care trusts). The authors draw on meta-organization theory (Ahrne and Brunsson 2005) to explore the evolution of the membership composition and its effects on the "character" of the association (phrased as the "compositional dynamics"). The association's compositional dynamics and their relation to the institutional environment over the course of 17 years are described, based on the reading of annual reports. A meta-organization is an association of organizations, different from a network as members are similar rather than different and hierarchy and boundedness are stronger than in networks. Moreover, changes of the association are, according to the theory, less a consequence of external events than of the internal relationships between the member organizations and the meta-organization. The authors' findings pose some challenges for meta-organization theory as it appears that the composition, at least in this case, is more diverse (in identity and in activity) than meta-organization theory would expect. Further, the institutional environment and the association's internal dynamics were more closely intertwined than the theory states; the boundaries of the association are more fluid than assumed. The findings thus contribute to a further development of meta-organization theory.

Hujala and Oksman (2018) report on the emotional dimensions of integrated care, based on the experiences of care professionals and care managers, working in cross-boundary teams, when delivering services to clients with multiple complex health and social care problems. Servicing the latter clients requires collaboration between services in primary health care, specialized health care, and social care as well as between professions (nurses, doctors, social workers). The article is based on a large action research project in Finland where complete integration of health and social care is to be realized in 2021. Adopting an emotional labor perspective (e.g., Mann 2005), the authors reanalyzed interviews conducted with managers and professionals, as well as problem analyses conducted by the cross-boundary teams. The main findings are that being a multiple problem client and being a care professional working with these clients give rise to various emotions and that the emotional burden increases as a consequence of ineffective cross-boundary collaboration. Further, care professionals experience difficulties in handling the diverse emotions, leading to avoiding emotions, which can hinder a deeper engagement with the client so that needed services remain unknown or may lead to quickly passing the client on to someone else. While the emotional burden may be shared, rules with respect to how to engage with emotions differ between professions. Finally, the authors noted the occurrence of power dynamics, stereotyping, and territorial behavior.

Kennedy et al. (2019) also write about the integration of health and social care, but now as it happens in Scotland and from the perspective of practitioners, who were contracted to support the process of learning to collaborate across organizational boundaries. The authors describe the principles underlying their approach, couched in organization development, action research thinking, and system psychodynamics. Working with 10 health and social care partnerships across Scotland, they aimed at helping the participants (care professionals and managers) understand how the development of interorganizational relations affected themselves and their teams and, in turn, how they affected the wider organizational system. To illustrate their actual way of working in this project, the events and dynamics within one partnership are described in more detail. Six practices are formulated that in the authors' view are helpful in creating the conditions for successful collaboration: suspending disbelief that "it will not work", having experienced so many earlier organizational changes; coming to a shared purpose; developing a sense of accountability to the shared purpose; exploring diversity, developing relationships, and building trust; designing structures that fit the purpose; leadership that is courageous and willing to work with the whole system.

Fodor et al. (2018) studied the effect of trust enhancement (creating a positive distinction between expected trust in one's own party, compared to expected trust in the other parties) on the expected and actually experienced stakeholder's centrality in a multiparty system, using a social network perspective. To test their prediction (that trust enhancement has a positive effect on centrality) the authors developed a multiparty task, simulating the decision making of six stakeholders that had one day to reach a consensus decision on Romanian educational policy. Altogether 239 students participated (54 groups, distributed over nine runs of the simulation), who took part in a course on learning about group and

intergroup dynamics (these dynamics were reflected upon after the simulation ended). Data were collected at four points in time (at the first point perceptions on trustworthiness were tapped, while in the all other rounds data were collected that allowed for the computation of network centrality). Analyses show that, indeed, trust enhancement, based on expectations of trustworthiness, predicts the evolution of network centrality, in a particular sequence. Thus, the authors claim, networks "originate in minds" and after that are shaped by the emerging relational dynamics.

Curşeu and Schruijer (2018), finally, investigate how relational phenomena within stakeholders have an impact on the whole multiparty system (consisting of all stakeholders) and vice versa, namely, how relational phenomena at the whole system level influence the stakeholder level. Predictions were formulated based on social interdependence theory (Deutsch 1949) and on notions regarding emotional contagion. They used the very same simulation that was described earlier in this article as the research context. During the simulation, questionnaires were distributed at various times assessing participants' perceptions of each stakeholder (their collaborativeness and conflictuality) and their perceptions of the within-stakeholder relational climate (task conflict and relational conflict). These questionnaire data were fed back during the review of each simulation so as to aid the joint sense-making. For this study the questionnaire data of five runs were combined. The occurrence of bottom-up processes was more strongly supported than of top-down; changes in within-stakeholder task conflict were positively related to changes in perceived collaborativeness at the multiparty system level, while changes in within-stakeholder relationship conflict were positively associated with conflictuality at the multiparty system level. In the reverse direction, relationship conflict at the multiparty level went together with changes in relationship conflict at the stakeholder level.

These seven articles, despite their differences, also have various elements in common. This introduction to the special issue started with citing the work of Barbara Gray, Chris Huxham, and colleagues, who have done pioneering work when it concerns fathoming and developing the social and relational dynamics of interorganizational relations. Now, having briefly presented the seven articles that are included, it may already be obvious that they are all indebted to and build on the ideas developed by Gray and Huxham. All articles, furthermore, address multiple system levels as the relational dynamics are created and are played out at multiple levels. Disciplinary boundaries are transcended in most of them, through working with diverse bodies of literature. The importance of creating "actionable knowledge" (Argyris 1996) transpires through the special issue, given the role of action research and the importance of reflection, learning and development, even in the more "traditional" research articles. This special issue shows the complexity and multidimensionality of the relational dynamics of interorganizational collaboration. It is hoped that it will stimulate further research and help shape the praxis.

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