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Research Review and Notes

Collaboration as the Politics of Affect: The Consultant–Client Relationship as an Embodied Moral Practice

Over a period of three years, Robbert Masselink collected autoethnographic stories about the topic of collaboration from his personal experience as an organizational change consultant as part of his research for a Ph.D. degree. Part of these stories were about his involvement in change processes where Appreciative Inquiry was applied, part about encounters with people from client organizations in which topics regarding particular change processes were discussed.

My thesis explores the ideology of collaboration from the context of the consultant–client relationship. It looks at its self-evident nature and the reasons for framing relationships as collaborative ones. The ideology is contrasted with the actual experience of collaboration in everyday organizational life, taking a micro-perspective on human interaction. My research question was to ask what we are doing when we say that we are collaborating with each other. I don't restrict the tendency to collaborate to the consultant–client relationship; it is expressed in many others, such as the relationship between government and citizen, employer and employee, and teacher and student.

What motivated me to start exploring the collaborative relationship was my experience of a discrepancy between its ideology and the actual experience of it in my consulting life. This ideology has become a common practice in organizations and in wider society. Becoming aware of its implications provides opportunities to better understand what people are doing when they are collaborating, likely reducing the gap between ideology and reality, and encouraging them to start to pay attention to their complicity in producing undesired consequences.

I conducted my research at the English University of Hertfordshire, becoming part of a research community that takes a complexity perspective on

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management, continuity and change in organizations, drawing upon the natural and social sciences. Practitioners from all over the world join together four times a year to share and advance their studies. They take their own experience as the starting point of their research, looking critically at what they and other people are actually doing. Taking a complexity perspective entails seeing the organizations that are emerging from human processes of relating, structured through their stories, actions and intentions (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000). From this perspective, an organization is never “finished”: interactions between people shift and constantly give birth to new themes, meanings and actions.

The method I used was writing organizational autoethnographies that studied the life-world of ordinary people within everyday organizational life. These autoethnographic stories are stories about myself set against the taken-for-granted social and cultural background in which I was raised and in which I live. I chose personal experiences as a consultant that at the time perplexed me and explored these in my role as researcher by describing them and reflecting on them. In a way, then, autoethnography is a process of resolving breakdowns by re-constituting them through inquiring into these moments of personal disturbance.

My main findings

1. The ideology of collaboration assumes an unproblematic application, hence contributing to a reduction in people’s experiences

Several scholars have written extensively about the consultant–client relationship, emphasizing its collaborative nature. Collaborative ideology radiates an optimistic view of consulting that promises progress and improvement, and a trusting relationship between consultant and client. It emphasizes cooperative aspects such as reciprocity, equality, mutual dependency and the willingness to take responsibility for the relationship (Cheung–Judge and Holbeche, 2011; Bushe and Marshak, 2015). It is presumed that if both the consultant and client enact these aspects that an effective working relationship will prevail, contributing to the right outcomes of intended change. In particular, the consultant is considered to be effective when he or she establishes the proper relationship for the task to be accomplished.

Becoming aware of the inherent asymmetry of the consultant–client relationship can stimulate the consultant to become more politically and ethically astute.

My research shows that the consultant isn’t in a unilateral position to establish the proper relationship with the client. That is, he is affected by the events that he is a part of and that influences him in unforeseen ways. He encounters resistance that he has to deal with and the experience that many of his well-meant intentions aren’t realized. It seems as if the idea is lost that people

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are interdependent human beings affected by their surroundings which they are trying to control most of the time. Instead, they see themselves primarily as acting upon the world in order to bring about change, progress and improvement.

Rather than trying to bring things under their control, people can generate new knowledge and ways to cope with it by means of inquiry, experimentation and reflection. Through these activities, they can come to realize that the resistance they experience, their (re-)actions and they themselves are part of the same event (Dewey in Brinkmann, 2013). The neglect of people to see themselves participating in events diminishes their ability to improve a situation, omitting their share in creating it and their responsibility for the consequences. They restrict ongoing change by negotiating its preferred manifestation. This reveals their complicity and mutual dependency which are uncomfortable parts of experience because they contradict the ideal of the autonomous human being.

The ideology of collaboration leads to the paradoxical situation that, by driving out difference and dissent, it creates the struggle and strife that the ideology tries to prevent. When people try to do that, they are undermining the very reason for collaborating. That is, differences attract people to expand their restricted practices and capacities, and create opportunities for novelty and change. By maintaining stability, it is this novelty and change, paradoxically, that the ideology of collaboration rejects.

2. The ideology of collaboration fits well within managerialist discourse

My research shows that consultants and managers share the same kinds of thinking, with managerialist discourse being central to that. Managerialism is the systematic approach, used by managers and consultants, to solve problems in standardized ways. It is grounded in the belief that organizations are more or less alike and that performance can be optimized by applying generic management models and skills. It provides a governance structure that has become the dominant discourse in many organizations, implying universal status and an ahistorical existence.

Governance directs the conduct of people by means of techniques, discourses and programs that mobilize people's capacities (Marshall, 2016). It isn't aimed at restricting and controlling people, as is often thought, but at making a particular kind of behavior "normal" (Betta, 2015: 2) and accepted. I suggest that collaboration is such a "normalizing" practice within managerialist discourse that has become firmly established within organizations. It helps to create the image of a unified organization with a well-aligned workforce and "collaboration" being the right label for a working relationship that is mutually

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empowering of each other's aspirations and objectives emphasizing people's potential for growth.

If employers make employees believe that their limitless potential is to be pursued, imposing pressure on them for continuous improvement and self-actualization, they will likely contribute to an increase in burnout and exhaustion (Han, 2015). Mistakes and failures don't fit employees' idealized self-images and will probably be avoided. Hence, employees will not realize their potential or shaping their selves towards becoming mature human beings, but will instead detach themselves from these situations (Sennet, 2008; Ekman, 2013).

Managers contribute to this tendency by avoiding the responsibility of confronting employees with unhappy realities and having uncomfortable, confrontational conversations with them. Ekman (2013) shows the tendency of both manager and employee to recognize each other's need for affirmation, avoiding unpleasant experiences within their relationship. I see many managers wrestling with their dual role of acting as manager and coach towards their employees, with the same being the case for employees. Both try to sustain an intersubjectivity of equality while there is none.

These are important messages in the positioning of collaboration within the scope of managerialist discourse. Moulding employees into actualizing subjectivities might restrict expression of their "lived experiences" of organizational life, hence constraining their freedom and illustrating the sustenance of a power differential. The employer, or client, evades taking responsibility for the joint constitution of the relationship and its negative consequences, masking or rejecting it for varying reasons. I argue that collaboration within the consultant-client relationship doesn't stand apart from these developments, and may suffer similar consequences that consultants should be aware of and be able to deal with.

To collaborate means to be willing to subordinate oneself to the customs of a collaborative practice, becoming complicit in a way that voluntarily restrict people's activities.

3. Collaboration constitutes a 'politics of affect' that illuminates its cooperative-antagonistic structure, hence contributing to a stable-unstable practice

Practically speaking, collaboration is a custom or a social habit (Dewey, 1922/2007) that is part of the social and cultural backgrounds in which people have grown up. It is unconscious, taken as self-evident, performed in effortless ways, and embodied and enacted in a corporeal sense. Habit reflects who people are, what they value, and engages them in what they do. To collaborate means to be willing to subordinate oneself to the customs of a collaborative practice, becoming complicit in a way that voluntarily restrict people's activities. It

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implies refraining from opposing elements such as competition, striving, contestation, conflict and difference. This contrasts with the commonly held picture that people, as autonomous individuals, are free to choose how they want to participate: in fact their freedom is restricted by their personal histories and their social and cultural embeddedness.

People act upon the world by experiencing it in immediate ways and responding to it habitually. As they proceed, new vistas come into view, or disappear, that they act upon in anticipation of their preferred futures. This process is dynamic and ongoing. The world acts back on them, and it is this continuous mutual responding out of which identity, reality and meaning emerge. People's actions in the world change it as the world changes them, generating new events to which they have to relate to again, etcetera. From their constant involvements in events, patterns emerge that create stability but also hold opportunity for novelty and change.

I suggest that when people collaborate, they position themselves in relation to others, objects, events and concepts in order to attain, sustain or enhance legitimacy, position, status and identity, and perform actions in accordance with their habits (Dewey, 1922/2007). Emotions and feelings reflect the successes and failures of their efforts in response to the enabling and constraining actions of others.

When people are affected, being moved within a concrete situation, their habitual ways of reacting are disturbed (Dewey, 1922/2007), if only for a short period. The disturbance reflects their involvement in the situation and entanglements with others, objects and/or ideas, with an emotional intensity that can significantly restrict their range of response (Elias, 2007). These moments of ethical disturbance (Dale and Latham, 2014: 171) offer people the opportunity to make an alternative choice to their habitual ones when confronted with the "otherness" of the other. Although the consequences of their choices remain unknown, every choice made will impact their involvement for the future in foreseeable and unforeseeable ways, and this is what makes it ethical. I argue that the choice being made is the process of adjustment and that it happens in an embodied way, is largely unconscious, and may end with people becoming cognizant of their choices retrospectively.

Moments of ethical disturbance offer people the opportunity to make an alternative choice to their habitual ones.

It is in these moments of ethical disturbance that people can become aware of their effect on others by means of experiencing emotions that reflect the intersection of social relationships they are part of. Emotions and feelings reveal collisions of simultaneous demands that jeopardize the identities that they will try to maintain. Collaboration is an ongoing activity of identity work (Burkitt, 2014) and emotions and feelings are the reflection of it, revealing whether or

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not people are successful in their attempts. In fact, feelings are never absent, as people are continually making sense of ongoing emotional communication. Maintaining a steady cooperative relationship is more difficult than people think, because of the ambivalence of the feelings and emotions they experience and of the existence of personal biographies that makes the occurrence of emotions hard to predict (ibid).

The consequences for the consultant–client relationship, and for the concept of collaboration in general, are that these relationships are less stable than people think, uncertain in their continuous constitution and re–constitution. The same is true for the legitimacy, mutual inclusion and recognition of both the consultant and client. I argue that the stability of their relationship is both stable and fragile, both because of their personal investments in the collaboration and because they are apt to being affected emotionally, as my research shows. This offers an opportunity for reflection upon the quality of the relationship and the ways the consultant and client affect that quality, which brings ethics to the fore.

4. Collaboration is an evaluative concept that offers consultants and clients the opportunity to reflect upon the quality of their relationship

What does collaboration, constituting the consultant–client relationship, need to make it work and when do we know that “it” works? The previous arguments reveal that part of the consultant’s “lived embodied experience” of collaborating with clients is not discussed, appreciated or taken into account by either him/her or the client. I argue that collaboration within the consultant–client relationship can gain strength and enhance its quality when this omitted part of experience is recognized and taken into account. I turn towards Michel Foucault’s concept of “technologies of self” (Foucault, 2008/2011), to illustrate this point.

Technologies of the self

In the final phase of his career Michel Foucault shifted his attention on power towards an “ethics of micro–emancipation within organizations” and the “active self–formation” by individuals (Raffnsøe et al., 2017: 7). He developed practical “technologies of the self” (Crane et al., 2008) for stimulating people to resist behaving in compliant and obedient ways when faced with restricting discourses, such as the managerialist one within organizations. Examples of these technologies are “care for the self”, “ethical askesis” and “parrhessia”, with the latter being the form of fearless speech discussed in my research. “Counter–conduct” is his expression for the ethical and political behaviors of people to resist disciplinary power as forms of contestation, which constitutes the process of self–governing (ibid: 1130).

An 'affective ethics' can put such 'lived embodied experience' at the center of the consultant–client relationship.

There is merit in these practices because they offer an opportunity for reflection on how people exercise their freedom and try to enhance it, for example, by starting to practise these “technologies of self” themselves, such as speaking truthfully (Burkitt, 2008), deep listening (Stivers, 1994; Rigg, 2017; Tamboukou, 2012), direct action and using pleasure (Munro, 2014). By expressing one’s “lived embodied experience”, differences are made explicit and mutual dependence and reciprocity enacted. This will increase people’s attention to the power-affect-identity aspects of their relationships with each other.

An “affective ethics” can put such “lived embodied experience” at the center of the consultant–client relationship, acknowledging difference and dissent, prioritizing the consultant’s and client’s personal engagements, centering and de-centering themselves as subjects within a larger engagement, and becoming reflexive on the co-constitution of the collaborative relationship. This constitutes collaboration as a critical practice instead of a compliant one.

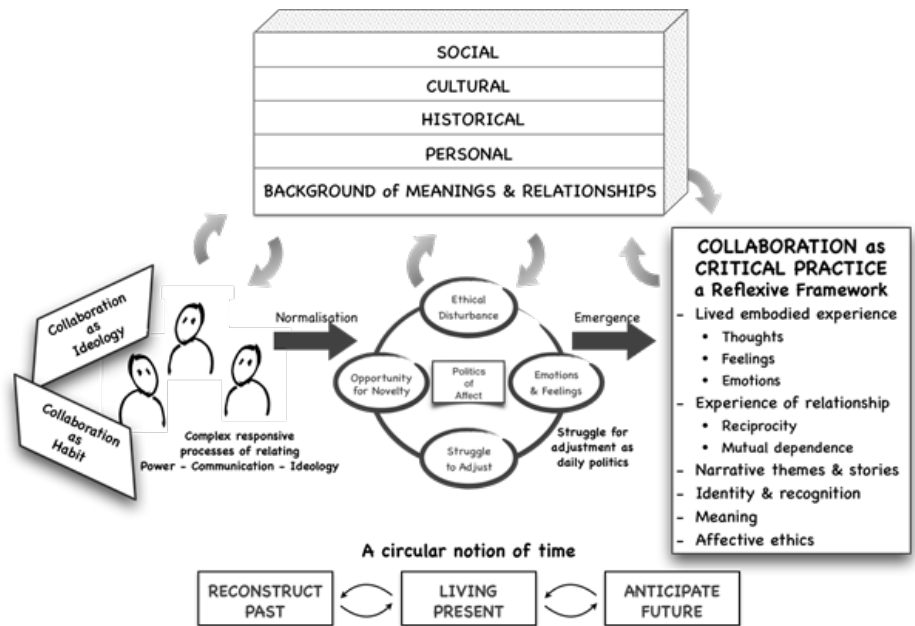
Pragmatists such as Mead, Elias and Dewey argue that an affective ethics emerges out of people’s interactions with each other and can’t be prescribed or imposed. They participate with particular intentions, principles, rules, histories, interests and expectations, and from “stable” identities. But in the complex interactions that are taking place, the outcomes are known and unknown at the same time. Known, because of the customs, rituals and habits that people have developed, which guarantee the continuity of their social practices, while at the same time never being sure if continuity will be the case. Tiny variations might give rise to significant and surprising alterations. This makes an “affective ethics” within the collaboration between the consultant and the client a performative and evaluative mechanism that will, despite its emancipatory potential, also contain power relations, politics and ideology.

Relevance for consultants and managers

I believe that together these arguments offer an opportunity to create a different conception of the collaborative relationship between the consultant and the client, and of the concept of collaboration in general. I have summarized the key themes of my research in a conceptual framework that posits collaboration as an emergent phenomenon that is part of people’s normal, daily interactions and creates the opportunity to reflect on them. People cooperate and compete when they collaborate with each other, for good and bad, and this acknowledgment turns collaboration into a concept that is more in accordance with their lived experience than when considered from an ideological perspective.

People cooperate and compete when they collaborate with each other.

Figure 1: Key themes of the research



Collaboration as an evaluative concept offers an opportunity for people to come to know something about themselves when they're being confronted with the alterity of the other. It enables them to reflect upon experience of relations, emotions and feelings, identities and other themes that are considered important and relevant but have also been rejected or neglected because they don't fit the functional perspective of organizations. Reflexive moments can become acts of mutual recognition, that is, of self-recognition as well as recognition of others that acknowledge interdependency and reciprocity. Considering collaboration as a critical, reflexive practice creates an opportunity to integrate these aspects, emphasizing the human side of organizations.

This other concept of collaboration contains potential for altering the consultant's practice in several ways. (S)he can become a more active participant in the ongoing (re-)constitution of the relationship with the client, enhancing his/her ethical and political astuteness, and emphasizing its interdependent and reciprocal character in which both the consultant and client make themselves more visible by making their differences explicit. This is a very different attitude than being a "pair of helping hands" (Schein, 1998). Re-politicizing the relationship can help to resist collusive tendencies – although collusion isn't necessarily a bad thing (Curtis, 2018) – and contribute to desired changes.

Collaboration is an evaluative concept that offers consultants and clients the opportunity to reflect upon the quality of their relationship.

Reflexivity can be stimulated by starting to ask questions about what the client is occupied with or what is holding him/her captive in order to increase detachment from his/her involvement in the situation. This may also help expand the consultant's own constrained perceptions, and those of others who are involved, to create a more complete perspective upon the situation s(he) finds himself

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or herself in. The consultant's natural tendency to act and look forward is complemented by a capacity to stand still and reflect upon the consequences of the actions undertaken and consideration of whose interests or positions might be served or breached. This capacity will likely enhance his ethical orientation.

Connecting my research with Appreciative Inquiry

As a result of my research, I have experienced my practice of Appreciative Inquiry changing in several ways. First of all, I have noticed that the vitality of stories told is more subject to people's relational resonance than to the positivity or negativity of the content. People's affective resonance reveals their attunement to personal histories, values and interests that enable them to constitute a common future based on past experiences that holds the potential of being transformed (their past images) by their joint inquiry.

Second, I see value in sharing stories of people's actual experiences of being together and reflecting upon their shared sense of collaboration. Appreciative Inquiry contributes to aspects of reciprocity, mutual recognition and dependence in people's interactions, and it is these aspects that the AI facilitator can make people aware of when collaborating with each other. Once they return to their regular working places, they may be in a better position to continue these collaborative attitudes.

Third, and last, my experience is that moments of what I have called "ethical disturbance" are good starting points for joint inquiry. That is because in these moments people's expectations clash with social reality, often without them knowing why. Inquiring into these moments can help people become aware of assumptions that hinder them from seeing what is actually happening and how they contribute to undesired actualities. This creates an opportunity to stop doing what they're doing and then turning their attention towards future desires.

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