Watching Whale-Watching:  
Exploring the Discursive Foundations of Collaborative Relationships

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In this article, we develop a discourse analytic framework for examining the antecedents, dynamics, and outcomes of inter-organizational collaboration. We argue that a framework based on a discursive understanding of collaboration can provide a coherent basis for understanding the dynamics of collaboration, the relation of collaboration to its broader institutional context, and the management and facilitation of collaborative activity as a communicative process. We base this framework on a study of the fabric of collaborative relationships that characterize one organizational field — the Pacific Northwest whale-watching industry. The theoretical framework we have developed frames collaboration as the discursive negotiation of the issues to be addressed by the collaboration, the interests relevant to the collaboration, and the actors who should represent these legitimate interests.
Vancouver Island has the largest population of resident Killer Whales in the world. In
the waters surrounding Southern Vancouver Island, Victoria, the Gulf Islands and the
San Juan Islands, we have three resident pods, J, K, and L. Over 95 whales in total.
These whales are most active in these waters during the Salmon spawning season from
May to October. Five Star Charters is proud to introduce you to these magnificent
animals. (Five Star Charters brochure)

We're learning so much about the whales . . . we're learning how much we're going to
have to protect their habitat. We'll have to work together with everybody; you know, the
conservationists, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the government, the land use
people, the fisheries, just everybody. We're just all going to have to work together if we
want to protect it. (Interview, Tour Guide)

I'm a member of the Tourism Association of Vancouver Island, Tourism Victoria, the
Victoria Marine Tourism Association, and the Whale Watchers Association. It doesn't
start to address the Chamber of Commerce . . . I just look at the end of the year and
think, how much money am I putting out in memberships? How many meetings? Is it
useful? (Interview, Whale-Watching Company Owner)

* * *

In this article, we draw on a study of collaboration in commercial whale-watching to
develop a theoretical framework that highlights the discursive nature of collaboration. Our
analysis of collaboration in commercial whale-watching off Vancouver Island and the San
Juan Islands provides both the motivation for this article, as well as the empirical context we will use
to illustrate the theoretical framework. Whale-watching companies, and the related organizations
and individuals that make up the organizational field, cooperate in a complex web of formal and
informal collaborations that play an important role in structuring the relationships and
understandings of members of the field. The theoretical framework highlights the discursive
relationships between collaborative processes and the resources, practices, and rules that
characterize the organizational field in which collaboration occurs. Thus, this article is intended
to advance our understanding of the social processes that underlie collaboration and their links to
the wider context in which they occur.

This article contributes to the study of collaboration in three ways. First, it provides a
coherent framework for understanding collaboration as a communicative process. Understanding
collaboration as a highly discursive phenomenon leads to a theoretical position that highlights
both the social production of collaboration and its social products. We argue that a theoretical
perspective focusing on the discursive aspects of collaboration encourages research that connects
processes of social construction and negotiation with the social context in which they are
embedded. In doing so, a discursive perspective highlights the role of context in the ongoing
production of collaboration and the effect of collaboration on its context.

Second, our theoretical framework begins to overcome what has been argued is a key
limitation of the existing literature (Wood & Gray, 1991: 140): “most perspectives are oriented
toward the individual focal organization – such as a firm, an agency, or a government department
– rather than toward an interorganizational problem domain”. By drawing on the range of
instances of collaboration across an organizational field, our framework allows for a broader
focus which is necessary if we are to understand the kinds of institutional antecedents that make collaboration more likely and that affect the sort of collaboration that results. The organizational field that we examine here, commercial whale-watching off Vancouver Island, is small enough that all of the important collaborative relationships could be examined. This allows us to understand not just the dynamics of collaboration, but the dynamics of the webs of collaboration that characterize a field.

Third, whale watching is interesting and important from a societal point of view as it is a non-consumptive, wildlife-oriented, service industry (Duffus & Dearden, 1990). The industry is at the center of a range of ongoing environmental debates about the proper use of the natural resources – forests, oceans, salmon, and whales – that make up the complex ecosystem of the area. The ability to employ natural resources in a non-destructive, sustainable manner is a crucial argument made on behalf of these forms of tourism. Collaboration plays a central role in the development of these industries in the face of sustained demands from existing and very powerful consumptive industries such as mining and forestry.

The remainder of our paper is structured in three parts. We begin by defining what we mean by collaboration and outline the general research questions that form the foundation of our study. We then describe the whale-watching industry and outline our research method and approach to data analysis. In the third section, we present and discuss the theoretical framework we have developed. Here, we draw on the example of commercial whale-watching to illustrate our theoretical points. We also include a discussion of the discourse analysis perspective from which we work. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our perspective for the study and practice of collaboration.

**The Analysis of Collaboration**

By collaboration we mean a cooperative, inter-organizational relationship that relies on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control (Ouchi, 1980) but is instead negotiated in an ongoing communicative process. This definition is inclusive, yet provides a set of critical characteristics that distinguish collaboration from other forms of organizational activity. The first and most straightforward aspect of our definition is that collaboration occurs between organizations rather than at the individual or organizational level. The study of collaboration therefore requires an aggregate focus and is part of the increasing move to studying populations, sectors, domains, and fields rather than the single organization and its environment (e.g., Meyer & Scott, 1983). Second, collaborative activity is not mediated by market mechanisms. In other words, collaborative activity is carried on ‘outside’ of market structures and cooperation depends on some alternative to the price mechanism. Finally, unlike hierarchy, collaboration does not involve the use of control through legitimate authority (Ouchi, 1980). Whereas hierarchies are associated with a willingness on behalf of members to submit to both direction and monitoring by their superiors, collaboration involves the negotiation of roles and responsibilities in a context where no legitimate authority sufficient to manage the situation is recognized.

In the management literature, collaboration has been considered from a number of different perspectives. One approach stems from the notion of “collective” strategy where businesses cooperate rather than compete (e.g., Astley, 1984; Bresser & Harl, 1986; Carney,
1987). This work examines how these forms of interorganizational collaboration can improve strategic performance by, for example, helping to spread risk, share resources, enhance flexibility, increase access to technological know-how and information, enter new markets, and secure assets (e.g., Amara, 1990; Barley et al., 1993; Nohria & Eccles, 1993; Powell & Brantley, 1993). Similar to this approach is the work of organizational economists (see Barney & Hesterley, 1996). In this work, the previous focus within economics on the dangers of collusion have been replaced with an interest in the efficiencies of strategic alliances (e.g., Kogut, 1988; 1991). Organizational economists have used transaction cost economics (Williamson, 1975, 1985) to explain the emergence of joint ventures and alliances as alternative forms of governance structure to the more traditional markets and hierarchies (Buckley & Casson, 1988; Hill, 1990; Hennart, 1991; Williamson, 1991).

Another approach to collaboration has focused on the dynamics of interorganizational domains (e.g., Gray, 1989) which are defined within this tradition in terms of sets of common problems facing organizations. This approach draws on negotiated order theory (e.g., Strauss et al., 1963) in its emphasis on the socially constructed nature of collaboration and the domains in which it occurs. This problem-focused approach also draws explicitly on the work of Emery and Trist (1965) who introduced the notion of turbulent environments where problems characterized by uncertainty, complexity and unclear boundaries are beyond the scope of a single organization to solve. Consequently, research within this tradition has lead to calls for inclusive (Warren et al., 1967; Warren, 1974) or collaborative (Gray, 1989) decision-making where organizations pool their expertise and resources (Trist, 1983).

Although each of these approaches (and a number of others not included here) has contributed significantly to our understanding of collaboration, their independent development has produced a set of theoretical and empirical understandings of collaboration that are largely isolated from one another. Yet, we believe that a common social process underlies these various forms of collaborative activity and that one approach to exposing these social processes is to work from a set of basic research questions concerning the underlying nature of collaboration to develop an integrative theoretical framework.

Questions about Collaboration

In two recent special journal issues on organizational collaboration¹ (Smith, Carroll & Ashford, 1995; Wood & Gray, 1991) the special issue editors summarize the issues surrounding collaboration in a similar fashion, suggesting three major questions concerning the nature of collaboration: (1) What are the antecedents of collaboration?; (2) What are the dynamics of collaboration?; and, (3) What are the outcomes of collaboration? The first of these questions is concerned with the conditions and resources that facilitate collaborative organizational behavior. Trust, for example, has been argued to be a fundamental condition for development of collaboration (Smith et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995; Hardy, Phillips & Lawrence, forthcoming). Smith et al. (1995) suggest that despite significant amounts of research on the antecedents of

¹ Although the Smith et al. refer to “intra- and interorganizational cooperation”, they use the term “interorganizational cooperation” in a manner equivalent to our use of organizational collaboration.
collaboration, the focus has largely been on formal collaboration (e.g., Gray & Hay, 1986), and that consequently, “additional research is needed on the conditions that give rise to naturally occurring cooperation” (Smith et al., 1995: 15). The framework we develop in this paper draws on examples of both formal and informal types of collaboration in addressing the antecedents of collaboration.

The second question concerns the nature of collaboration as a process, including such issues as the stages of collaboration (e.g., Gray, 1989; Zajac & Olsen, 1993), the politics of collaboration (e.g., Gray & Hay, 1986; Hardy & Phillips, forthcoming) and the emotional aspects of collaboration (Hardy, Lawrence & Phillips, forthcoming; McAllister, 1995). Approaching this question can lead to an emphasis on conscious, rational decision making processes as in Browning, Beyer and Shetler’s (1995) examination of SEMATECH. It can also lead to a focus on processes of social construction and negotiated order, as in Nathan and Mitroff’s (1991) study of collaborative strategies in the management of a product-tampering crisis. While the study of collaboration has examined many aspects of its dynamics, these results remain somewhat diffuse. Divergent theoretical perspectives seem to examine similarly divergent empirical phenomena, such that the results are largely non-cumulative.

The third question asks about the results of collaboration. According to Smith et al. (1995: 17), “most of the previous research that has linked cooperation to outcomes has focused on performance variables and individual satisfaction variables”. We concur with their call for the examination of a broader range of outcomes, including non-economic impacts such as social ties, political power and technological innovation (Smith et al., 1995). Collaboration can also be associated with other, less attractive consequences. Outcomes such as concentration of power (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), homogenization of ideas (Janis, 1972), exclusion of marginal members (Gray & Hay, 1986), and coordination of pricing (Scherer & Ross, 1990) can be as significant as any positive outcome. The positive connotations of collaboration, however, seem to have led to an under-examination of negative outcomes in the empirical and theoretical literatures.

We believe that the study of collaboration requires a theoretical framework that can accommodate these questions in a consistent and coherent manner. Understanding the social processes that connect the antecedents, dynamics, and outcomes of collaboration is critical to an understanding of its role in organizational fields and in understanding how collaboration can be managed and facilitated.

Whale-Watching in the Pacific Northwest

Our study of commercial whale-watching was intended to provide an empirical grounding for the development of a broad, discursive theoretical framework. Consequently, the design of our study emphasized gaining an understanding of a broad range of collaborative activities and the networks of collaboration that existed in the field. The study was not intended to be the basis for the testing of theory or the in-depth analysis of any specific instance of collaboration.

The whale-watching community around Vancouver Island and the San Juan Islands was chosen as a research site for several reasons. Most importantly, we reasoned that the development of commercial whale-watching would encourage a significant variety of interorganizational
collaboration as a wide range of interested actors came into contact in novel ways. Like other forms of ecotourism, commercial whale-watching combines tourism and environmentalism and therefore involves private enterprise, governments at many levels, and environmental groups of various kinds. However, while the organizational field is characterized by many different kinds of collaboration between many different kinds of organizations, it is still small enough to make it practical to try to examine all significant collaborations in the field. Third, because whale-watching is a relatively young industry, many of the collaborations are still developing. This offered us an opportunity to examine the ongoing structuring of collaboration, rather than simply engaging in post hoc analysis. And, when the collaboration was already well-structured, the process of forming the collaboration was still recent enough to be clearly remembered by the participants.

The whale watching community around Vancouver Island and the San Juan Islands is a rapidly growing organizational field that cuts across a range of traditional industries and activities. It consists of professional and amateur whale watchers who watch whales for fun, research, or commercial purposes. The commercial aspect of whale watching consists of a rapidly growing ecotourism sector that specializes in taking tourists to view various kinds of marine life including dolphins, gray whales, sea lions, seals, eagles, and killer whales. The industry has been growing rapidly since its birth in the 1970’s and is made up of operators of small boats in the lower Vancouver Island area and of larger boats in northern parts of Vancouver Island. In addition, there are a number of marine research organizations who focus on the whales (particularly the killer whales). Researchers spend considerable amounts of time studying the behavior, habitat, and movements of the whales. The commercial whale watchers and the research community have excellent relations, exchanging information on the whereabouts of the whales, on their behavior, and on the well-being of particular members of the whale population. The researchers provide much of the information that operators pass on to their customers regarding the whales. One measure of the closeness of the two groups is that the commercial whale watchers on northern Vancouver Island have agreed to donate one dollar per customer toward research on whales in their area. Finally, the organizational field is also populated by a range of other, less central, actors including the amateur whale watchers; related industries such as sea plane companies (who often spot whales and pass on the information), ferry companies, and fishing boat companies; and the various regulators such as the Government of British Columbia, the Canadian and American Coast Guards, and various travel and tourism boards and associations. Depending on the context, these actors participate in a more or less direct way in the various forms of collaboration that characterize the field.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The primary form of data collection was a series of 17 tape-recorded, semi-structured interviews that focused on getting the interviewees to describe in detail their activities and relationships with respect to whale-watching. The interviews focused on several issues: the collaborative relationships among actors in the field, especially those that might have an effect on their strategic and institutional context; relationships with clients, competitors and other interested parties; resources employed, including people, money, skills, and organizational and
institutional linkages; and the historical, political and social contexts of whale watching. The transcribed interviews formed the primary database for analysis. In addition, a wide range of materials such as company brochures, meeting agendas, books, and articles of various kinds provided an important background for the interview transcripts.

In collecting the data, we utilized a theoretical, or purposive, sampling design (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This form of sampling is marked by its emergent properties: successive subjects are chosen to extend information already obtained; the sample is continuously focused as insights and information accumulate; and selection occurs until information redundancy or saturation is achieved. Sampling occurred in stages as information from previous interviewees was integrated and successive interviewees were identified. Each interviewee was asked to identify key collaborators as well as competitors, clients, and other influential actors in their field. By the end of the interviewing phase of the project, we had interviewed all of the commercial operators in the area, representatives of municipal and federal governments, research biologists, owners or employees of various related tourism companies, and a number of environmentalists.

Each interview was transcribed into a computer text file and imported into NUD*IST, a qualitative data analysis software package that allows the researcher to develop a hierarchy of theoretical codes, link these codes to segments of the text under analysis, and perform a wide variety of text- and code-based searches. In this case, the hierarchy of codes was developed in an iterative manner, consistent with the notion of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We began the analysis with a basic theoretical orientation focusing on discursive construction and then developed the key theoretical terms and relationships in an iterative manner, working back and forth between theoretical development and empirical analysis. This iterative approach produced the theoretical framework presented in the following sections.

**A Discursive Theoretical Framework for Collaboration Research**

Based on our case analysis, we believe it is possible to develop a view of collaboration that addresses the research questions defined above and begins to integrate the variety of disparate theoretical definitions and approaches that have developed in the literature. We believe that beneath the variety of activities associated with collaboration a common set of discursive processes are operating and, therefore, that a common theoretical framework can be developed for understanding the many kinds of collaboration that have been identified.

**Discourse and Collaboration**

The theoretical perspective we adopt here argues strongly for the active role of discourse in the creation of social reality. We argue that the myriad ways in which social actors communicate work not to reflect or represent reality, but to actively, and at times strategically, constitute that reality. Discourses do not reveal some hidden, pre-constituted reality, but rather provide the framework that actors use to fashion a social world. Indeed, as we use the term here, a discourse is a system of texts that constitutes a set of “concepts” and “objects” (Mumby & Clair, 1997; Parker, 1992; Phillips & Hardy, 1997). By text we simply mean any delimited phenomenon that can be interpreted (Phillips & Brown, 1994); while the texts interpreted in this
study are limited to spoken language and documents, there is no necessity to limit the range of
texts interpreted in this way.

But the term discourse refers to more than simply a collection of texts; it also includes the
practices that underlie texts and which allow their production, transmission, and reception
(Fairclough, 1992). Discursive activity is activity which acts to maintain or modify this
discourse, the social structures related to it, or to enact a discourse in a social situation in a
significant way. From this perspective, the communicative process underlying collaboration is a
discursive struggle between different groups of stakeholders each with access to different sets of
discursive and non-discursive resources2. The struggle occurs through texts that construct the
world in differing ways and that may be resisted or inverted through the construction, by
competing groups, of other texts (Phillips & Hardy, 1997).

In examining the dynamics of discursive activity, it is useful to distinguish between two
sets of constructive effects – concepts and objects (Fairclough, 1992: 64; Parker, 1992: 6-8).
Concepts are the set of categories, relationships, and theories through which we understand the
world and relate to one another. Concepts make up what Harré (1979) refers to as the expressive
sphere: all of the conceptual ideas available in to an actor in a social situation. They are the
fundamental ideas that underlie our understandings and relations with one another. Thus, the first
important dimension of the discursive process underlying any collaboration is the ongoing
struggle to define a collection of concepts sufficient to sustain the collaboration. These concepts
may be drawn from other discourses around other collaborations within the field, or from more
distant discourses that can be connected in some way to the situation at hand.

For example, one very important concept that underlies the entire whale-watching
industry is the idea of a ‘killer whale’. The general discourse around killer whales changed little
from the description of Pliny the Elder who wrote that “a killer whale cannot be properly
depicted or described except as an enormous mass of flesh armed with savage teeth” to the 1974
US Navy diving manual which described killer whales as “extremely ferocious” and warning that
they “will attack human beings at every opportunity”. Yet, the current consensus is that killer
whales do not attack humans but rather are curious and peaceful creatures. This
conceptualization of killer whales, along with the changes in the broader environmental arena,
has radically altered the discourse so that the focus now is not on how to best kill them, but on
how best to interact with the whales without harassing them or damaging their natural
environment (Ford et al., 1994; Heimlich-Boran & Heimlich-Boran, 1994). Much of the
discursive work that has shifted the construction of killer whales so dramatically has taken place
in the context of collaboration and every collaborative relationship in the whale-watching
industry must deal on an ongoing basis with the construction of a generalized concept of a ‘killer
whale’.

In examining collaboration we must also attend to another category of constructive
effects: when concepts are brought into play to make sense of ongoing social relations or physical
objects, then the discourse has constituted an object. Objects and concepts are obviously closely

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2 For a more general discussion of the application of discursive ideas to organizational topics see Mumby and Clair (1997).
related, the primary difference being that concepts exist only in the expressive order, in the realm of ideas. Objects, on the other hand, are part of the practical order; they are real in the sense of existing in the material world. The concept of a killer whale exists in our minds as competent speakers of English. The animal that a tourist recognizes as a killer whale is an object; it is made sensible by the concept ‘killer whale’ and we can write about it using the same concept. But the whale itself has a certain existence outside of the discourse that reveals it; it has an ontological reality beyond the discourse. It would continue to exist in a physical sense apart from the observer’s experience of it (Bhaskar, 1978; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The killer whale exists without any awareness of the concept of a ‘killer whale’: the killer whale has no idea it is was “extremely ferocious” in 1974 or that it is now a friendly, intelligent being like the whale in *Free Willy*.

The role of discourse in constituting social objects is even more fundamental. In social objects like collaborative relationships, related concepts are applied, by members and others, to sets of material practices in a way which not only reveals the social practices and makes them meaningful, but is fundamental to their enactment in the first place. Changing the concept ‘killer whale’, or convincing someone that the animal that they thought was a killer whale is actually a dolphin, may make them see it differently, but it does not change the animal. In contrast, changing the conception of an appropriate collaborative relationship held by members fundamentally changes the way the collaboration is socially accomplished. It is at this level that discourse has the greatest impact on the social world. Organizations and other social interactions depend on the discursive construction of the underlying concepts and the discursive application of concepts by members to make sense of their experience. By successfully modifying the discourse that underlies important concepts and/or important objects, the actual accomplishment of social relationships can be changed. The act of creating and disseminating texts is therefore a highly political act and underlies the most fundamental struggles for power and control.

The production of a collaborative relationship can therefore be thought of as a discursive accomplishment. Through the negotiation of various dimensions of collaboration, and through the importation of concepts from the surrounding organizational field, the members of a collaboration come to enough agreement about the nature of their activity that they can identify it as a collaborative relationship (i.e., a cooperative, non-market mediated, non-hierarchical relationship). It is an object constituted in discourse that can be used by members to work towards desired goals and the collaboration can act as an arena for the further negotiation of concepts and objects.

**Dynamics of Collaboration**

In our analysis of collaboration in the whale-watching industry, we identified three specific dimensions on which participants needed to reach a working level of agreement in order to constitute their relationship as collaboration: (1) what issue is the collaboration intended to address?; (2) what interests should be represented in the collaboration?; and, (3) who should represent those interests? The answers to these three questions are mutually constitutive and form the framework for collaborative activity (see Figure 1). From a discursive perspective, the answers to these questions of issue, interests and representation are collaboratively-produced,
discursive objects. Each of these objects requires the successful discursive use of some antecedent set of concepts and objects to bring it into being.

**Issues**

In the sense we use the term here, an issue is an account produced by a participant in an organizational field that constructs the world as problematic and requiring action. For example, the following account was provided by a local commercial operator:

> And you get out to the whales, sunny afternoon, mid-summer, and you know there could be thirty boats that are commercial going over towards the San Juan [Islands]. You're looking at thirty to thirty-five commercial boats plus the pleasure operator. There can be up to a hundred boats around whales. (Interview, commercial operator)

> It's a real perception problem with whale watching. With any activity around the animals, if people who are watching it aren't well informed, almost anything can look like harassment. And down here … you're doing it right in front of people's houses on San Juan Island, so they get a lot of flak from shoreside observers. (Interview, Department of Fisheries and Oceans officer)

Together, these accounts describe a situation in which the legitimacy of commercial whale-watching activities is being threatened by a perception that they are harassing the whales. When observers from shore see up to a hundred boats around the whales, they perceive a problem that requires action (e.g., protection of the whales); at the same time, the commercial operators see the large number of boats around the whales as an issue, although their understanding of the reason for it being problematic and the required response may differ substantially from the shoreside observers.

Issues are often contested by other participants who present contradictory, or at least opposing, views of the world in an attempt to reframe understandings and argue for alternative action. An agreement between actors on the existence of an issue within an organizational field provides the foundation for collaborative activity. But they are also the focus of extensive negotiation and conflict as actors struggle to manage understanding in order to shape the collaboration and the organizational field.

This definition has three important elements. First, issues are not naturally occurring nor can they be non-problematically identified by actors within the collaboration nor by researchers looking in from outside. Issues are not laying about waiting to be correctly identified but are, instead, complex constructions of the world that bring with them calls for action (Blumer, 1971). Issues are accounts of ‘objects’ that exist in the organizational field (i.e., harassed whales, threatened operators, environmental concerns). They exist as texts that draw on existing shared discursive resources to produce an account of objects and their arrangements in the organizational field. These accounts are negotiated over time and become more-or-less shared, and, if they are widely accepted, provide a foundation for action.

Second, issues are of critical importance as they provide an impetus for action. They are accounts that construct the organizational field in a problematic way that demands some sort of action by members of the field. It is at this point that the practical effects of collaborative activity are most strongly felt. The social construction of issues leads to demands for action on the part of
the members of the field. If an arrangement of discursive objects – a state of affairs or potential state of affairs – is described as problematic, then it demands action. Actors may not agree on why some situation is problematic, but successfully gaining agreement that an issue exists leads to, at least, some consensus on the need for action.

Third, collaborative issues are highly political. The fact that they lead to action ensures that they are contested and the focus of extensive discursive struggle as actors work to realize their goals and interests within the collaborative activity. The constructions of the world that are produced by actors are therefore not produced uninterestedly; they are not presented without reason. Actors see the world in a particular way and have personal goals for their participation in collaboration. These personal agendas appear in the way issues are perceived and in the way issues are constructed. Discourse, or perhaps more accurately meaning, is often highly political and this is certainly true of discursive activity within collaboration. The fact that collaboration requires some sense of intersection of purpose and requires the negotiation of mutual benefits and mutual responsibilities in the context of a cooperative venture ensures that the construction of issues will be a highly political, contentious, and sometimes divisive activity.

Clearly, the above example of the question of traffic around the whales constitutes an issue. The combination of whale watching operators, local pleasure boats wanting to watch the whales, and the normal traffic in the busy waters off the south end of Vancouver Island results in a situation where up to 100 boats may surround a pod of fewer than 30 whales. While no one disputes the presence of the whales or the number of boats present, the meaning of this situation and the kind of action required to deal with it are understood very differently. For the commercial operators, the issue is one of perception. They argue that the whales used to boats and are unaffected by the presence of the boats. They point to the fact that the whales are increasing in number and that they often swim toward the boats as evidence of their lack of concern regarding the high number of boats populating their waters. At the same time, other whale watchers - some on shore, some in other boats - have begun to question whether or not this intense scrutiny of the whales might constitute some form of “harassment”. They complain to their local politicians and to marine researchers about the harassment of the whales by whalewatchers of all kinds. For people who live on the shore, the issue is partially about the whales and partially about the disturbance caused by this large number of boats and the obstruction of on shore watchers’ view of the whales by the boats.

**Interests**

Within our framework, *interests provide assessable reasons for action*; to say that some practice or situation would be in the interest of a person is to suggest that it would benefit that person (Hindess, 1986). For example, the following excerpts describe why one operator is in favor of self-regulation within commercial whale-watching, by drawing on the interests of a range of stakeholders:

I call them urban whales. They've been dealing with pleasurecraft since pleasurecraft existed. They're cosmopolitan. …

[Passengers] don't want to see [harassment of the whales]. So, it’s just not good P.R. [If] there's a perception amongst passengers that you are harassing the whales, then you will hear about it. …
If we don't regulate ourselves, we will be regulated by someone else in a very harsh manner. (Interview, commercial operator)

Although self-regulation is only explicitly mentioned with reference to the interests of the commercial operators, the statements work to discursively construct the interests of the whales, passengers and operators in a manner consistent with the need for self-regulation. Extensive government protection is not in the interest of the whales as they are not currently harmed by their interactions with boaters – they are ‘urban whales’ who are used to dealing with boats and boaters. However, some regulation might help ensure that passengers perceive less harassment of the whales, which would increase their satisfaction with the whale-watching experience. If some regulation is necessary, self-regulation is in the interest of commercial operators because it will defer government sponsored regulation that would be more restrictive and costly. This argument provides a rationale for self-regulation that involves the construction of interests, including the identification of relevant stakeholders and the implicit calculation of the costs and benefits.

Our understanding of interests has three important elements. First, interests emerge out of the discursive processes that constitute the context in which collaboration occurs:

Persons, as agents engaged in struggle, will strain over that which is constituted as arguable, according to the conditions of particular discursive processes, and will formulate their interests accordingly. It cannot be maintained that these interests are formulated outside the conditions of particular discursive practices and struggles, which a Marxian structuralist definition would seem to imply. (Clegg, 1989: 181)

Interests cannot stand outside of the context in which they are situated. Organizations, institutions, and especially people do not have ‘interests’ that are existentially independent of the context in which those interests are implicated. “In other words, interests feature as elements of discursive availability” (Clegg, 1989: 181). To clarify this aspect of interests, it is informative to contrast interests with the psychological concept of ‘motives’. The key difference stems from our understanding of the ‘location’ of the two concepts. Psychological motives are ‘located’ in the mind of the actor, and thus can reasonably be understood as existing either consciously or unconsciously, and can be reasonably inferred from behavior. In contrast, interests exist strictly as objects in a discourse and consequently are only perceptible in the texts that constitute it. What is critical here is that interests can not precede the discourse, but are an effect of it; interests are constructed by actors through processes of negotiation. The interests of whales, passengers and commercial operators articulate above illustrate this dynamic: in arguing against government regulation, the operator quoted above is not merely presenting some innate properties of these three groups, but is actively constructing their interests in discourse, perhaps drawing on the ways in which each of these groups has been talked and written about in the past, as well as her own experience with them. We are not suggesting anything about the ‘rightness’ or validity of her statements, but simply clarifying their status in our framework. Thus, interests from our perspective are negotiated rather than objectively defined.

A second critical aspect of interests in discourse is their assessability. This aspect of interests stems from the intersection of their status as discursive phenomena and their role in engendering or making sense of action: to suggest that some practice is in someone’s interest is
to imply the ability to assess the impacts of that practice with respect to that actor. As the discursive construction of an ‘issue’ produces an account of the world that demands action, interests connect the issue to some specific actor or set of actors by articulating how change might affect those involved:

The point is simply that [interests] are the result of some definite process employing particular conceptual means of specifying the actor’s situation and possible changes within it. Interests are the product of assessment. (Hindess, 1986: 120)

This aspect of interests serves to more clearly differentiate the concept from that of psychological motives, since the assessability of interests is in no way intended to explain ‘why’ people might engage in some action, but rather to provide some rationality to an action or intended action. While individual motivations need not be rational or explicable and often are not, the articulation of interests demands a certain rationality, in the sense that they describe why some action makes sense for some actor or set of actors. So, in discussing self-regulation as a means of controlling commercial whale-watching, the operator used the terms “urban” and “cosmopolitan” not simply as a witty description of the whales, but also to imply that the effects of whale-watching on them were assessable and negligible, and thus that continuation of those practices were not against the interests of the whales. Similarly, the suggestion that regulation by an external body would be “harsh” suggests that the impacts on the commercial operators would be more severe than under a regime of self-regulation.

The third important aspect of interests flows from the interaction of the first two. Since interests are socially negotiated and demand assessability which involves competing methods of calculation, the assessment of actors’ interests is essentially indeterminate. If we understand interests as “reasons for action”, they are then rooted in discourse and social processes of negotiation, and consequently are potentially political, conflictual and disputable. This is especially important because the formulation of interests is often done ‘for’ an individual or a group by others. Politicians describe the interests of their constituents as reasons for their policies and promises. Union leaders articulate the interests of their union members as reasons for their bargaining positions or strike mandates. Environmentalists trade on the interests of “humanity” to justify the preservation of ecosystems or the protection of species. Thus, if the interests of parties are always disputable, then the actions they support are essentially contestable. Even where a group of actors agree that an issue is problematic and requiring of action, they may still disagree on the formulation of various stakeholders’ interests. This does not mean that interests will always be disputed, or actions always contested, but leaves open the possibility in any situation.

In the collaboration processes that deal with the issue of traffic around the whales, the construction of interests plays a critical strategic role. For instance, self-regulation as a means of dealing with this issue had broad support from a range of stakeholders, including commercial operators, marine mammal researchers, government officials, and local tourism association members. This example illustrates the often relational nature of interests: in constructing a discursive basis for action, interests which enroll a wide variety of parties are more powerful than those which are proprietary (Latour, SiARef). Here, the interests that a broad range of actors constructed as reasons for self-regulation established ‘the industry’ as their primary concern.
while the whales were secondary. Commercial operators argued that self-regulation would defer more costly and restrictive government regulation. According to a government official, self-regulation would help the industry avoid blame if the whales were to decrease in number or disappear, even though it “could more likely be a crash of fish stocks or whatever else” (Interview, DFO officer). From the perspective of the local tourism association, “We would rather that the industry self-regulate … because if they don't somebody will force them and they may come along with regulations that they're not happy to live with” (Interview, tourism association executive member). Thus, the discourse worked to establish a rationale for self-regulation since it was as constructed as being in the common interest of many parties.

The focus on the health of the industry rather than the health of the whales partially reflects a shared understanding among key stakeholders that whale-watching as an activity does not seem to be harming the whales. However, it also reflects a critical aspect of the construction of interests – assessability. The impacts of self-regulation were much more assessable in terms of the industry than in terms of the whales. Actors could construct plausible scenarios with respect to impacts on commercial operators much more easily than in terms of the whales. This was due largely to the relative difficulty of calculating the effects of any action or situation on the health of the whales: “Unfortunately, we do not yet have enough clear evidence to determine whether whale-watching boats and other types of marine traffic are detrimental to the well-being of the whales” (Ford et al., 1994: 30). Thus, as a discursive resource in the construction of a collaboration, interests demand plausible scenarios with assessable consequences.

**Representation**

The question of representation in collaboration has traditionally been understood in terms of stakeholders: the “organizations or individuals with a legitimate interest in the problem under consideration” (Gray & Hay, 1986: 96). More generally, representation involves the discursive construction of actors and roles in a collaborative process. As with issues and interests, the discursive processes by which actors and roles are constructed are essentially political: power is involved both in the ability to construct roles in a discourse and then in the ability to effect certain actions that is associated with those roles (Phillips & Hardy, Someref). One example of such a construction from the field of whale-watching is the formation of the Northwest Association of Whale Watchers:

> Our relationship with the San Juan Island operators quickly became pivotal, and that led to the Whale Watch Operators Association of the Northwest [sic], which took several years to sort of grunt and groan into existence. (Interview, commercial operator 1)

> We also have Northwest Association of Whale Watchers … And they have voluntary guidelines and a set of rules about how to behave around the whales. (Interview, commercial operator 2)

The formation of this association provided a discursive position from which commercial operators could legitimately enter into the discourse around regulation of boater behavior around the whales, effectively increasing the potential influence of the operators beyond what they would have had as individual actors. The Association was recognized as a legitimate voice for commercial operators by regulatory agencies and local citizen groups. Indeed, their construction
as a collective actor enabled the operators to interact more easily with other collective actors, such as government departments and agencies.

In the negotiations around collaboration, available concepts (e.g., ‘industry association’, ‘commercial operator’) are discursively attached to members of the collaboration to justify and explain their legitimate right to participate. According to Gray and Hay (1986: 96):

A significant step in defining the domain [of collaboration] is identifying who truly has a legitimate stake in the issues to be addressed. A stakeholder is viewed to have legitimacy when this individual or group is perceived by others to have the right and the capacity to participate.

Gray and Hay go on to suggest that while some organizations gain legitimacy due to their power based on expertise, or control of critical resources or processes, others “may hold little actual power but have the legitimate right to participate because they will be affected by the agreements reached” (Gray & Hay, 1986: 97). Thus, the negotiation of representation can directly involve the use of interests as discursive resources to warrant the inclusion of some actor in the collaborative process; to argue that the effects of some collaborative agreements justify an actor’s or set of actors’ participation suggests that their interests provide the required legitimacy.

Of course, this does not suggest that simply because some actor or set of actors will be affected by a collaboration, that those actors interests will be articulated or their representation supported; all of these actions require some access to the discourse by someone motivated to undertake them. So, in many political arenas, many actors are not represented because they lack the means of articulating their interests or the sponsorship of someone willing to do so for them. Or, as is the case in the field of whale watching, the whales are, naturally, unable to interact directly in the discourse, so their interests are represented by a number of other actors, including government regulators, local citizens, environmental groups and research scientists. This example illustrates the political relationship between issues, interests and representation, such that actors strategically formulate and draw on issues and interests to explain their role in the collaboration, and ultimately to influence the process toward their desired ends. In negotiating roles in some collaborative activity, actors may successfully present themselves as important to the resolution of an issue and still remain excluded or marginal in the network of representation. For instance, cliques within the network of actors negotiating the domain and nature of the collaborative activity may work to exclude others in order to enforce a homogeneity of interests (reasons for action) with respect to an issue. In contrast, actors with seemingly marginal attachment to issues might be included where the goal of dominant actors is to ensure a heterogeneity of interests, as is seen in some governmental committees for example.

While Gray and Hay (1986) usefully highlight the discursive construction of actor’s relationships to issues, the problem of representation may also involve the discursive construction of actors themselves. Just as issues and interests are produced in communication, so too are actors as objects in discourse. This is, perhaps, most obvious in the case of organizations. In the social negotiation that surrounds collaboration, persons may find it strategically necessary to establish a collective identity with a discrete association to the issues and interests at hand. For instance, as some individuals or groups find themselves marginalized despite their self-perceived
legitimacy (e.g., Cobb, 1993), they may work to re-present themselves as a collective agent with greater power and legitimacy. Because representation involves the negotiation of roles and status, individuals too may find themselves ‘reinventing’ their own identities with respect to the collaborative process. This is not a process of deception or guile, but simply an acknowledgment of the discursive nature of identity – social actors are not simply biological beings or collectives but include implicit or explicit relations to social context.

In the formation of the Northwest Association of Whale Watchers, negotiations around representation have effected a network in which operators of commercial whale watching ventures have negotiated the status of “members” of the Association, while others such as U.S. and Canadian Coast Guards and fisheries officials, local residents and politicians, and research scientists are involved in other roles. The discourse around the Association presents government organizations largely as an alternative to the Association in that the focus of its activities is the regulation and control of member behavior around the whales. Local residents and politicians engage in discussions with the Association regarding the behavior of operators around whales, often focusing on the position of the operator’s boats vis a vis the residents onshore and the whales. Research scientists interact less directly with the Association, providing scientific evidence concerning the effects of whale watching on the animals. The scientists also interact with various operators in the exchange of information regarding the position, direction and identification of whales and pods.

Outcomes and Antecedents

Outcomes

In this framework, outcomes refer to the social effects of actors’ negotiations of issues, interests and representations. The negotiation of these discursive concepts and objects not only defines them, but can also affect the activities and relationships of actors in important material ways. These effects occur both within the collaborative relationship and in the broader institutional context in which it occurs. For instance, the effects of negotiations around a collaboration in the whale-watching community might affect only that specific relationship, as in the negotiation of meeting times and places for an operators’ association. Or it might have much broader effects such that the field as a whole, as in a collaboration that either enhances or damages the public’s impression of whale-watching as non-intrusive.

We conceptualize the outcomes of collaboration, whether in the collaboration or at the field level, in terms of two primary categories: practices and rules. By practices we mean not simply what people do, but the patterns of action that become legitimated and institutionalized within some context. For instance, the issue of not knowing where the whales are located was associated with significantly different practices in the different collaborations that arose around it. In the informal Johnson Strait Spotting Network, information on whale locations and directions was widely shared among operators and researchers:

[The researchers] are on the radio all the time, every single day, talking to the whale researchers, the whale watchers. They'll basically tell the whale watchers where the whales are, and then the whale watchers will tell them what's happening with the pods. You know, who's traveling with who, and what direction, and what they're doing, and stuff. (Interview, commercial operator)
In contrast, whale location information was considered proprietary and guarded closely in the two southern spotting networks associated with commercial operators:

I had hired the guy and we had bought a lot of expensive equipment. … We have a man with military binoculars who can look across the strait. … So this was costing me enormous amounts of money: the guy was full time, radios, telephones, equipment, so I made a deal with the first two guys and said okay, ‘Let's share some of these expenses’. … So as time went on, other people heard about this - we tried to keep it quiet, but other people heard about it. … We drew the line after some point, saying, ‘Okay, this is our group’. And I knew when we did that, what we were inviting was a competing network, which is exactly what happened. (Interview, commercial operator)

In discursive terms, the establishment of a practice involves the construction of both a concept and an object. Practices involve concepts because they imply an understanding of some action as normal or legitimate. Practices also exist as an object – practices involve the attachment of some concept to a set of social relations and activities that are real in the sense of existing in the material world. For example, sharing information freely as a practice associated with the Johnson Strait informal whale-spotting network implies that the actors involved in this collaboration have some understanding of the concept of sharing information freely. At the same time, it suggests that they not only understand this concept but that they act on it as well.

The second type of collaborative outcome is the production of a rule. Whereas practices involve action, rules express normalized understandings of legitimate behavior and, thus, exist strictly as concepts. Drawing on an institutional perspective, rules “are classifications built into society as reciprocated typifications or interpretations. Such rules may be simply taken for granted or may be supported by public opinion or the force of law” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977: 341). Consequently, rules involve only the construction and arrangement of concepts. Regardless of whether they are written down or exist only in oral communication, rules remain in the expressive sphere. We conceptualize ‘rules’ as a broad category that comprises a range of discursive concepts, including formal legislation, charters, constitutions and guidelines, as well as informal norms and standards.

For example, an informal collaboration of whale watchers and researchers in the Johnson Strait area produced a set of formal guidelines for behavior around the whales, which were partially summarized by one commercial operator:

If you're in a boat you don't come within a hundred meters of the whales. The whales can decide to come to you, you know, that's fine, it's their choice. You don't run on top of the whales. You don't chase them at any time. If they're in a resting line, you stay with them for 800 meters max, because they're at a more vulnerable state. (Interview, commercial operator)

These rules say nothing about the extent of operators’ level of conformity or acceptance with respect to the guidelines. While these guidelines might (and have) influenced the practices of the field, they might not have done so, but would in either case exist as rules, as concepts in the discourse. Although the aim of the sponsors of some rules might often be to influence behavior or outcomes, the link between rules and the material world is in their relationship to practice. As
rules are reciprocated, they affect the actions of participants in the collaboration and, if those actions become institutionalized, the rules effect practices. 

Thus, we conceptualize the discursive outcomes of collaboration in terms of the set of effects that the collaborative action has, both directly on its members as they work together and more broadly on the organizational field in which the collaboration occurs. What is critical is that these effects not simply occur in a one-off or ad hoc manner, but that they become institutionalized in some manner. This does not mean that they necessarily involve formal legitimation as through government regulation or even the bylaws of an industry association, but merely that they become associated with some set of social, cultural or psychological processes that support them in a routine manner, such that they do not require continuing intervention to be sustained (Jepperson, 1991). Our conceptualization of both rules and practices is that for them to be considered an outcome of the collaboration, they need to become an ongoing feature of the interaction among participants in the collaboration or of the field more generally.

Antecedents

From a discourse analytic perspective, the antecedents to collaboration are the discursive resources which form the backdrop to any attempt to collaborate. Just as collaboration has an effect on the field of which it is a part, the initial set of objects, concepts, rules, and practices upon which the actors interested in collaborating can draw are products of the activities associated with the field. In other words, collaboration never occurs in a social vacuum and existing understandings which are brought by actors to a collaboration form the basis for the negotiation of the issues, interests and representation that underlies collaboration.

The organizational field can therefore play either an enabling or a constraining role. In some cases, the available resources will act to support collaborative activity. For example, in the northern whale-watching community, their practice of collaboration around the sharing of information on whale location supported other forms of collaboration. The norm of cooperation (a rule) and the practice of sharing information supported further collaboration. In the south, however, the reverse situation occurred. Rather than sharing information on the location of whales across the community, two separate groups formed and competed for information on whale locations. This led to an increasingly deep rift forming in the community and hindered further cooperation even though it may have benefited everyone to share the costs of whale-spotting and tracking. The practices and norms of the lower whale-watching community acted as a barrier to collaboration across the boundaries that had grown up.

The nature of the organizational field is not only important in terms of the role it plays in supporting or undermining the collaboration, but also in the role it plays in privileging individual actors. The existing field provides the discursive resources from which individual actors construct their versions issues, interests, and representation; that is, their versions of the world and their place in it. The field will always support some sets of issues, interests, and representations more than others, and those that are not supported by existing understandings will have to work harder and have access to more resources in order to make up for the disparity in position created by the institutional structures of the field.
But this also points to the importance of the outcomes of collaboration. Successful collaborations will tend to structure the field in ways that provide the necessary resources for similar forms of collaboration to occur and for existing ones to continue. Over time, the issues, interests, and legitimate identities may become sedimented and increasingly hard to dislodge. Actors become able to see things in only one way, and to understand their role and identity in a limited fashion. These understandings then provide the antecedents for future collaborations and, over time, play an important role in the structuring of the field and other collaborations.

**Conclusions**

In this article, we have drawn on a broad investigation of collaboration in an organizational field to develop a model of collaboration that focuses on its underlying dynamic and its relation to the organizational field in which it occurs. Our contribution is therefore a model of collaboration as a social process, embedded and growing out of an organizational field, with important ramifications for the ongoing development of the field and the meanings, practices, and rules that characterize it. This model has a number of important ramifications for further research and for the practice of collaboration.

**Implications for Research**

First, our perspective highlights the embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) of collaboration in wider institutional structures. We have referred to the connection between collaboration and the interorganizational domain in which it occurs at several points in our discussion. But this connection between broad institutional structures and collaboration requires much more development and further empirical research. Based on our study, it is clear that understanding the dynamics of collaboration, and in particular its antecedents and outcomes, requires an understanding of how broader institutional structures are produced, the role of collaboration in this production, and the way broader institutional structures are drawn upon to support collaboration. Conversely, it is equally clear that certain institutional structures can prevent collaboration and that this dynamic is equally important to a developed theory of collaboration. Future work in this area must therefore take the organizational field as its focus of attention (Wood & Gray, 1991) and study the range of collaboration that occurs across a field and the complex web of inter-relationships that connect the various forms of collaboration.

Second, collaboration is a social accomplishment (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). It is highly discursive and depends on an ongoing process of discursive negotiation. Collaboration depends on the ongoing negotiation of meanings that allow sufficient agreement on the issues, interests, and representation to allow the collaboration to move forward. Theoretical perspectives that fail to include an explicit theory of meaning and social construction are unable to consider this important aspect of collaboration. Similarly, empirical methodologies that ignore meaning and the necessity of developing common understandings are missing much of the process underlying collaboration.

Third, the discursive perspective we have adopted includes an explicit connection to a nuanced idea of power (Hardy & Phillips, forthcoming; Phillips & Hardy, 1997). While the organizational field that we studied was composed of participants with a wide variety of resources, the limitations each faced meant that no party was able to dominate the collaborations.
Even the government, with its inherent ability to coerce other participants, was practically limited by its own resources and the difficulties associated with attempting to police boater activity around marine mammals. This situation is not true in all instances of collaboration. In other instances, collaboration may be “managed” much more directly by powerful participants. The focus on collaboration as a “discursive struggle” highlights the need to understand the kinds of resources that make certain participants more successful in gaining support for their constructions of the world and thereby managing the collaboration. The critical discourse analysis literature (Fairclough, 1992) provides the necessary theoretical ideas to develop a more critical view of collaboration building on the theoretical framework developed in this paper.

**Implications for Practice**

By implications for practice we mean implications for participants in collaborations and for consultants and other facilitators interesting in assisting in the formation of collaborative groups. Understanding the highly discursive and negotiated nature of collaboration leads to three primary implications for the practice of collaboration. First, the potential for collaboration lies not in trust or the existence of a shared problem, but rather in the ability of participants to negotiate a set of shared understandings of issues, interests and identities that provide a sufficient framework for concerted understanding and action. The existence of appropriate concepts and objects in the inter-organizational field is an important pre-requisite of successful collaboration. For example, the development of SEMATECH depended on a pre-existing agreement that the Japanese posed a threat to the current market dominance and that collaborative activity was more effective at improving the technological competence of industry members than competition (Browning et al., 1995).

Second, collaboration is a communicative process and the clear explication of the meanings of things should be the initial focus of collaborative activity. Tools from communication become the tools of collaboration and the development of collaborative practice begins with the development of communicative practice (e.g., Putnam, Chapman & Phillips, 1996). All of the kinds of things that assist in the production of effective communication become part of the production of effective collaboration, including the recognition that communication is not occurring and that an agreement in some ases is very unlikely. Negotiation and mediation become the central activities for collaborators and facilitators respectively.

Third, collaboration affects much more than just the “issue” at hand. In modifying or creating objects and concepts it may have profound effects not foreseen by participants and, furthermore, the collaboration may have profound effects on groups not formally included in the collaboration. A discursive view of collaboration therefore highlights the importance of considering the ethical aspects of collaboration particularly around the idea of representation. The profound effects of collaboration make fairness and openness important issues in a public policy sense.
References


Figure 1: A Discursive Model of the Collaboration Process
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