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Collaboration in action: How micro-level relational dynamics are connected with issue frame convergence in collaborative governance networks

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we investigate stakeholders' micro-level relational dynamics and their connection to issue frame convergence in collaborative governance. We longitudinally studied the collaborative network around area regeneration in an urban area in the Netherlands. Three different relational dynamics emerged over time: an adversarial, a transactional and a care-based dynamic. A care-based dynamic fostered 'deeper level' issue frame convergence through reflexive integration of differences. Reflexive learning about relational dynamics within collaborative networks is required to nurture this fruitful and productive connection. Participatory action research can offer action perspectives on how to do so.


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Introduction

Collaborative governance has become a well-established approach in public administration theory and practice (Ansell and Gash 2008; Waardenburg et al. 2020). Induced by the complexity of contemporary societal issues, it has become common that public, societal and private actors engage in collaborative governance to develop and implement public policies. Characteristic for collaborative governance are sustained and constructive dialogue between stakeholders across public, private and civic spheres and, based on the recognition of interdependency, a commitment towards developing a shared theory of change and collective actions to respond to a policy issue of common concern (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson and Nabatchi 2015).

A central assumption in collaborative governance theory is that stakeholders' micro-level relational dynamics, i.e. the way stakeholders relate, bond and approach each other within collaborative networks, have a constitutive role in

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collaborative work (Gash 2022; Stout and Keast 2021; Stout and Love 2017). Specifically, scholars highlight that stakeholders' micro-level relational dynamics shape issue frame convergence, i.e. the development of a shared frame of the policy issue at stake (Nowell 2010; van Buuren 2009). Achieving issue frame convergence is considered key for engendering collective action (van Buuren 2009).

Whilst stakeholders' micro-level relational dynamics are constitutive for realizing issue frame convergence, studies also show that the extent to which stakeholders succeed (or do not) in developing issue frame convergence throughout collaborative processes feeds back into stakeholders' relational dynamics too. Persistent lack of issue frame convergence, for example, may exacerbate conflicts and torpedo productive relationships (Dewulf et al. 2009; Gray 2004).

It remains, however, remarkably underexplored what patterns of micro-level relational dynamics *actually* emerge throughout collaborative governance processes (Bartels 2018; Stout and Keast 2021) and how, *in practice*, particular micro-level relational dynamics connect to the development of issue frame convergence in collaborative work. Grassroots empirical studies that systematically and longitudinally unpack stakeholders' micro-level relational dynamics and their connection to issue frame convergence remain sparse. Yet insights herein can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how collaboration gets shape in practice. This study therefore takes as guiding research questions:

- (1) *What patterns of micro-level relational dynamics emerge over time within a collaborative network?*
- (2) *How do these dynamics connect to the development of issue frame convergence/divergence within the collaborative network? Specifically, through which mechanisms is issue frame convergence fostered or hindered?*

The following section outlines our theoretical perspective and analytical foci. The empirical section then draws on a longitudinal in-depth case study of the collaborative network around the area regeneration of Greenham¹, an area located in one of Netherlands' largest cities. After presenting the case and the research methods applied, we outline how particular relational dynamics are connected to issue frame convergence within the Greenham network. The final section discusses the implications of our findings for collaborative governance theory and practice.

Theoretical perspective

Collaboration in action: micro-level relational dynamics and their connection to issue frame convergence

Collaborative governance can be generally conceived as 'any method of collective decision making where public agencies and non-state stakeholders engage each other in a consensus-oriented deliberative process for inventing and implementing public policies' (Johnston et al. 2011, 699). The collaborative governance literature broadly recognizes that much of the ability of collaborative networks to solve public problems depends on the quality of their internal collaborative process, i.e. of 'what happens between participants "at the table"' and how it happens' (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015,

58). This study zooms in on two processes within internal collaboration dynamics: stakeholders' micro-level relational dynamics and issue frame convergence. In particular, we are interested in how stakeholders' relational dynamics connect to the development of issue frame convergence.

Zooming in on stakeholders' micro-level relational dynamics

The explicit orientation towards stakeholders' micro-level relational dynamics implies a relationally driven approach towards collaborative governance. This approach affords primacy, both ontologically and methodologically, to relationships and interactions as the main unit of analysis and focuses on unpacking emergent performances of relational processes (Bartels and Turnbull 2020). As Bartels and Turnbull (2020, 1331) point out: 'relationality does something: i.e. webs of interactions and relational dynamics give shape to individuals, systems and their actions and outcomes'. Foregrounding relationships and inter-actors denotes a reversal of ontological priority: stakeholders' relationships are conceived as constitutive of collaborative work rather than instrumental to it. Therefore, the empirical and analytical starting point of our study is stakeholders' micro-level relational dynamics.

Current studies on stakeholders' relationships have mainly been preoccupied with studying the (static) properties of stakeholders' relationships that facilitate collaborations, such as trust, commitment, internal legitimacy or reciprocity (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson and Nabatchi 2015). This line of research provides insight into the relational properties of successful collaboration but leaves us with a rather unspecified understanding of the micro-level relational dynamics that *produce* these properties (Stout, Bartels, and Love 2018). We argue here that to thoroughly comprehend what relationships 'do' to issue frame convergence, this predominant focus on identifying static properties needs to be paralleled with a more detailed and dynamic understanding of stakeholders' relationships in collaborative networks (Stout and Keast 2021). This analytical interest in micro-level relational dynamics requires a conceptualization that goes beyond structural (static) properties and broadens our consideration to the dynamic ways in which people relate (Stout, Bartels, and Love 2018; Vandebussche 2020).

We conceptualize stakeholders' micro-level relational dynamics as the ways actors relate, bond and approach each other within collaborative networks (Stout and Keast 2021; Stout, Bartels, and Love 2018). Drawing on Bartels (2014), Stout, Bartels, and Love (2018), and Stout and Keast's (2021) work on collaborative dynamics and micro-level relational processes, and drawing on Schutz's (1966) work on dimensions in interpersonal relationships, we use four dimensions in stakeholders' micro-level relational dynamics as 'sensitizing concepts' to guide our analysis: (1) stakeholders' attitudinal dispositions towards the collaborative network and its members, (2) power dynamics, (3) style of affection and (4) communicative pattern within the collaborative network. The first dimension, attitudinal dispositions, focuses attention on stakeholders' (positive or negative) attitudes and tendencies towards the network and its members (Kaiser, Byrka, and Hartig 2010). This is about, for instance, stakeholders' degree of willingness to participate in the collaboration. The second dimension points to power dynamics: how power is exercised within the collaborative network. More specifically, it draws attention to the arenas of power use: on how stakeholders exercise power to control the who (participants), the what (content) and

the how (process) within collaborative networks (Purdy 2012). This may vary across a dimension from power asymmetry to power sharing for decision-making on participants, content and process (Ran and Qi 2018). The third dimension, style of affection, emphasizes the emotional closeness people feel towards other stakeholders within the collaborative network (Schutz 1966). This is about how and to what extent stakeholders accept and value each other as members of the collaborative network. Communicative pattern – as a final dimension – draws attention to the way people communicate with each other within networks, both verbally (tone of voice, modes of expressions) and non-verbally (Bartels 2014). We use these four dimensions to explore what patterns of relational dynamics emerge throughout a collaborative governance process.

Zooming in on the connection between micro-level relational dynamics and issue frame convergence

Following the argument that ‘relationality does something’ (Bartels and Turnbull 2020, 1331), we recognize that stakeholders’ relational dynamics can foster or hinder collaborative process(es) (Stout and Keast 2021; Stout and Love 2017). We focus on what relational dynamics ‘do’ to issue frame convergence within collaborative networks.

The concepts of frames and framing have become well established in public administration literature (Van Hulst and Yanow 2016). In the diverse uses of the concepts, the common denominator is that a particular situation ‘can be understood in different ways, according to different frames, and that this holds different implications of what that something will be taken to mean’ (Dewulf et al. 2007, w.p.). In the policy realm, framing operates on three kinds of entities: ‘the substantive content of the policy issue, the identities and relationships of situational actors in the policy process, and the policy process itself’ (Van Hulst and Yanow 2016, 102). Issue frames, the first kind of entity, concern how stakeholders interpret a given policy issue: what it is, why it exists and subsequently how it can be solved (Nowell 2010; Van Hulst and Yanow 2016). Hence, issue frames encompass a diagnosis of the policy issue at hand and a description of the adequate response to solve that issue.

Within collaborative processes, issue frames are ‘deliberated’: stakeholders engage in frame deliberation, i.e. ‘debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants’ (Chambers 2003, 309). Ideally, through deliberation, a collaborative governance process results in the development of a shared issue frame, i.e. in issue frame convergence (Ansell and Gash 2008; van Buuren 2009). Issue frame convergence is considered elementary for the achievement and legitimization of collective action (Nowell 2010; van Buuren 2009). Issue frame convergence can become visible in multiple ways: issue frames can merge into an overarching frame (compromise frame), or a new shared frame can be constructed (Zimmermann, Albers, and Kenter 2021). However, seen that issue frame convergence is an emergent outcome, the lack of issue frame convergence – i.e. divergence – may also occur. In such a case, substantial discrepancies remain between different stakeholders. Issue frame divergence can present a major challenge for collective action (Nowell 2010).

Collaborative governance and adjacent literatures theoretically argue that stakeholders’ relational dynamics are connected to issue frame convergence/divergence in

collaborative work: if stakeholder relationships evolve positively, it is more likely that stakeholders will succeed in converging issue frames through frame deliberation (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson and Nabatchi 2015). Donohue, for instance, argues that stakeholders' relationships form 'a relational logic, or framework that serves as a resource for the substantive issues in the interaction' (Donohue 2003, 168). Alternatively, it has also been argued that persistent frame divergence undermines positive relationships and contributes to prolonged or intractable relational conflicts (Gray 2004; Nowell 2010).

This study seeks to refine our understanding of how stakeholders' relational dynamics are connected to the development of issue frame convergence. This also implies taking into consideration how issue frame convergence (or lack of it) feeds back into prevailing relational dynamics.

Research setting and methods

Introduction to the case: the Greenham network

We obtained empirical data through a longitudinal in-depth single case study of the collaborative network dealing with the area regeneration of Greenham (further: the Greenham network). The Greenham network was created to coordinate actions and decisions in relation to the area regeneration of Greenham, an urban area in one of Netherlands' largest cities. Our research approach, although limited in generalizability, enabled us to closely follow-up developments for an extended period of time. Our in-depth focus on a *single case* was needed given our interest in stakeholders' relational dynamics, a potentially delicate topic to study that requires time, attention and rapport with stakeholders in the field. We also sought to understand how particular relational dynamics connect to the development of issue frame convergence. This interest in change and development implied developing a *longitudinal view* on these phenomena (Eshuis and Gerrits 2021).

We chose the Greenham network because it brought together public, private and societal stakeholders to jointly develop an area-based regeneration plan, based on a consensus-oriented style of policy-making. These features can be considered as typical of collaborative forms of governing on the local level, particularly in the (Dutch) urban planning field (Gerrits, Rauws, and de Roo 2012). There were also pragmatic reasons to study the Greenham network: many secondary sources were available (such as media reports, policy documents, and a series of short documentaries), making the case accessible and transparently observable. Additionally, at the time of case selection, in 2012, the Greenham network still had years ahead, enabling us to study stakeholders' relational dynamics and their connection to issue frame convergence not only in retrospect but also in 'real time'.

The Greenham network was installed mid-2008 by the municipality as a response to persistent conflicts about the area regeneration between the housing association (owning about 80% of the housing in Greenham and main investor in the area regeneration) and the residents' and tenants' organizations. In the run-up to the installation of the Greenham network, these stakeholders held diametrically opposed views on the area regeneration. In 2006, the housing association had announced a plan based on the – back then – standard recipe for area regeneration: demolition and new building. The residents' and tenants' organizations campaigned

for a different approach: renovation and restoration of the housing. In addition, they drew special attention to the cultural-historical value of the area. Protests and conflicts about the way forward accumulated in the following years, illustrating how the area regeneration was a highly contentious issue. Consequently, stakeholders got ‘stuck’ in a policy dispute over the area regeneration. The municipality intervened and proposed a collaborative approach to the area regeneration. An independent project manager, appointed by the municipality, set up a collaborative network and, from mid-2008, the Greenham network emerged, bringing together the following key stakeholders: the housing association (main investor), the district, which Greenham is part of (political and administrative actor responsible for physical and social developments in the area), the municipality (facilitator), and the residents’ and tenants’ organizations. From then on, the Greenham network was the designated platform for further developing the area regeneration plans.

Data collection & analysis

We generated various kinds of data throughout our empirical study (see Appendix A). First and foremost, we relied on *in-depth narrative interviews* (Czarniawska 2004) to elicit stakeholders’ detailed stories about relational dynamics in the Greenham network and about how these dynamics connected to the development of issue frame convergence. Interview questions clustered around three major themes: how stakeholders experienced mutual relationships, qualitative changes in these experiences throughout the collaborative process, and the connection of relational dynamics to issue frame convergence (see interview guide in Appendix B). During interviews, we used *time-lining* as a tool (Sheridan, Chamberlain, and Dupuis 2011) to encourage stakeholders to visualize the temporal flow in relational dynamics within the network and their connection to issue frame convergence. In total, 23 stakeholders were interviewed multiple times (minimum two interviews/respondent) between 2013 and 2016. Twenty-one respondents were key stakeholders in the Greenham network: eight staff members of the housing association, five representatives of the residents’ and tenants’ organizations, six public professionals from the district and municipality, and two self-employed spatial planning professionals involved as experts. The other two respondents were filmmakers who made a series of documentaries on the area regeneration process. Their engagement resembled that of nonparticipant observation, specifically stationary observation: they installed a camera and microphones and recorded the meetings without interfering (Czarniawska 2007).

Between 2013 and 2016, we also engaged in *shadowing* during project and working group meetings and related activities. Shadowing implies we joined meetings as close observers, preserving an attitude of outsideness while not prohibiting sharing thoughts or feelings with those we engaged with: the point was ‘never to behave like a fly on the wall [...], but to behave like a responsible adult, showing respect and sympathy for others’ (Czarniawska 2007, 54–55). This enabled us to observe stakeholders’ interactions, attitudes and behaviours and to capture the emergence of relational dynamics and connection to issue frames in real time. We made extensive field notes of what happened, how interactions went, how actors behaved and dealt with each other and of our interpretations hereof.

In addition, we used *archival documents* to reconstruct stakeholders’ issue frames and the development of issue frame convergence, and to further

reconstruct stakeholders' relational dynamics. These documents included reports of the project and working group meetings, policy documents, newspaper articles, websites and blog content. Moreover, we had access to 7 h of footage of meetings of the Greenham network, collected by the filmmakers mentioned earlier.

We analysed our data using abductive thematic analysis. Abductive analysis conducts 'parallel and equal engagement with empirical data and extant theoretical understanding' (Thompson 2022, 1411). We thus used a combination of deductive and inductive aspects in grappling with stakeholders' relational dynamics and the development of issue frame convergence in the Greenham network.

We started data analysis by familiarizing with our data set and, in an initial coding round, labelling data fragments according to the key concepts in our study: relational dynamics, issue frames and issue frame convergence. At this point, we also time-stamped each selected fragment.

We then first focused on fleshing out the question of what patterns of relational dynamics emerged throughout the collaborative process. To prepare this coding process, we re-read all relevant fragments and categorized them according to the different dimensions we formulated to guide our analysis of relational dynamics. Then, in a first step, we inductively coded the categorized data fragments. Next, we collated these inductive codes into broader theoretically informed themes by cross-referencing inductive codes with theoretical insights from relevant disciplinary fields concerning relationships and communication: e.g. interpersonal dynamics theory, family systems theory, communication studies. In a final step, we analysed whether there was any meaningful clustering of theoretical-informed themes *across* dimensions and in time, showing a pattern: a repeated and consistent way of relating and approaching each other within the collaborative network in a given period. Based on this final analytic step, we distinguished three patterns across dimensions: an adversarial, a transactional and a care-based dynamic. Appendix C provides an overview of the steps taken in our analysis of stakeholders' relational dynamics.

Following our analysis of stakeholders' relational dynamics, we analysed how these dynamics connected to the development of issue frame convergence. Here, we started with analysing the relevant (timestamped) fragments for the two central frame-elements: diagnosis of the policy issue and description of adequate response(s) and its frame-holder. Based on this analysis, we made a visual overview of the communicated issue frames over time. In a next step, this visual overview was used to analyse the development of issue frame convergence/divergence over time. When in a given period, issue frames were highly compatible, we labelled this as issue frame convergence. When stakeholders' frames had incompatible elements and lacked agreement, we labelled this as issue frame divergence. Appendix D provides a (stylized) overview of issue frames and issue frame convergence throughout the collaborative process between 2008 and 2016. As a final step, we analysed through what kind of mechanism relational dynamics connected to issue frame convergence. To do so, we re-read and re-analysed all relevant fragments vis-à-vis the connection between stakeholders' relational dynamics and issue frame convergence to track down how stakeholders logically connected particular relational dynamics to the development of issue frame convergence/divergence in the

Greenham network. We identified three mechanisms: (1) polarization and entrenchment; (2) primary integration, and (3) reflexive integration.

Findings

What patterns of micro-level relational dynamics emerged in the Greenham network and how were particular dynamics connected to the development of issue frame convergence? To structure our description of events, we decomposed our research narrative in four successive phases – each phase representing a period of time in which a particular relational dynamic characterized the Greenham network. For each phase, we first elaborate on the pattern of relating that emerged and then delve into how this particular dynamic connected to the development of issue frame convergence.

Phase 1: 2008/2009

Adversarial dynamic

At the outset of the collaboration, mid-2008, the Greenham network was marked by conflicts. Much of the encounters between the housing association and the residents' and tenants' organizations of Greenham ended up in 'fights and run-ins' (R1). Read how the project manager described the atmosphere at that time, particularly that between the director of the housing association and the chair of the residents' organization:

My finest moment . . . not! . . . Terrible. The Minister of Housing was paying Greenham a visit [. . .] and we thought, well, that is a good time for the project group to report on their progress. So, we had breakfast at the home of the director of the housing association and discussed: 'guys, we will not fight at the table. You can say you do not agree, but, well, this is meant to bring in money'. Well, the director of the housing association and the chair of the residents' organization had a huge fight, you do not want to know how embarrassing, it was terrible, I wanted to crawl under the table, but I couldn't do anything about it. What a mess. [. . .] The director of the housing association having a cheap fight with the chair of the residents' organization in front of the Minister. (PP1)

This story exposes the offensive way of communicating between the director of the housing association and the chair of the residents' organization. From the start, these two were 'fighting like wildcats' (PP1). This was also reflected within the collaborative network, as one of the members of the tenants' organization explained:

There was a battle. We simply needed to compete. And that was quite fierce, the knives were out. We simply needed to win that battle. Period. We simply couldn't lose that battle. So, then it is a matter of who has standing power and you need to have the right arguments in place. [. . .] (R2)

This adversarial atmosphere was also reflected in power wrangling about who was in control. During the start-up of the project group, late 2008, the director of the housing association stated that they were in charge and 'did not see any reason to openly share all information with residents and tenants during project group meetings' (F1). At the same time, the residents' and tenants' organizations tried to draw power towards them. Illustrative of this is that they wrote to other housing associations with the request to 'buy' the area and 'rescue' it from the plans of the incumbent housing association. The

housing association conceived this as a sort of coup attempt, as the following quote illustrates:

They simply wanted to take the seat of the board. They wanted to direct They actually explored whether they could free Greenham from the housing association. This was really shameful: they wrote to other housing associations across the country to ask if they wanted to buy the area. They also explored whether they could become an independent housing association. (HA8)

Both the housing association and the residents' and tenants' organizations thus tried to pull the strings. The above stories epitomize stakeholders' pattern of relating in 2008/2009. While the different stakeholders 'came to the table', they were not committed to the collaborative network: stakeholders behaved avoidant, they constantly fought over control, their way of communicating was reproachful and offensive and, in particular, the director of the housing association and the chair of the residents' organizations displayed feelings of mutual antipathy. We labelled this way of relating as an *adversarial dynamic*.

Polarization and entrenchment: persistent frame divergence

This adversarial dynamic held collaborative work hostage. The project manager's attempts to initiate and engage stakeholders in discussions about views on the urban regeneration were not successful. The project manager shared:

So I thought, let's get some plans on paper, and then we can talk about it and try to get some energy in the process. [...] Eventually, well, it was difficult to get something off the ground. . . . [. . .]. On a substantive level, this made things very difficult, and it also caused a lot of irritation that nothing happened [. . .]. I genuinely had my doubts if they would be able to reach a compromise, to reach anything Because the tendency was like . . . 'never mind', 'not possible', 'leave us alone'. . . . (PP1)

Stakeholders did little to harmonize efforts or find common ground, rather they were constantly getting into confrontations and avoided or even sabotaged collaborative work. We also observed how stakeholders used project meetings to reiterate their own framing(s) of the issue. As one of the filmmakers summarizes:

There was little nuance, from both sides [. . .]. The first years of meetings was mainly a one-way street. [. . .]. The housing association just re-iterated the same issues, and communication with residents was a one-way street. And the residents' organisation too was digging its heels in. (F2)

The adversarial dynamics that prevailed led to polarization within the Greenham network: when being faced with each other during meetings, stakeholders structurally rejected or objected each other's input in interactions and, as a consequence, the already diverging issue frames became more entrenched. This also showed in how stakeholders reacted on each other's statements. When, during a meeting with the Minister of Housing, in November 2009, the housing association expressed its concerns about the financial picture of the first collectively explored ideas on the area regeneration, the residents' and tenants' organizations conceived this as a direct attack on their views on the area regeneration – while this was not what that statement meant to communicate (as the Minister also pointed out during the meeting). Hence, working together in this adversarial dynamic triggered polarization: interactions revolved around opposing each other, pitting viewpoint against viewpoint, which further entrenched stakeholders' issue frames. Beyond simply hindering frame convergence,

this adversarial dynamic, through a mechanism of polarization and entrenchment, contributed to perpetuating frame divergence.

Eventually, the continuing conflicts and persistent frame divergence in the Greenham network had a degenerative effect on collaborative work. The network faced impasse after impasse – culminating in the proverbial straw: a formal complaint of a staff member of the housing association against a member of the residents' organization, causing a deadlock in the process for more than 6 months. At this point, the Greenham network was on the precipice of its demise.

Phase 2: 2010–2012

Transactional dynamic

Early 2010, stakeholders' relational dynamics profoundly changed. As the project manager explained, the 6-months deadlock, the many 'irritations' that persisted (PP1) and the lack of progress made clear that something needed to change if they were to get anywhere. Following the suggestion of the project manager to change the composition of the network, the housing association replaced some of its staff in the Greenham network. This intervention disrupted the offensive tone within the collaborative network and the style of communicating now became more neutral and task-oriented. This is how a professional of the district described this change of attitude:

The atmosphere wasn't always good, but it was more constructive. [. . .]. So, in that respect, there was a good working atmosphere – with sometimes in particular the housing association still being defensive. [. . .]. But what was very obvious, was that everyone had the intention to figure this out, although the differences were very big. (PP5)

However, stakeholders were still primarily preoccupied with protecting their own interests. Illustrative is this typification by a staff member of the housing association of the collaborative work as a game of chess:

At some point, you know what the municipality has to offer, you know what the residents' organization has to offer, you know what the national government has to offer . . . what they can and cannot do. And you know what we have to offer, as housing association . . . And you also know how the different people that are involved look at it, and you also feel where there is room to manoeuvre and negotiate So, in that respect, it was like playing chess. (HA8)

This signals how stakeholders approached collaborative work as a strategic negotiation: they focused on what they could get out of the collaboration. As one of the filmmakers indicated: it was still much about 'staking out own fields' (F1). Stakeholders also indicated how engagement in the network was mainly based on 'task-oriented roles' rather than on personal commitment.

While obviously the dust had settled, and stakeholders were willing to participate in the collaborative network in this period, we observed that collaboration more resembled a negotiation and transaction game than a search for mutual wins and shared solutions. The communicative pattern within the network was task-oriented and instrumental, emphasizing 'meticulously recording agreements' (F2), and stakeholders approached each other based on their respective organizational roles and their own interests. Hence, we labelled this relational dynamic as *a transactional dynamic*.

Primary integration²: first-order issue frame convergence

Against the backdrop of this relational dynamic, the Greenham network now actively (and steadily) started to explore how to develop a joint vision for the area regeneration. The project manager deliberately started this exploration by discussing a relatively non- emotive, neutral topic: the cultural-historical value of the area. The following quote from the project manager clarifies that:

We needed to focus on that cultural-historical element. The municipality loved it. [...]. The residents loved it. And the housing association couldn't object that we invested in mapping out the history of such a beautiful area. [...]. That made that we could realize [...] the Improvement Program. That saved Greenham ... That was the unifying and reconciling element. So, all parties were like: 'this cultural-historical aspect, this is something we can talk about with each other'. And working together on this aspect has, I think, ... well, parties could become more familiar with each other, each other's' tone, each other's attitude. And slowly, step-by-step, relations got better. (PP2)

The prevailing transactional dynamic enabled to create stability in stakeholders' relationships and to start with the exploration of reconcilable interests, such as the cultural-historical value – while avoiding discussion on the more contentious and sensitive (and fundamental) issues. We denote this way of engaging with issue frames as *primary integration*: issue frames were deliberated and discussed in a conflict-avoidant way.

Deliberating on reconcilable elements served as the breeding ground for developing the *Improvement Program* – which was approved and signed by all stakeholders in February 2012. The *Improvement Program* was the materialization of issue frame convergence: the programme merged the different issue frames in a so-called compromise frame. The *Improvement Program* combined stakeholders' different interests, without requiring stakeholders to adjust their underlying logic. As different stakeholders pointed out: at this stage they had not aligned their perspectives on the 'rough edges'. Issue frame convergence was thus realized, but only superficially. The transactional dynamic, through the mechanism of primary integration, thus fostered 'first-order' issue frame convergence: convergence on non- emotive and neutral issue elements. Nevertheless, as the quote above illustrates, the development of first-order issue frame convergence also did good to stakeholders' relational dynamics: working on the cultural-historical value reinforced the more productive relationships in this period.

Phase 3: 2012–2015

Care-based dynamic

In the previous phase, the development of issue frame convergence, albeit in a superficial way, reinforced stakeholders' more productive relationships. Moreover, in 2012, there were several events – mainly at the side of the housing association – that profoundly affected the collaborative process. Importantly, the housing association merged with another one. Following this merger, a new director was appointed and a 'dedicated' team was composed for Greenham. The new director took a different, more considerate attitude towards the Greenham network – already reflected in the appointment of a 'dedicated team Greenham'. In combination with the establishment of issue frame convergence in the previous phase, these changes in the housing association's approach to the collaborative

process facilitated the emergence of a new relational dynamic between stakeholders. Most characterizing for the stories about this period is how the housing association staff became more personally involved in the collaboration. Now, they were described as ‘working with their heart’ (R1). Instead of focusing on reconciling interests, more time and effort were now taken to explore and discuss misunderstandings and uncertainties. Space and time were created to share pains and listen to each other. Listen to how a staff member of the housing association described the way of working:

So, for instance, about the choice of contractor and the role s/he should play in the process. We really went into dialogue and dug deep to get it on the table. And a couple of weeks later, we had a similar issue about something else. So, we discussed it again and talked about concerns and doubts and pains in relation to the process. And we noticed that it just takes quite some deep conversations before we have our plans in focus. Sometimes the time it takes is frustrating, but it also gave a boost when we had a good dialogue . . . simply by saying: it is not going well, we get closer to each other. (HA3)

This more collective-oriented approach also showed in how the network organized its decision-making processes in this period. Exemplary is how stakeholders dealt with the discussions around the financial concerns of the housing association that came to the fore around 2014 (in short: the agreed upon plans no longer seemed financially feasible because of withdrawal of promised government funding). When the housing association brought these concerns to the table, workshops were organized with all parties to explicitly address these concerns and to collaboratively think through how to move forward. One of the members of the residents’ organization explained:

The mindset changed. Now it’s much more: ‘We do this together with residents’ instead of ‘We’ll do it our way and residents simply must comply’. It’s much opener now in terms of sharing information. [. . .]. The intention to collaborate is really there. Currently, we are preparing a workshop in which all parties sit together at the table trying to think through how to move forward, seen the changed situation [. . .]. The different views are not reconciled yet, but it is definitely the purpose to come to a joint solution. (R5)

The stories above show more attention to – even emphasis on – the qualities of relationships as the basis for collaboration. Stakeholders were ‘genuinely committed’ (R2) to the network, sought to share power, had an attentive communicative pattern and approached each other with empathy, care and attention. As a resident summarizes: people at the table ‘listened better, were more curious and more open, and gave attention and respect to the project and each other’ (R5). Hence, we characterized this relational dynamic as a *care-based dynamic*.

Reflexive integration: second-order issue frame convergence

As mentioned above, the *Improvement Program* still contained several ‘rough edges’. Inevitably, these issues needed to be handled. Against the backdrop of the prevailing care-based dynamic, deliberations hereabout were now approached more openly. Exemplary hereof were the discussions on the dormer windows. Although there was a lot of disagreement on this, with the new dedicated team in charge, there was also genuine interest in what residents found important. The housing association kept an ‘open mind and caring attitude towards residents’ ideas’ (R5) realizing that this could be for the better.

This also showed in how the Greenham network initially tried to tackle the earlier mentioned financial setback together – the housing association shared its calculations and discussed the possible scenarios to deal with that setback in workshops with other stakeholders. The following quote by a staff member of the housing association describes this explicit attention to exploring viewpoints and differences herein as the basis to develop a shared plan of action:

Discussing that area exploitation all together actually went well. Although it is scary, because it might mean letting go of the agreements you made with each other. . . . now we have to look with each other, how we can get the best out of it And if you take a closer look, this starts with our relationships and everything we have built up together here . . . you have a change of course, but we talk about it. Because you know each other, and that we have different viewpoints, if we discuss those thoroughly, and discuss how we can make this acceptable for all of us, I mean, not everything will be possible, but as much as possible. (HA4)

In effect, these conversations focused on a re-assessment of the situation, working on a shared understanding about that, and consciously exploring how to change the framing of the situation. We label this way of discussing and deliberating frames as *reflexive integration*. Reflexive integration fostered the development of a more deeply rooted shared frame, i.e. ‘deeper’ issue frame convergence that included convergence on sensitive issues too. A *care-based dynamic* thus fostered issue frame convergence on a ‘second-order’ and ‘deeper’ level, through a mechanism of *reflexive integration* wherein the deliberation of frames is based on a reflexive way of dealing with differences.

Phase 4: 2015–2016

Re-emergence of a transactional dynamic

In 2015, the prevailing care-based dynamic was overturned by a transactional dynamic. Compared to the previous phase (2012–2015), stakeholders returned to a stronger focus on prioritizing their own interests. The following quote of one of the residents epitomizes how interest talk was back on the table within the Greenham network:

We [residents] now work on keeping that room for negotiation as open as possible. It’s a bit a play . . . You want them (the housing association) to make progress, but you also want to turn up the heat and safeguard your own interests. (R1)

What happened in the Greenham network that explains this shift towards a more transactional dynamic again? To understand this, we took a side-step in our analysis and zoomed out to reconstruct which events played a role herein. As mentioned above, from 2014 on, the urban regeneration plans were under financial pressure and the Greenham network was working collaboratively on financial recalibration. The housing association increasingly felt cornered by these financial concerns. In 2015, these ongoing concerns led the housing association to unilaterally decide – without further consultation with the network – to change the urban regeneration approach: instead of committing to high-quality renovation or new building, they decided to commit to major maintenance. The agreed upon *Improvement Program* was re-branded as the *Great Improvement Plus* (see Appendix B). This entailed a reframing of the urban regeneration compared to the shared frame that stakeholders had agreed upon in the *Improvement Program*. This reframing was imposed to the network (by the housing

association) as a *fait accompli*. This move turned the way of working within the network upside down, as the following quote signals:

In the previous period, there were meetings with the interested parties, up to the public professionals and residents, experts, and everyone came together to brainstorm about how to collaborate best . . . and the housing association putted a lot of time and effort herein. Now this seems a sealed, other world . . . I do not recognize anything of that in the follow-up . . . as if the housing association drew a line and made a whole new start without putting it on the agenda. Before, there was a lot of transparency on decisions, but now a lot of things are unclear in relation to the follow-up phase in the Improvement Program. (E1)

Tampering with the shared frame and imposing a re-framing of the urban regeneration approach without (much) deliberation led to profound shifts in relational dynamics within the Greenham network. A core group of residents eventually agreed upon this re-framing – arguing that they ‘still agreed on the main lines of the new approach, and were okay with letting the housing association decide on the details’ (R1). They continued to participate in the Greenham network – thereby preserving issue frame convergence within the network, albeit on the main lines. Yet, as the quote above illustrates, stakeholders’ relationships within the network were strained by these events. Moreover, part of the residents quitted the Greenham network, feeling ‘betrayed’ by the housing association (R3). Thus, while the re-framing was eventually supported (and issue frame convergence preserved) within the remaining network, unilaterally tampering with the shared frame and imposing a re-framing to the network went to the expense of the care-based dynamic previously characterizing the Greenham network.

Conclusion and discussion: “care-fully” relating for instrumental and democratic value

This article provides an in-depth and detailed empirical understanding of how relational dynamics emerge in a collaborative network and how these connect to issue frame convergence. Insight into the connection between these two key constitutive processes within collaborative networks and the mechanisms that underlie them is currently lacking in the collaborative governance literature.

In our study, we found that different patterns of relational dynamics (can) emerge within a collaborative network. In the Greenham network, we observed three particular patterns: (1) an adversarial dynamic, (2) a transactional dynamic and (3) a care-based dynamic. These patterns had distinct configurations in relation to the four dimensions that we used to explore stakeholders’ relational dynamics. Our study also provided deeper understanding of how these dynamics emerged. First and foremost, our case brings out the role of endogenous developments – developments from ‘within’ the network – for stakeholders’ relational dynamics. Our findings show how personal relationships and particular individuals within the collaborative network profoundly shaped relational dynamics. In phase 1, the offensive style of communicating between the director of the housing association and the chair of the residents’ organization held the collaborative network in its grip. Working collaboratively was virtually chanceless with those two people at the table. Later, the involvement of the new director of the housing association and her more personal approach facilitated a shift towards a care-based dynamic. This insight corroborates collaborative governance literature that stresses the importance of individual professionals and their process skills in

collaborative networks (O’Leary, Choi, and Gerard 2012). However, nuancing the conception that an individual’s impact on collaborative work heavily hinges on his/her skill set, capacities and knowledge alone (e.g. O’Leary and Vij 2012), our findings suggest that there is an ‘interactional’ element to this: it is also about the ‘social match’ between individuals (see also Stout and Staton 2011). When the director of the housing association withdrew from the collaborative network, the chair of the residents’ association stayed at the table and relational dynamics, over time, grew into more productive dynamics. This finding shows that the effect of a given individual is ‘interactional’ rather than ‘isolated’ (Stout and Staton 2011). This nuances the emphasis on the role of individuals, and shifts attention to the relational and situated behaviour of individuals within networks.

While personal relationships and individuals *within* the collaborative network had considerable impact on relational dynamics, our analysis reveals how *external* events shaped stakeholders’ relational dynamics in significant ways too. External pressures – events that occurred *outside* the network – changed the ‘rules of the game’ and thus the collaborative setting. This had its repercussions on stakeholders’ relationships too. For instance, financial setbacks, associated with the suspension of promised government funding for the urban regeneration, led the housing association to unilaterally change the regeneration approach. This decision heavily affected stakeholders’ relational dynamics *within* the network. This exemplifies how stakeholders’ micro-level relational dynamics are also shaped and affected by its wider context. Expected or unexpected events on macro or meso-level can enhance or stall the internal process within a collaborative network (Rządca and Strumińska-Kutra 2016). This highlights the embeddedness of internal collaborative processes in a wider institutional and/or organizational environment (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015).

Regarding the role of both endogenous developments and external events in relational change, our study shows that no single external event in itself (in isolation) had a transformative impact on stakeholders’ relational dynamics. Rather, it was the interaction of external pressures with endogenous developments that led particular relational dynamics to emerge. This implies that endogenous and external events ‘in conjuncture’ trigger change, showing how relational change is emergent and ongoing, rather than a ‘transitory moment’ (McMurray 2010).

Besides studying how relational dynamics emerged over time in a collaborative network, we also investigated how the varied ways of relating we empirically found, connected to issue frame convergence *within* the collaborative network. We found how:

- an *adversarial dynamic* hindered issue frame convergence through a mechanism of *polarization and entrenchment*;
- a *transactional dynamic* fostered ‘first-order’ issue frame convergence through a mechanism of *primary integration*, focusing on aligning reconcilable issue elements;
- a *care-based dynamic* fostered issue frame convergence on a ‘second-order’ and ‘deeper’ level, through a mechanism of *reflexive integration*, in which the deliberation of frames is based on a reflexive way of dealing with differences.

While our primary focus was on understanding what micro-level relational dynamics ‘do’ to issue frame convergence, our study also brings out how issue

frame convergence (or lack of it) feeds back into stakeholders' relational dynamics. In phase 1, for instance, persistent frame divergence in the Greenham network reinforced the corrosion of stakeholders' relational dynamics. In contrast, in phase 2, (first-order) frame convergence catalysed the development of more productive relationships.

Alternatively, we also observed that the establishment of issue frame convergence does not mean that the collaborative network can keep things together relationally. In phase 4, the housing association unilaterally changed its approach to the urban regeneration. This re-framing had a corrosive effect on the relational dynamics in the network. However, important to note here is that this corrosive effect on stakeholders' relationships was actually not attributed to the tampering with the shared frame as such, but rather to the relational modus in which it was tampered with: the housing association operated solo on this matter and imposed their re-framing to the network, without engaging in 'care-full' deliberation. This highlights the key relevance of *how* stakeholders engage and deal with emergent differences in issue frames (see also Zimmermann, Albers, and Kenter 2021). And, coming full circle, this is embedded in how stakeholders relate to and approach each other – in their relational dynamics.

This brings us to our final reflection on the power of a care-based dynamic for collaborative work. Our study highlights how in a care-based dynamic, stakeholders' commitment was a much deeper and affectionate process. It not only covered the acknowledgement of each other's interests but also involved empathy and care: it was about engaging in perspective-taking and about caring, marked by a sense of social responsibility towards each other's concerns (Burnier 2003). This care-based dynamic fostered a reflexive way of discussing divergent issue frame elements. Heterogeneity was taken as a resource to get to better decisions rather than as a burden to the collaborative process. This observation supports existing views of collaborative work as being as much about respecting differences as about engaging with consensus-formation (Hillier 2003). Thus, while working on reaching some degree of consensus, i.e. issue frame convergence, showed to be *instrumental* for booking progress in our study, 'caring for' or 'working from the heart' seemed to be essential for *democratizing* collaborative efforts through the democratic practice of inclusion and equality (Rawlings and Catlaw 2014). This insight enriches the current literature about the conditions or circumstances under which a collaborative process can enact its democratic values.

These insights have practical implications too. They highlight the key role inclusive relational work plays in collaborative governance and the importance of fully appreciating relational work, rather than discounting it as over-processual or a wasted effort (Stout and Keast 2021). Inclusive relational work aims 'at creating connections between the people who need to work together and fostering empathy' (Feldman, Khademan, and Quick 2009). This implies building a climate where 'perspective-taking is possible, empathy can be enacted and repairing can be done if doing difference stirred up difficult emotion' (Schrujfer 2020, 20). Being able to create such a climate requires relational skills from both individuals and groups. Hence, more scholarly and pedagogical attention should be given to inclusive relational work and to the knowledge, skills and reflexivity necessary to 'do differences', not only as individuals but as groups too. This is not an easy exercise, given that 'slowing down' interpersonal interactions requires the disruption of many settled habits within administrative practice (Catlaw 2009).

Creating a climate in which empathy and difference are central requires ‘learning by doing’ and a reflexive space to review relational dynamics to ‘help to gain a richer experience, get a better understanding of the different perspectives around the table, stay in touch with reality, repair [...] wrongdoing and, based on a working through of these experiences, adjust the way of working together’ (Schruijer 2020, 20). Therefore, future research could benefit from an action-oriented approach towards collaborative practice. Participatory action research focuses on improving and changing social practices, by opening ‘communicative space’ and enabling groups to learn, work and act together with the goal to transform (Bartels and Turnbull 2020). Such an approach to change and nurture stakeholders’ relational dynamics could offer us valuable insights into and action perspectives on how stakeholders can, as individuals and as groups, learn, adjust and repair their ways of relating for the benefit of instrumental and democratic value.

Notes

1. We use pseudonyms and epithets throughout. We refer to the area under study as ‘Greenham’ and use epithets as descriptive terms to refer to the roles of our respondents, rather than using their real names.
2. We borrow the term primary integration of Dabrowski (1964), who uses it to describe individuals who, psychologically, experience little inner conflicts over their values or actions in life – in the sense of: ‘ignorance is bliss’. Their personality feels ‘integrated’ but on a basic level ignoring or not attending to ambivalences inherent to life. If they would attend to these, their personality could develop to higher, broader or richer levels of mental functions.

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