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# THE COMMONS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATION RESEARCH AND PRACTICE*

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# THE COMMONS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATION RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

## INTRODUCTION

During the 1990s research on collaboration has been driven by several frameworks (Gray 1999), including institutional theory, resource dependency theory, transaction cost approaches, strategic management approaches, and political and critical perspectives. A distinct body of interdisciplinary research and literature has grown up outside these approaches, where a "commons" framework underpins the study of the sustainable management of resources in communities (see Ostrom, 1990; Bromley, 1992; Memon & Selsky, 1998). The resources are usually natural, and the management occurs usually by the members of a local (rather than regional or global) community. In a related development, Lohmann (1992) has used commons principles to articulate a theory about the nature of the nonprofit sector. Nevertheless, the growing body of interdisciplinary research on the nature and management of the commons has not been absorbed into the study of collaboration in the organizational sciences.

We need a commons perspective because it is important that holistic rather than segmental perspectives be used in collaboration research. In a holistic perspective the unit of analysis is the whole social system with an interest in, or affected by, the issue in which collaboration is being attempted. This is in contrast to perspectives that focus on a particular element (often a powerful organizational "actor" or a key set of relations) of a social system. I will show that the inherent holism of the commons perspective provides advantages for understanding and managing collaborative action. Having trialed a commons framework in research on urban port domains in New Zealand, in this paper I comment on the broader applicability of this framework for understanding processes of collaboration in other kinds of domains. I draw together themes in recent research by others as well as myself.[1] Specifically, the purposes of this paper are (1) to describe a "commons" framework for collaboration research and to situate it in relation to socio-ecological theory and institutional theory; (2) to highlight the potential uses of such a framework in research and practice; and (3) to illustrate two diverse applications of this framework.

## THE COMMONS FRAMEWORK

The source of the contemporary commons framework was Garrett Hardin's infamous 1968 article, "The tragedy of the commons." This article had direct implications for and applications to the management of both social and natural resources, as indicated below.

It is now commonly viewed that Hardin failed to consider the full range of property rights regimes: private property, state/public property, common property (or common pool), and open access regimes (Feeny et al., 1990).During the 1980s and 1990s, these regimes have been examined in underdeveloped, developing and developed contexts around the world. In commons research the focus is institutional: It is either on institutions that are capable of managing resources sustainably, or on (creating) the institutional conditions within which resources may be managed sustainably. Extensive empirical research – largely based on case study and comparative case study methods – has found that such conditions consistently favor collaboration. The survival of social systems based on common-pool regimes over long periods of time attest to the resiliency of collaboration for managing commonly held/owned resources (see review in Ostrom, 1994).

The commons framework may be described in terms of its perspective on resources and the management regimes for those resources. Resources are conceptualised as common pool resources (CPRs) associated with a social system of "...local users reliant on a resource; within the system one user's use of the resource diminishes the ability of others to use it, and use is limited to a definable community of users which establishes rules for appropriating the resource" (Selsky & Memon, 1997a: 260).

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[1] This paper relies on extensive direct quotes from my own earlier papers in order to draw together some theoretical strands. In order to retain the flow of the paper, those direct quotes are not indicated in this paper.

governmental agencies in the regulation of a resource, so that each can benefit from the knowledge, and check the potential excesses, of the other. For instance, multi-party co-management involves many different stakeholders and different kinds of forums and arenas for negotiating satisfactory outcomes (Ostrom, 1994; Selsky & Memon, 1997a: 260). Co-management represents attempts to use non-hierarchical arrangements to support collaborative action. This has a direct analogue in much of the discourse on multi-party collaboration, which either assumes or discusses directly how formal, especially hierarchical arrangements inhibit collaborative action (Gray, 1989, 1999). The recognition of this constraint leads to an advocacy of informal, network, and/or non-hierarchical arrangements to support collaborative action and a reliance on what Ring (1997) calls "resilient" trust as a regulatory mechanism. For instance, Ring's (1997: 115-116) elaboration of characteristics of networks are almost completely identical to the characteristics of a commons.

Until recently, use of a commons framework in organisation studies has been hampered by its origins in understanding how traditional societies manage their natural resources in situations that change little over long periods of time. However recent work has elaborated a framework which may be useful for understanding complex, dynamic and multiple-use commons (Selsky & Memon, 1995; Edwards & Steins, 1998). Complex CPR systems arise in turbulent environments and are distinguished from simple CPRs by the presence of multiple, overlapping and potentially conflicting uses and user groups; volatility in uses and institutional arrangements; and variances between *de jure* and *de facto* property rights. These conditions give rise to *emergent patterns* of use and management of the resource(s), which do not occur in simple CPRs. The model suggests that institutional arrangements (a configuration of uses, pluralist values, technologies and political-economic arrangements) produce the emergent patterns. In turn, it is the emergent patterns, not the institutional arrangements themselves, that produce the system's outcomes (Selsky & Memon, 1995). That is, institutional arrangements are interpreted locally and manifest in unique local patterns of decision and action; these patterns can have system-wide as well as local ramifications.

The use of a commons framework to study natural resource management is extensive (King, 1995). A number of case studies exist of communities reliant on a resource such as fish, timber or water, which develop commons governance structures which persist over decades or centuries. Selsky and Creahan (1996: 355-356) trace the sources of over-exploitation of such natural resources by identifying three classes of appropriators of natural resources, distinguished by the nature of their interest in, and their time orientation toward, a natural resource. Primary appropriators consist of the group of decision-making actors in a resource system that have an intrinsic interest in the sustainability of a CPR and a shared set of values, norms, and goals. These actors may be individuals, organisations or communities, but they are often people living together in a geographic community. The latter is the sense in which the CPR literature treats appropriators. Secondary appropriators consist of decision-making actors who have an instrumental interest in appropriation of resources from the CPR, often in terms of exchange value. They have no intrinsic interest in the sustainability of the resource system over the long term. Tertiary appropriators are decision making actors in the value chain of a product who have an instrumental interest in the consumption of resource units but are concerned neither with direct appropriation nor with the state of the resource stock. Tertiary appropriators purchase resources - legally or illegally obtained - from actors in the secondary class. In terminology more commonly used in the organisational sciences, appropriators are the stakeholders in an interorganisational domain.

Dividing resource appropriators into classes is particularly useful for understanding the behavioural dynamics of complex CPRs. In such systems, the primary appropriator group for one CPR may consist of individuals who are primary, secondary or tertiary appropriators in related or adjacent CPRs, or even in the same CPR. Thus the group of primary, secondary, and tertiary appropriators of a particular CPR may be called its appropriator set. Because of their mixed interests, the goals, norms and values in appropriator sets can be expected to be less convergent, more diverse and more volatile. This is directly applicable to collaboration studies of stakeholder groups and differential power (Hardy & Phillips, 1998).

## USING A COMMONS FRAMEWORK IN COLLABORATION RESEARCH

The most direct bridge to link the commons framework to organisational studies of collaboration is social-ecology theory. In the social ecology school the unit of analysis is the interorganisational *issue domain* (Selsky, 1998a after Trist, 1983). Thus social ecology reverses the perspective from conventional frameworks focused on the single organisation. This reversal focuses attention on the network of relations among a collection of

organisations or other social actors within a shared area of interest or geography. Essentially, shared values among decision makers cohere these interorganisational systems and give them the capacity for collective (not necessarily collaborative) adaptive responses in changing environments. This often involves joint planning for the creation of shared desired futures (Baburoglu, 1992: 271).

The actors in a domain are viewed as stakeholders arrayed around an issue of shared concern. The actors make decisions based on the emergent complex of individual interests, partially shared interests, and collectively shared values. The actions and interactions of stakeholders are embedded within normative and institutional frameworks, thus constraining the outcomes produced (Granovetter, 1985; Bromley, 1992). Thus analysis of domains is concerned with understanding the impact of a shared, "contextual" environment on the behaviour of actors, and on individual and collective outcomes.

Social ecology theorists may regard CPR systems as geographically based issue domains whose interactions are focused on the appropriation of certain resources (Selsky & Creahan, 1996). Moreover, in complex CPRs, property rights regimes and the level of uncertainty of the shared environment may co-evolve unevenly under pressures from appropriator sets (ibid.).

What makes the commons framework potentially valuable for understanding many types of collaboration is that the resources of interest may be social as well as natural. For example, such qualities in a local community as quiet and freedom from disturbance have been interpreted as social resources. Bundling such resources as an *amenity commons* (Selsky & Memon, 1997a) was found to be heuristic. In a study of relations between a port company and its local community in Dunedin, New Zealand, an amenity commons was found to emerge in the community when members' quality of life was threatened by planned, proposed or anticipated actions on the part of the port company. Community members voiced their assumed rights to serenity. Generalising on this observation, it is proposed that under certain conditions assumed (amenity) rights which have lain latent in the community can become visible, and thence contested. These rights have the character of *de facto* property rights.

The commons framework may be employed to understand the processes and structures of collaboration in issue domains, and also to provide a distinctive discourse of collaboration in field settings. The general method used in commons (or CPR) research is institutional analysis. In an institutional analysis, information about the biophysical and socio-cultural aspects of a setting, plus its stakeholders and their interactions, is gathered from a variety of sources. A composite picture of the situation is then formulated, focusing on the particular strategies used by individuals and interests to further their aims, and on the essential problems they face (Ostrom, 1990).

**Property rights**

The transaction-cost approach is the basis for much of our present-day understanding of strategic management, and it strongly influences how we view collaboration. The transaction-cost approach leads to a strict allocation of private rights to the respective parties in the transaction. There is an assumption of divided interests, which can suppress the incentives for collaboration. It can also lead to regulatory cat-and-mouse games and other forms of opportunistic behavior that are typical of secondary appropriator groups. In contrast, a commons approach engenders a more holistic view of issue domains based on the intrinsic interest characteristic of primary appropriator groups. Intrinsic interest may derive from reliance on the resource (social or natural) as a source of livelihood, from protecting or stewarding the resource, or from a sense of obligation to other users. A communitarian logic (Etzioni, 1993) prevails.

**Common Space**

The boundedness of membership in a commons creates the possibility of distinctive cultural and institutional space. (Van de Ven (1976) called it a "social action system".) For example, a distinctive cultural space may emerge from the interactions of boundary spanning employees in the interstice between two organisations in a strategic alliance (Selsky, 1998b), or when imposed rules or policies are superseded and actors are able to self-organise (Selsky, 1999). This is space which is not appropriated by the organisations or formal systems themselves, and is characterised by what Hardy, Lawrence and Phillips (1998) have called "collaboration-dominant discourse." Distinctive institutional space may emerge when local rules and *de facto* rights

override *de jure* policies; this occurred in the amenity commons in Dunedin, as mentioned above. Identifying these distinctive spaces as common-pool regimes has important implications for dynamics of trust and power in these spaces, especially when complex appropriator sets are involved.

**Stakeholders and social responsibility**

Collaboration is often underpinned by assumptions about corporate social responsibility (SR). However the prevailing concept of SR appears consistent with the transaction-cost approach discussed above – it takes a non-holistic approach. Such an approach tends to stimulate the kind of social responsibility conflicts seen in the Dunedin port case, by polarising into adversarial positions the interests of the company and its stakeholders (Selsky & Memon, 1997a). A new approach to social responsibility that would be consistent with the commons framework would have several characteristics. First it would have to be more holistic. Thus it may be advantageous to reframe SR away from a focal organisation and towards key issues in the locales (physical and social) inhabited by a corporation and the community stakeholders. Key issues might include quality of life, profit, and watershed health. Focusing on key issues might provide a more effective, negotiated basis for assessing the commercial and social performance of actors in the shared locale, rather than the unilateral basis assumed by a dominant actor (Selsky & Bretherton, 1998).

Second, a new approach to SR would have to make transparent both potential synergies and trade-offs between and among the values associated with the key issues identified by the actors. Examples of such values are economic, ecological and power-building (Frederick, 1995). Such a competing-values approach to SR would be more power balanced. Finally, a new approach to SR would have to be more dynamic, to allow for new, emergent appreciations of social responsibility in volatile institutional, commercial and cultural contexts. The prevailing concept tends to reify the relations between the focal organisation and the existing pressure groups "around" it (Selsky & Bretherton, 1998).

**Discourse**

Through the use of a language of dynamic institutional arrangements and the mobilisation and appropriation of resources, the commons framework encourages processual thinking about collaboration, and avoids potentially reifying terminology such as 'social capital' which has recently become popular in this field (see Gray, 1999). For example, if domain participants are talking the language of corporate social responsibility or locational conflict, then the language itself will encourage and reinforce adversarial dynamics.

## APPLICATIONS

I now illustrate the use of a commons framework in research in two quite diverse settings: an urban port domain in New Zealand and a cross-cultural classroom experience regarding test-cheating norms in Turkey.

**Urban Port Domains**

A current research project on the social dynamics in urban port zones in New Zealand uses the *complex common-pool resource system* (Selsky & Memon, 1995) as a guiding model. The emphasis is on how the institutional arrangements among the actors condition their behaviour. The actors include the owners of a port's assets (e.g. regional council), those who manage those assets (e.g. port company), residents and communities in the vicinity of a port (e.g. ratepayers association), local authorities which regulate impacts on the natural and social environment (e.g. district council, environment ministry), the national Environment Court (arbiter of disputes) and other "social actors." The impetus for this project was the major institutional reforms in port ownership and management signalled in the Port Companies Act 1988.[2] A case study of the Otago Harbour near Dunedin in 1994 yielded a major issue, namely chronic conflicts over port development between the port company and local residents in the port zone.

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[2] This act corporatised all ports in New Zealand, which previously had been owned and governed centrally by the New Zealand Port Authority. Port assets were assigned to territorial authorities (regional and district councils), and management of ports was undertaken by newly created port companies, which are "stand alone commercial entities" (Selsky & Memon, 1997a).

The chronic conflicts at Dunedin were sparked by actions of the port company to expand the port by increasing the volume of cargo throughput. More noise, more trucks on local roads, and new proposals for harbour reclamations violated in different ways some statutory and some assumed amenity rights of local residents. The concept of the *amenity commons* is developed to describe the emergent phenomenon of residents' sense of violation of their assumed neighbourhood amenity rights (Selsky & Memon, 1997a). The authors analyse how this phenomenon might be an unintended consequence of the institutional reforms. Other potential conflicts are with recreational, environmental, and Maori interests.

These conflicts and potential conflicts led the researchers to identify the urban *port domain* as the unit of analysis. This is defined as a complex, whole, harbour-based system embracing port facilities and surrounding communities, plus the interactions among organisations, interests, communities and individuals concerned with the operation, management or governance of the port (Memon & Selsky, 1997a). Thus a port domain is interest or issue based; it is generally more encompassing than a port zone, which defines the specific physical location of a port plus its immediate locale. The port domain is both a physical and social entity which affects and is affected by decision making processes and structures in port management. Port management is not limited to decisions and actions taken by port-company officials or territorial authorities, but instead is defined as the ongoing process of any social actor in a port domain taking decisions and actions that have implications for the mobilisation or deployment of natural, human, physical or financial resources associated with that port.

The authors advocate that port domains be viewed and managed as complex CPR systems, using co-management principles. In the past, conflicts in port domains have tended to be addressed through non-holistic "logics" such as corporate social responsiveness or locational conflict. These logics have tended to polarise the interests of the parties and lead to contention and litigation. In contrast, the authors advocate dialogue and partnerships in order to address conflicts, based on the holistic logic of co-management of a complex CPR system (Memon & Selsky, 1997b: 266). However, the authors recognise that decisions about partnerships in port management now occur within a national and local institutional "infrastructure" which presents conflicting incentives and pressures (e.g. economic rationalism). This line of logic illustrates the boundedness of the local commons.

Other research on this case (Selsky & Memon, 1997b) indicates that the long-standing conflicts over proposed port developments may be yielding to more of a partnership approach. However collaborative attempts to cope with such conflicts are fragile, not resilient (Ring, 1997). During years of port-community contention, local residents organised into several community opposition groups and took an active interest in the development plans of the port company. The port company resisted these intrusions and grudgingly complied with court orders and civic ordinances regarding noise. However a mediation process between local residents and the port company was initiated by the city council in 1993, and a respected Dunedin community leader was asked to lead that effort. She convened and chaired a formal committee of the major parties which succeeded in: building up some trust among them; developing a framework for collecting information, especially monitoring incidents of excessive noise; and keeping the committee's activities out of the media spotlight. Despite its promise, this committee disbanded in late 1996 when the convenor was elected to the regional council and claimed a conflict of interest. Residents were told to take their grievances directly to the port company. A possible return to the old adversarial relationship was circumvented by the retirement of the chief executive of the port company, and his replacement by a former member of the mediation committee.

The authors question whether the sweeping institutional reforms that have occurred in New Zealand in the past ten years have achieved their stated policy objectives in local urban port domains. This is an important question in terms of understanding the dynamics of collaboration in issue domains, because it helps to identify other issues. For example the question enables inquiry into the Dunedin residents' de facto rights: Were those rights able to be articulated because the reforms (an emergent outcome of system change) now provided an institutional mechanism for doing so? The logic is that under the previous institutional arrangements those rights had been latent, uncontested, and uncontestable.

**Classroom Test Cheating**

I have examined a situation of classroom test cheating using a commons perspective (Selsky, 1999). While on sabbatical at a private university in Turkey, I taught an undergraduate Organization Theory class of 62 students. During the first of two midterm tests the students cheated systemically. The students and I discussed this, and negotiated a "collective midterm" for the next test. The normal rules that enforce individual test taking were suspended and the students were free (forced) to self-organise. They did so by establishing a division of labor of three roles: a "Production Unit" of 7 students who conferred among themselves, then announced the answers to the 44 "Consumers." The latter wrote the answers down verbatim. A "Director" regulated the "performance." (Additionally, ten students opted to take an individual test.) The group achieved 90% on the test, and framed the event as a peak experience afterward – but also expressed reservations about repeating it.

This example highlights the value of self-organising collaborative behavior in a commons. The students' self-organising behavior may be understood in terms of property rights. Standard classroom evaluation methods (e.g. tests) are constructed as an imposed, privatized solution to the problem of how to assess the production and distribution of subject competency among students. That is, in conventional classrooms regulations are enforced by the instructor which enclose the commons of subject competency as it is distributed among a group of students. Competency is then treated as individual private property. It is usually devoid of a cultural context.

Those imposed controls can be relaxed. When they are, it provides space for the emergence of different solutions to the property rights problem. One solution is the creation of a new, common-pool property regime. In this event the students entered the new space and constructed local, culturally specific arrangements, then enforced them in the service of a shared goal. Their self-organising behaviour transformed a problem of maintaining private-property rights over competency in the subject (i.e., controlling cheating) into an occasion for eliciting the group's collective competency in that subject through common-pool processes. In short, they created a learning commons.

The learning commons was highly local, confined to that classroom for that single event. The analysis from a commons perspective evoked two kinds of tensions at the boundary between the local and the wider system: a problem of potential free-riding if the event were to be repeated; and a problem of encapsulation vis-à-vis the wider bureaucratic system of that university. The commons framework enabled me to interpret the equivocal reactions to the event held by some students and myself.

## CONCLUSION

The commons framework has several implications for collaboration theory and practice. First, it suggests that collaboration must be viewed as a process, not as an outcome. When researchers view it as an outcome, collaboration falls prey to the danger of reifying processes. This also applies to key features associated with collaboration, namely trust and social capital. For instance, the discourse of social capital carries certain meanings. When managers start thinking in terms of capital, then it becomes an entity: One tries to increase it, draw it down, discount it, depreciate it, etc. The underlying learning processes that create social capital, which are an ineffable part of the deep cultural norms of the system, either can get lost or compromised. See Selsky (1998b) for a similar logic regarding trust as a process of structuring the relations between partners in a long term strategic relationship.

Second, the commons framework raises the question of collaboration for what? Local, primary appropriators of resources in slow-changing communities can be viewed as using collaboration functionally, in order to secure their livelihoods through sustainable use. Over time the specific forms of collaboration can lose their instrumental character and become intrinsically meaningful rituals. Such institutionalisation of collaboration is rare in fast-changing settings characterised by complex appropriator sets; collaboration remains ruthlessly functional for achieving each party's outcomes. (Ironically, Ostrom (1994) points out that collaboration is the most efficient and effective way to achieve shared objectives in CPR systems.) However I have pointed out that in complex CPR systems some outcomes are emergent, and some property rights are *de facto*. Thus the commons framework focuses our attention on the institutional conditions for collaboration, but we must recognize that emergent patterns of use and management mediate those arrangements.

Third, there are a number of issues regarding boundaries between the local commons and the wider context. At a theoretical level, a commons framework sweeps "outsiders" into the system, and the implications of these new kinds of multi-organisational systems are vast. At a practical level, how local rules form and how they interact with broader institutional policies and norms is currently an important topic in complexity theory. Using our terminology, this may take the form of tensions between primary and secondary appropriator groups, or tensions within appropriator sets.

Fourth, the commons framework highlights the power of discourse for legitimating changes in institutional arrangements (Holm, 1995) and for shaping the collective identity of participants in the "common space" (Hardy et al., 1998). For instance, the power of partnerships lies not only in their function as a mechanism for allocating value to different interests. Its greater potential lies in transforming the thinking of parties involved in a problematic issue from us-and-them to us-with-them. This does not sacrifice self interest to the common or public good, but recognises that the parties' fates are inevitably linked. This was seen in the classroom cheating case. Thus if partnerships are based on polarising logics (and their associated discourses) such as corporate social responsiveness or locational conflict, then the potential for transcending narrow self interest will not be fulfilled as well as it could be. However if partnerships are based on the logic of co-management of a common-pool resource system, then there is a higher probability that that potential will be fulfilled (Selsky & Memon, 1997b).

Fifth, the main iimplications for stakeholder theory are in terms of social responsibility. To resonate with a commons framework, a new approach to social responsibility would entail the redesign of existing institutional arrangements. For example formal stakeholder councils, with independent, 'closed loop' channels of information to the board, could be added to the corporate architecture to foster greater social responsiveness on the part of all actors (Turnbull, 1993; Selsky & Bretherton, 1998).

Finally, it is clear that the commons framework is more useful for studying multi-party collaborations associated with issue domains, than for studying two-party strategic partnerships associated with value-chain management. It is a vehicle for understanding and managing the articulation, mobilisation and allocation of interests in interorganisational issue domains. The holism and dynamism of the complex CPR framework give it some distinct advantages as general model for collaboration research and practice.

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