NETWORK GOVERNANCE AS A STRUCTURE OF CONVERSATIONS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we use Cultural Theory to explain why effective network governance is experienced by so many participants as generating many frustrating conversations – a 'talking shop' – and to explain why particular actors tend to find these conversations so frustrating. In the second part of the paper, we propose an approach to managing those conversations in a more fruitful way, based on separating out a specific set of conversations, based on our prior analysis, and generating a set of potentially testable propositions about how to go about this. We draw on twenty years of participation in the network governance of 'joining up' projects in the field of health social care and education.

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INTRODUCTION[1]

There can be few networks involving dissimilar organizations that have not been criticized by someone for being 'talking shops'. Practical minded people with a desire to get on and do something, people who exhibit an action-bias, the very people such networks rely on for success, are often alienated and irritated by the constant meetings and the volume of communication that always seem to be generated by networks and partnership working. They implicitly or explicitly contrast such talk with 'real work,' and see the former as a substitute for the latter. This paper will use Mary Douglas' grid-and-group analysis, also known as Cultural Theory, to try to reframe this common perception. We will argue that talk is not always an alternative to doing network governance but is a necessary part of that task. Like Myrna Mandell and colleagues, we observe that 'conversation and language are the tools through which … new collective identities are negotiated and successful collaboration is achieved' (Mandell et al., 2017: 328).We do however, meet these critics of talk half way, arguing that such talk can be better organized to make it more productive by avoiding certain 'bad assumptions' and by ensuring that appropriate spaces and occasions are made available to conduct a set of conversations which are necessary, but not sufficient, for the success of the network.

NETWORK GOVERNANCE

Governance is a complex concept that is shared across a range of disciplines from management and political science to anthropology and sociology. What is more, a wide range of specific forms of governance have emerged, such as clinical governance or information

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[1] A much earlier version of this paper was presented to the Conference on Multi-Organisational Partnerships and Networks (MOPAN) 2013: Newcastle University Business School, Newcastle Upon Tyne, 15-17 July, 2013. Thanks also to Claire Hannibal for comments.

governance. In general, governance refers to institutional features rather than skills or competencies. Provan and Kenis (2007: 231) for example, argue that 'a focus on governance involves the use of institutions and structures of authority and collaboration to allocate resources and to co-ordinate and control joint action.'

Much political theory has emphasised a distinction between two key institutional forms of governance – bureaucratic state 'intervention' versus market co-ordination. Similarly, within firms, the key decision has been 'make or buy?' At the most general level, this is presented as a choice between markets and hierarchies (governments or firms). Both scholars and policy makers, seeking to escape from a dualistic contrast between markets and bureaucratic (hierarchical) modes of governance, have attempted to identify a third option – network governance. Important contributions have come from work in political science and public administration on policy networks (e.g., Rhodes, 1997; 2007; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992), from economics, building on Williamson's transaction cost economics (e.g., Williamson, 1975; 1998), and from institutional theory (e.g. Powell and DiMaggio 1983; Powell, 1990).

One important debate has concerned how we should conceive the network in relation to the other two modes of governance. For some the network is a distinct mode of governance. For example, "[by] definition, a network is a collaborative structure, an exchange convention which depends neither on the market nor on the hierarchy," (Assens and Lemeur, 2016: 6). For others (e.g., 6 et al.; Provan and Kenis, 2007) the network is less a distinct form and more a hybrid, perhaps a synthesis, of hierarchical and market forms of co-ordination. From this point of view, the network exhibits both strong hierarchical characteristics – some nodes in the network have more authority or power than others – and strong exchange characteristics – the relationships between nodes are, in some sense, deals, the result of calculative bargaining and negotiation. The network is, from this perspective, a mid-point on a spectrum stretching from market to hierarchy, rather than a discrete and distinct form of governance.

There are a range of different kinds of networks. Our analysis focuses on some, but not all, such networks. Drawing on Daft et al.'s useful distinctions, summarized in figure 1, we focus on networks characterized by dissimilar organizations working in a broadly co-operative relationship – in their terms, a collaborative network. In this sense, then, we are concerned with networks, which are characterized by the search for Collaborative Advantage (c.f., Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Cropper et al., 2009). As Myrna Mandell and her colleagues argue, collaborative networks 'not only bring together a diverse set of people … but also mould these people and their resources into a different functioning entity underpinned by new ways of thinking, talking and behaving' (Mandell et al., 2017: 326). While the distinctions that are implied by Figure 1 may not be as cut and dried in practice as they appear on paper, this is an important limitation on the claims that we will be making.
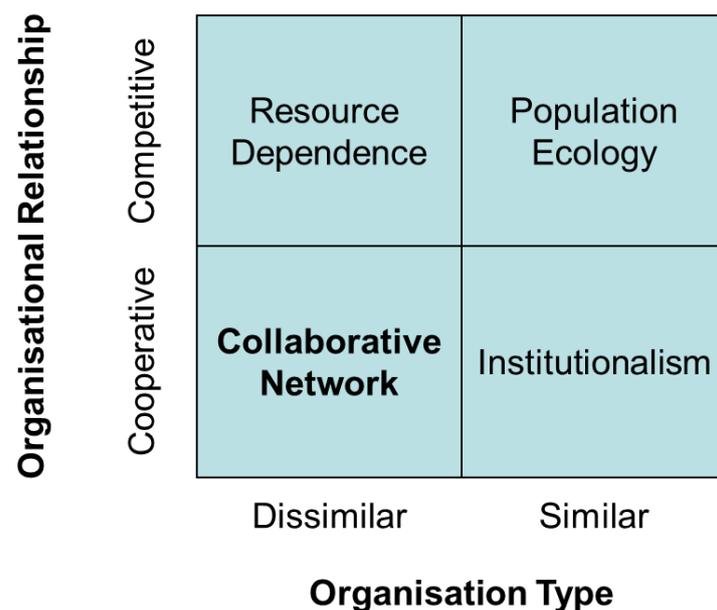
FIGURE 1 SITUATING COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS IN THE IOR SPACE. SOURCE: DAFT, R.L., MURPHY, J. AND WILLMOTT, H. (2010) *ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY AND DESIGN.* ANDOVER: SOUTWESTERN CENGAGE, P 187.

Scholars of network governance have argued that Network Governance is prone to certain tensions. Kenis and Provan (2007: 242-244), for example emphasise three such tensions: Efficiency versus Inclusiveness; Internal versus External legitimacy; and Flexibility versus

Stability. In this paper, we focus on the first of these tensions. As Provan and Kenis argue, '[c]ollaboration, especially when the aim is to build greater trust among network partners, is seldom an efficient endeavor… [t]he more that organizational participants are involved in the network decision process, the more time consuming and resource intensive that process will be' (2007: 242). Meanwhile, as Mandell and et al. (2017: 338) assert, 'When diverse sets of participants get together they often speak at cross purposes.' Such tensions cannot ever be fully resolved, but they can be managed, attenuated or ameliorated. Students of organisational paradox, for example, draw a distinction between resolving such tensions and creating a 'workable certainty' that enables progress to be made (Luscher and Lewis, 2008; see also Smith, 2014). This still leaves the question of how such certainty can be created.

CULTURAL THEORY AND THE TALK IMPERATIVE

Our theoretical position is based on what has come to be known as Cultural Theory – capital C, capital T. CT is derived from ideas originally proposed by the British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1992, 1996) and subsequently developed by Douglas' collaborators Aaron Wildavsky, Richard Ellis and Michael Thompson (Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky, 1990). (Douglas gives an interesting account of the development of the theory in Douglas n.d). Subsequently, Christopher Hood (1998) and Peri 6 (e.g., 6 et al 2002), among others, have drawn on the concepts of CT, in different ways, for work on public policy and public services in the UK. Even more recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in CT in organisational studies (Logue, Clegg and Gray, 2016) and especially in applying versions of CT to public services (see, the special issue of *Public Administration* in 2016, in particular Simmons, 2016; Ney and Verweij, 2015).

Douglas was influenced by Durkheim (and hence this approach is sometimes described as neo-Durkheimian theory). Specifically, CT builds on Durkheim's idea that there are 'basic

myths and tropes by which people classify their environments and organizational processes are driven not so much by accurate or distorted perceptions, as by the basic forms of social organization or what Durkheim a called "solidarities"' (6 et al 2002: 77). In this focus on a small number of fundamentally incompatible tropes, CT can be seen as similar to recent French 'conventions theory' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Jagd, 2011) and as a foundation for work on competing 'institutional logics' (Thornton and Occasio, 2008). Douglas initially identified three, later four and subsequently five, such forms of organization. It is this simple yet extremely flexible structure, which encompasses the classic markets-versus-hierarchies spectrum but goes beyond it in important ways, which has made CT so appealing.

The key elements of CT are summed up in one of its alternative names, grid and group theory. Douglas' identified two key dimensions in terms of our orientation to the world: grid – the extent to which the world is seen as naturally well-ordered and structured, regulated and devoid of ambiguity; and group – the extent to which successful action in the world is achieved through collective as opposed to individual effort. Using these two dimensions Douglas creates a space or plane that incorporates four cultural archetypes (See figure 2 – the fifth archetype is the hermit, which we won't consider further here).

Using the grid and group dimensions, Douglas distinguished four stable cultural paradigms. A high grid, high group construct (a stable and regulated world and a collectivist vision of effective action) generates a classic hierarchical, Weberian bureaucratic framing of problems in terms constructing, implementing and enforcing appropriate **rules**. These stable and knowable characteristics also permit detailed planning of action. The antithesis of this perspective is the individualist or market perspective founded on low grid and low group (an unregulated and ambiguous world and an individualist vision of effective action). Problems are framed as amenable to individual rational **calculation** and the negotiation of transactions. So far, Douglas mirrors the conventional distinction between markets and hierarchies. The

quadrant defined by high grid and low group (a highly regulated, stable and unambiguous world and the futility of collective action), generates a fatalist position. In this quadrant, outcomes are associated primarily with individual good or bad **luck**. The most interesting quadrant for us is the final, low grid and high group quadrant. From this perspective, our knowledge of the world is fragile and much is ambiguous and needs to be negotiated, yet we can only effectively proceed if we work together. This is the quadrant that is various labelled the enclave (because Douglas claims that it tends to create a strong in-group/out-group dynamic), egalitarian or communitarian position. Within this culture, the focus is on a discursive process of "sensemaking" through dialogue and debate – **talk**. In her original research, Douglas was quite dismissive of this position (as was Wildavsky), perhaps echoing the concerns about "talking shops" we noted above. However, we need not see the various positions in any kind of value hierarchy.
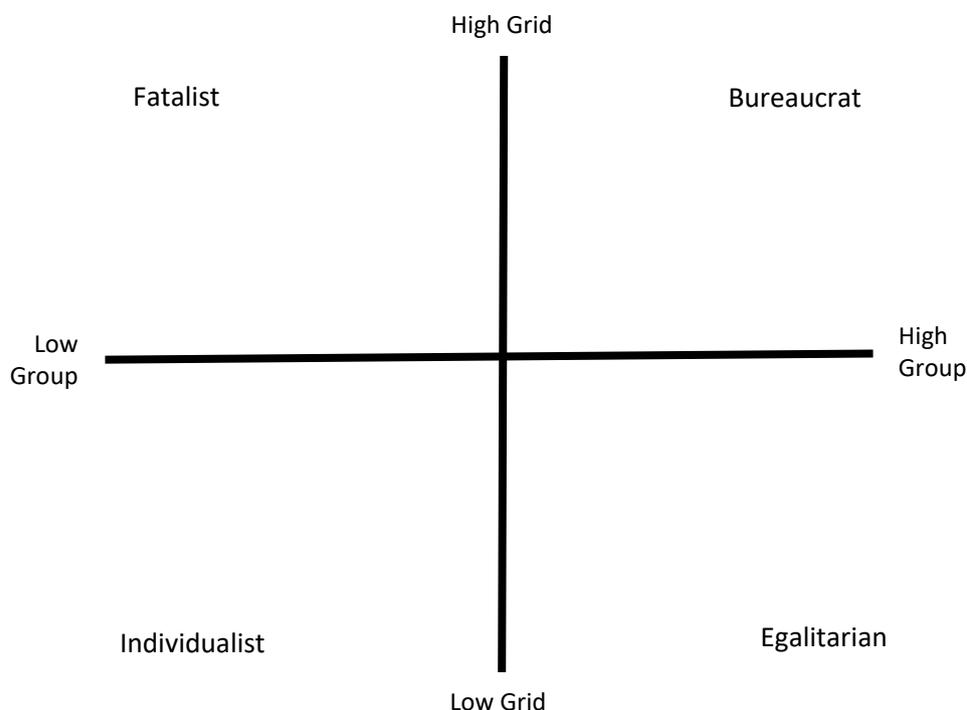

FIGURE 2 GRID AND GROUP AFTER MARY DOUGLAS

Importantly, Douglas and other early writers in this tradition argue that each position forms a coherent and stable culture that militates against any effective mixing of cultures, pushing societies or organizations out from the centre of the space represented in figure 2 towards the corners of the square. Where there is interaction between these cultures, they have argued, it generates the classic 'dialogue of the deaf' (Douglas, n.d.). Christopher Hood (1998) has used this feature of CT to provide an explanation of sudden paradigm shifts in public policy as the weaknesses of a particular approach to a problem build up and become apparent and eventually the solutions associated with that position are abandoned and a new culture comes to the fore with new approaches and solutions. The example of policy relating to climate change might give us a recent example where market solutions have been tried and appear be failing leading to renewed interest in bureaucratic, communal and fatalist approaches to the issue (see e.g., Hulme, 2009).

What is important for network governance research, we would argue, is that the kind of collaborative partnerships, as we have demarcated them above, appear to map more or less precisely onto the enclave/egalitarian/community form of organisation. Let us justify this position. Firstly, in a partnership between dissimilar organizations there is typically a high level of ambiguity about the epistemological stability of the world – the grid dimension. What for one partner is an established fact or stable assumption is for other organizations a shaky assertion or a wild surmise. What is more, partnership tends to be applied to difficult, wicked or otherwise complex problems (because the simple or benign problems can usually be effectively addressed through other means) and a degree of epistemological ambiguity is usually identified as a characteristic of these problems. At the same time, partnership must be predicated on a group perspective on effective action. Almost all writers on the subject include the injunction to avoid collaborative partnership approaches if there are other ways of achieving organisational goals that do not require working with other agencies (see e.g.,

Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Looked at in the round, collaborative partnerships therefore fit into the Egalitarian/Communitarian quadrant in the Grid and Group space, dominated by the imperative to talk (cf. Mandell et al, 2017).

Central argument 1: where a partnership is comprised of diverse, dissimilar organisations in a co-operative relationship seeking Collaborative Advantage, they are condemned to talk because they must be, at least initially and probably chronically, in a low grid/high group situation.

THESE CONVERSATIONS ARE EXPERIENCED AS FRUSTRATING

Why are the conversations that dominate partnership working experienced as so frustrating by so many participants? Answering this question could help to explain the emergence of an '"anti-collaboration" discourse which redefines collaborative action as costly in terms of resource use, problematic for workers and team-working, risking reputational and intellectual capital, unable to achieve the outcomes set for it, and insufficiently amenable to customer or citizen views' (Sullivan et al., 2013: 126).

To explain why the conversations are so painful for so many, we draw on the concepts of "framing" and "footing" drawn from the tradition of conversational analysis (see Tannen, 1993; Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974). Very simply, participants approach conversations with a set of more or less coherent expectations that they use to frame the conversation (what are we 'really' doing here?) and which give them a footing in the conversation (what role am I playing?). Of course, framing and footing can be highly complex matters. Sophistication in language might be thought to include the ability to sustain multiple frames to manage such vital elements of social life as irony or double entendre, while an effective understanding of footing involves unpicking what Charles Goodwin has called the 'complex lamination of

structurally different kinds of entities' (2006: 19) that we put forth in conversation. Reasons of space here mean that we will be far more crude.

Often frustration in partnership conversation arises when participants have a non-congruent framing and footing within a conversation. Where I think that we are 'shooting the breeze' but you think we are negotiating a job promotion, for example, our framings of the conversation are non-congruent. But, where does such non-congruence come from? Again, the CT Grid/Group approach can provide some explanatory tools. Using an approach that Hood (1990) has used, we can quarter the grid group space again (see figure 3) to explore how the four cultures experience the conversation.

Fatalist	Bureaucrat
	Fatalist / Bureaucrat
Individualist	Individualist / Egalitarian
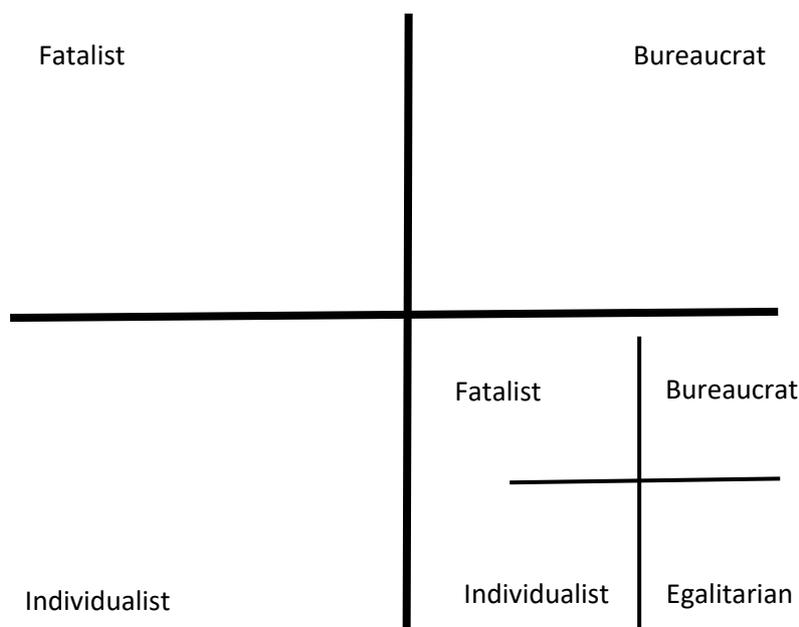
FIGURE 3: QUARTERING THE EGALITARIAN QUADRANT

How do our four stylised characters respond to the conversational imperative?

- In this scenario, the egalitarian is, of course, on home territory. They tend to frame the conversation as a collective act of identity construction and sense-making – 'who are we and why are we here?' The need for a coherent 'we' is taken for granted, even

though there is more debate about who, individually and institutionally, should be included (Douglas' concern with in group/outgroup).

- The bureaucratic/hierarchical, character, by contrast, is 'playing away from home,' even though they share a collective orientation. For this character, the focus is on imposing order on what is experienced as a threatening lack of grid. This character focuses the conversation on creating rules, roles, processes and protocols for the partnership. For this character, the question is, 'can we agree some shared rules here?'

- The individualist is also 'playing away,' but is much more comfortable with the lack of grid. For this character, the concern is the (potentially stifling) high group flavour of the conversation. This character frames the conversation as a deal-making, competitive, probably zero sum, game. For this character, the framing question is, 'what's in it for me?' Importantly, as Mandell et al (2017: 328) note, this 'transaction-based language is largely incompatible with the higher level interdependent relationships that exist within collaborative networks.'

- Finally, the fatalist is the most alienated character in this context (and probably the most frustrated). Because the fatalist position is both high grid and low group, the tendency is to see the conversation as a, possibly pointless, ritual. The role of the conversation is to help the group members adapt to the inevitable, to minimize the fall out, and just possibly to 'get lucky.' The framing question for the fatalist is, 'how can I get through this with the least damage and keep open the possibility of a lucky accident?'

What is important to note is that these are all quite insightful ways of interpreting the conversation. We *can* see the conversation as identity/sense making, as rule setting, as bargaining/deal making, and as a pure ritual. However, each view also tends to deny or downplay the others. If we approach the conversation as a joint act of sensemaking and

identity formation, can we also see it as hard bargaining? If we fundamentally see the conversation as a ritual in which we might get lucky, can we simultaneously see it as establishing rules and operating procedures? How do we work to make these frames congruent (note: not epistemologically privilege one over the others). Some recognition must be given to each character as they all have, within their own cultural frame, reasonable questions to ask. We now turn to how CT can help us to manage or govern networks of dissimilar organisations as a structure of conversations.

NETWORK GOVERNANCE AS A STRUCTURE OF CONVERSATIONS

As Ralph Stacy has argued, 'Organizations are the on-going patterning of conversations so that changes in conversations are changes in organizations (Stacy, 2007: 317). Studies of network governance of partnership work always emphasize the importance of discourse and communication (Sullivan et al., 2012; 2013; Mandell et al, 2017). Such an emphasis can take the form of skills. For example, Williams (2002: 115) describes this common sense well from the perspective of the 'boundary spanner' role.

> The value of basic and effective oral, written and presentational communication skills cannot be overestimated. The ability to express oneself, and one's position with clarity, is considered to be essential, as is the choice and use of language. The problem associated with the use and interpretation of 'professional' languages and jargon is recognized as an area in need of sensitive management in order not to undermine, patronize, mislead or give offence to others. The search for shared meanings is particularly acute in partnership arenas. Communication is also a two-way process and receiving information – listening – is considered as important as information giving. References are made to 'active listening' which is expressed as a willingness or openness to be influenced by the views of other people (Williams, 2002: 115).

Clearly, these competences are critical to our argument. If conversation – talking and listening – is necessary, then we need participants to be competent at doing it. But what is a

good, productive conversation? How can conversations be made more effective? How can they "move things on" and avoid getting "bogged down"?

Socio-linguists such as Paul Grice (Grice, 1975; 1989) and Harvey Sacks (1992) have provided a strong basis for the retrospective analysis of conversation. Conversational Analysis (CA) focuses on the joint production of meaning and order in conversation, on the work done by both speakers and listeners. CA has been developed in linguistics into a highly technical form of analysis. It has been carried across into management by a few writers (e.g., Boden, 1994). It has sometimes been linked to work on the uses of narrative in organization (e.g., Shotter, 1993; Boje, 2001). More specifically, work on "translation" between social worlds (e.g., Callon, 1986; more generally see Freeman, 2009) and the use of boundary objects (Star and Griesemer, 1989; Sullivan et al., 2013) provide the basis for further work on specifically inter-organizational conversations.

While we do not have space here to explore the implications of these bodies of work for Network Governance, we will sound a brief note of warning. We must guard against the common assumption in much management practice (and not a little theoretical writing) that emphasizes clarity and transparency above all other values in communication. We have long known that ambiguity can be strategically useful (Eisenberg, 1984). Stacy (2007: 283, drawing on Shaw 2002) makes the point well:

> Shaw argues that the widespread demand that management meetings should
> be carefully planned actually kills the spontaneity of ordinary conversation
> in which new meaning can emerge (Stacy, 2007: 283).

This is not to deny that clarity is sometimes desirable. Indeed, what is particularly valuable about the focus on conversation as a management tool is its open ended, but rule governed nature. It is open ended in that the outcome cannot be predicted at the start. It is rule governed in that it has a basic set of shared assumptions about, for example, turn taking. Thus Stacy describes conversation as 'sophisticated, associative turn-taking' in which 'participants... co-

create meaningful patterns over time' (2007: 279) and which can be 'paradoxically repetitive and spontaneously transforming at the same time' (2007: 284).

STRUCTURING PARTNERSHIP AS 4 KEY CONVERSATIONS

If partnerships are condemned to talk, and talk takes a range of basic conversational forms, how should this talk be organized? Our response to has been to identify four inter-institutional conversations, or conversational threads, focused around particular content and drawing on specific knowledge-bases within the partner organizations, which we believe are necessary, if not sufficient, for successful partnership working. These four foci can be conveniently, if a little artificially, labelled with short phrases starting with the letter P: Principles and Identity, Policies and Processes, Politics and Bargaining, and Practice and Routine. As should already be clear, these conversations can be linked to the four quadrants of CT as follows:

- Egalitarian: principles and identity

- Bureaucrat: policy and process

- Individualist: politics and bargaining

- Fatalist: practice and routine

We will briefly outline: what we understand to be the agenda for each of these conversations; the most likely and useful protagonists; and some of the useful information or other tools that could support a fruitful conversation in this domain.

The need for conversations about **principles and identity** might appear to be an obvious point, but in our experience these are often skimped, if not avoided altogether. The fundamental values of the partner organizations, both espoused and practiced, are seldom placed on the table and fully discussed. Discussion of principles can appear abstruse,

recondite or impractical and thus be dismissed as irrelevant or timewasting by those who favour an action bias. While formal documents can give some insight into this domain, there appears to be no substitute for well-structured, facilitated, face-to-face conversations. Methods for externalizing assumptions about partners and their values and motivations are needed.

• **Principles and Identity** 　– Who are we? 　– Why are we each doing this? What are our values? Where are our boundaries?
• **Policies and processes** 　– What basis are we acting on? What rules do we want to govern the partnership? 　– What processes and systems underpin the partnership? What is the workflow?
• **Politics and bargaining** 　– What is the political support for/opposition to the partnership? 　– What can I/my organisation gain from the partnership and what are the costs required for that gain?
• **Practices and routines** 　– How can partnership working integrated into regular working practices and routines?

FIGURE 4 THE FOUR PS OF PARTNERSHIP WORKING. SOURCE: THE AUTHORS

Conversations about **policies** are familiar to most collaborative partnership working. Policies include the various rules and regulatory principles that are laid down and which govern the partners' activities. Policies range from the legal status of the partners or their foundational charters or documents of incorporation, and the specific powers and responsibilities that those documents prescribe or imply, to the rules that cover routine processes such as claiming expenses. What appears as a perfectly viable or legal action for one partner, may be explicitly forbidden to another. Because organizations come from a heterogeneous set they will tend to have a variety of legal forms – companies, partnerships, local authorities, NHS trusts, charities, Universities founded by royal charter, etc. – and there is often little understanding among partners about the specific regulatory frameworks under which their collaborators work. Key players in such conversations are clearly those with legal or regulatory compliance

responsibilities – the company secretary, the clinical governance lead – and conversations will be more effective if they include individuals with those roles. Finally, this conversation can appear, or be framed, as bureaucratic (in a bad sense), pedantic or nit picking.

Conversations about **processes,** by contrast focus on the operations of the partners. The focus here is on the workflow within and among partners. This is often seen as the nitty-gritty of partnership working. Tools such as business process mapping and artefacts such as process maps can provide useful boundary objects around which conversation can be organized, if there is also a danger of mistaking the (process) map for the territory and ignoring undocumented or emergent processes. Key voices in the process conversation need to include operational and IT managers providing the supporting infrastructure or buildings, timetables, machines and information. If the previous discussions can be dismissed as abstruse or pedantic, this conversation is sometimes dismissed as unnecessarily technical and "over-practical," missing the bigger picture.

The **politics**, or perhaps better the political economy, of partnerships – calculation, negotiation and **bargaining** – is critical. All partnerships need support, from allies within their sponsoring organisations and therefore need to be 'sold' to participating organisations. Calculation of costs and benefits of partnership is a constant question for most partners. All partnerships are, at some level, about striking a bargain. All partnership projects need to overcome naysayers and opponents. For some practitioners, politics and bargaining are a grubby, negative element in partnership work, to be seen in failure, obfuscation and distraction. However, both experienced practitioners and academic commentators have successfully challenged this view. The political dimension of partnership working does include what Huxham and Vangen (2005) have described as 'Collaborative Thuggery' and the "dark arts" but is not restricted to them. Academic work that is relevant here might include the political process approach (e.g., Badham and Buchanan, 2008). Practical tools

that can facilitate the political conversations might include stakeholder mapping. Spaces and occasions for political conversations need to include both frontstage and backstage locations. Finally, if partnership needs to be inserted into organizational processes, it also needs to be incorporated in organizational working **practices and routines.** Partnership working is sometimes seen as an almost costless activity that can be absorbed into the existing workload of managers, professionals and support staff. This is not just a matter of finding time for partnership working but also one of incorporating the other demands – cognitive, political, emotional – that partnership working creates for individuals. Conversations about practices need to have the participation of, at a minimum, those professionals and support workers who actually have to deliver the partnership and give life to the processes. Perhaps because of the focus on frontline work, this conversation can be dismissed as special pleading or even resistance from professionals and other workers.

• Principles and Identity
    – We **all** have the same values/principles
    – You **will** roll over accept my values

• Policies and Processes
    – Your policies **are** much the same as mine
    – You **will** accept my policies
    – Your process **will** interface with mine
    – You **will** change your processes to interface with mine

• Politics and bargaining
    – The benefits of the partnership **are clear** to all members
    – The partnership **would** work if it wasn't for all the politics

• Practices and routines
    – Partnership working **can** be costlessly integrated in working practices and routines
    – You **will** change your working processes and routines to fit with the new partnership arrangements

FIGURE 5: SOME BAD ASSUMPTIONS IN PARTNERSHIP CONVERSATIONS: SOURCE: THE AUTHORS

We want to be clear that we are not attempting to specify the specific outcomes of these conversations, just that they appear necessary (if not sufficient) to effective network governance and partnership working. However, we can be a little bolder. Perhaps the most

important practical implication of our work is that it can help partnership managers and leaders to avoid certain bad assumptions that we have often observed being made in the field (these are summarized in Figure 5). Noticeably they tend to take similar forms: partners assume that their way is the 'normal' way to organize the specific matter and do not bother to check that this is the case or that, where a partner is aware of heterogeneity they assume that it can be resolved by other partners adopting their norms and practices. We can also identify some of the arguments that can be used to dismiss, downplay or disparage discussion and debate relating to each of the topics (See Figure 6 for a summary). While we do not want to dismiss these arguments completely, being aware of them can help managers to devise spaces and occasions that can help to meet the concerns that they raise.

• Principles and Identity   – Abstruse, high flown, unrealistic…

• Policies and Processes
  – Bureaucratic, nit picking, pedantic….
  – Overly technical, narrow, missing the human element …

• Politics and Bargaining   – Negative, divisive, politicking …
• Practice and Routine   – Special pleading, subjective, conservative, resistance …

FIGURE 6 TYPICAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST CONVERSATIONS: SOURCE: THE AUTHORS

Proposition 2: Partnership talk can be usefully organized into four distinct strands: Principles and Identity; Policies and Processes; Politics and Bargaining; Practices and Routines.

A BRIEF EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION

This framework was originally developed from work on a shared e-portfolio that would link schools, colleges and universities, enabling students to build and maintain a portfolio as they transition across institutions although we have used this framework in a range of other

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contexts. The e-portfolio project had a strong technical dimension and technical leadership from the university partner and was funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee of the Higher Education Funding Councils. However, the focus was on a range of diverse educational organisations working together. The Final Report of the project stated that:

> The overall approach was collaboration, collaboration, collaboration among the regional Universities and FE Colleges, and within these groups among learning technologists, educationalists, administrators, executives, managers……

The project therefore matches well with our criteria for a collaborative partnership.

The authors were participants in the e-portfolio project with a learning and evaluation brief. This illustration is therefore based on our (participant) observation of the project and the interaction of various stakeholders, to which we had privileged access, but also of our subsequent reflection on both what we observed *and* our role in the project. In this sense, what we offer here is a contribution to a phronetic social science, practical, problem focused wisdom (Schram, 2012). Phronetic knowledge is distinguished in the Aristotelian framework, from the epistemé (law like generalisation) and the techné (technical know-how). While we are well aware of the limitations of this kind of participant observation in the social sciences, it does offer the kinds of insight that is not easily available by other means.

What we observed, as we worked with the project over a period of 17 months, was that certain conversations were well supported while others were marginalized or only addressed when it became apparent that their omission was creating an obstacle for the project.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the technical leadership of the project, the best supported conversations related to the domain we have labelled **process**. The technical partners enjoyed a relatively well established set of tools – process mapping, a technical language of interfaces and standards – that facilitated their interaction. The project was successful at creating a

technical infrastructure for moving portfolios between institutions. In some other domains, however, the project struggled.

In terms of **policies** – covering data protection, ownership of portfolios and copyright as well as the precise institutional regulations on computer use – the project regularly "discovered" new complexities and new information. The legal status of portfolios and the ownership and control of data and information in them was not as straightforward as the original plan had expected. The project needed to bring in a lawyer to advise on these issues and a considerable amount of "repair" work was required.

The **politics** of the project also represented a challenge. The project did have some planning in this field from the start but the main concern was with holding the partnership's sponsors together at a time when there were a range of other struggles going on among the various institutions. However, what emerged from the project, and was less foreseen, was that individual and collective (group, department) project participants would need political support *within* their institutions where portfolios were not widely accepted and in which their advocates often saw themselves as 'isolated.'

With regard to working **practices and routines,** there was little attention paid to when staff in organizations, especially schools and colleges, would work with students to populate their portfolios. Basic understandings of the curriculum, both official and "hidden," and the working environments – classrooms and computer labs – in which teachers, lecturers and students were expected to operate, only emerged in the course of the project. The central questions of when and where portfolio work would take place were only addressed when the project was significantly advanced and were never fully resolved.

The biggest issue, however, was that of **principles and identity** – it emerged through the project that there was no real agreement at an operational level on the value of the basic

model that the project was promoting. The project was developed with the underlying conception of education as a smooth and progressive acquisition of skills and knowledge, with each partner building on the work of the lower levels. This turned out to be substantively challenged as the project developed. In practice, each level of education saw its role as the partial undoing of the work of the previous level and the creation of substantially new structure of knowledge. Rather than a smooth progression participant saw a series of more or less violent transitions or transformations. A good college student was something very different from a good school student, something qualitatively different, not just different in degree. The successful school student identity had to be disassembled or broken up in order for a 'good' college student identity to be formed. A similar transition was also noted at the boundary between college and university. From this point of view the merits of carrying information over from one institution to another, in the form or an e-portfolio are much less clear. Indeed, such a carryover might well help to sustain old identities that the new institutional context was trying to destroy. These concerns effectively remained hidden because the fundamental conversations about educational principles remained un-discussed and the project's mainly technical leadership accepted the smoothly "progressive" model of education rather than the violently transformational model.

We need to be clear that this was in many senses a successful project. It achieved many of its goals and was instrumental in creating a mixed technical and pedagogic community around e-portfolios in region in question. However, the final report of the project was clear:

> The project was much too short to bring all the necessary negotiations and relationship-building required to deliver a project of this magnitude…
> There was insufficient, and insufficiently effective, engagement with FE partners, with their very different needs and worldviews.

By planning for, and facilitating, effective conversations, we believe, the project could have achieved more, even in its relatively short time-span.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS: SPACES AND OCCASIONS TO TALK EFFECTIVELY

In this paper, we have used Cultural Theory to argue that partnerships are condemned to talk and we have proposed that a good and productive way of structuring the content of that talk can be captured under the four P headings: principles and identity; policies and processes; politics and bargaining; and practices and routines. We haven't tried to specify what the outcome of the conversations identified here should be, only that they need to be organized and facilitated and that ignoring, suppressing or delaying these conversations is likely to be counterproductive . This is a highly pragmatic attempt to address what we have found in the field to be a perennial set of issues. We have aimed to develop a theoretically informed but practical set of guidelines that make sense to partnership managers and that help them to make sense of their task. There is always the risk of the platitudinous in such an endeavour. Hopefully, we have avoided that.

The limitations of our approach should be clear. We have no real evidence that this approach is as fruitful as we claim and elements remain underdeveloped theoretically and practically. In particular, we have avoided addressing the moment when the four conversations are brought together. We clearly need to develop and test the framework proposed here in a wider range of contexts. Theoretically, we need to develop a clearer understanding of what a productive conversation that can 'move things on' sounds like and how we can effectively facilitate such conversations. Elsewhere, we have worked with the notion of creating both spaces (which endure in time and which may not require co-presence) and occasions (which are time limited and face-to-face) to support multi-agency working and this provides a basis for taking this work forward.

The key point we want to make here, however, is that in a network or partnership context talking is not an alternative to doing network governance, it *is* network governance and partnership working and therefore something that partnership managers need to become skilled at organizing, facilitating, channelling and supporting.

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