

ARTICLE TITLE Collaborative Futures: Discursive realignments in austere times

AUTHOR DETAILS

Name: Professor Helen Sullivan – Corresponding author

Biography: Director, Centre for Public Policy

Postal Address: University of Melbourne, School of Social and Political Sciences, Room 442,
John Medley Building, Parkville, Melbourne 3010

Email Address: helen.sullivan@unimelb.edu.au

Name: Dr Paul Williams

Biography: Reader in Public Management and Collaboration

Postal Address: Cardiff School of Management, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Llandaff
Campus, Western Avenue, Cardiff, CF5 2YB

Email Address: pmwilliams@cardiffmet.ac.uk

Name: Professor Mick Marchington

Biography: Emeritus Professor of Human Resource Management, Manchester Business School
and Professor of Human Resource Management, Strathclyde Business School

Postal Address: Ladyshawe House, Bridge Street, New Mills, High Peak, SK22

Email Address: mick.marchington@mbs.ac.uk

Name: Dr Louise Knight

Biography: Senior Lecturer in Management

Postal Address: Engineering Systems and Management, Aston University, Aston Triangle,
Birmingham, B4 7ET

Email Address: l.knight2@aston.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the future of collaboration in an era of austerity. Boundary object theory provides a framework to assess the significance and role of four key discourses in collaboration – efficiency, effectiveness, responsiveness and cultural performance. Crisis provides a way of examining how and in what ways discourses realign. The exploration of discourses aids critical analysis of collaboration across sectoral, geographical and disciplinary boundaries, highlighting the importance of understanding the contextual roots of collaboration theory and practice, and the implications of local/global dynamics.

KEY WORDS: collaboration; boundary object theory; discourses; austerity

4955 words excluding abstract and refs

COLLABORATIVE FUTURES: DISCURSIVE REALIGNMENTS IN AUSTERE TIMES

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration is well established within and between the public, private and third sectors. In the private sector, companies use arrangements such as joint ventures and strategic alliances to pursue competitive advantage through more efficient use of resources, shared learning and innovative practices (Child et al 2005). In the public sector, inter and intra-sectoral collaboration is commonplace across policy fields, particularly as a response to the challenges of complex and interrelated problems, and to government exhortation and legislation to plan and deliver public services more efficiently and effectively (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002). In the third sector inter-sectoral collaboration with the public sector has a long history predicated on the ability of third sector organizations to access particular user communities more easily and to be more flexible and innovative than large public sector bureaucracies. Intra-sectoral collaboration is often part of a wider pattern of inter-sectoral relationships, which latterly include collaboration with the private sector (Alcock 2010).

Despite the high levels of activity, results from collaborative endeavours are not always convincing, and collaboration's continued appeal to policy makers can appear to be an expression of faith, underpinned by an unquestioning acceptance of its apparent virtues. Academic research has also struggled to provide a consistent and coherent evidence base for the potential and limits of collaboration because of: distinctive disciplinary perspectives which

pose diverse conceptions of and questions about collaboration; institutional configurations which separate the study of collaboration into sectors, 'public', 'private' and 'third'; and methodological differences which promote particular approaches to collaboration research.

The current global economic turbulence is prompting public, private and third sector organizations to reconsider the types of collaborative activity that are valuable, in what circumstances and for what purposes. This could stimulate collaborative activity, but in new ways and in specific areas of policy or business. These circumstances, and the resulting critical attention given to collaboration, provide an important opportunity for academics and practitioners to reflect on collaboration across disciplinary, sectoral and methodological boundaries.

This article presents a contribution to this debate, prompted by and drawing on the deliberations of an ESRC funded seminar series. The 'Collaborative Futures' seminar series¹ brought academics and researchers from diverse disciplinary perspectives and policy areas, together with practitioners from the public, private and third sectors to generate new knowledge and perspectives about the future(s) for collaboration. Focused principally on the UK but informed by contributions from mainland Europe, the series explored the prospects for collaboration in more austere times, reflected on how existing research and evaluation could guide future action, and considered the implications for policy and practice. The seminar series

¹ ESRC grant no: RES-451-26-0672. <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/government-society/research/collaborative-futures/index.aspx>

ran from November 2009 to April 2011 enabling over 100 participants from both academia and practice to explore key themes in collaboration including leadership, governance, learning, human resource management, innovation and evaluation. This article draws on all of these contributions but orientates its discussion towards the implications for public policy and public services.

The article argues that options for collaboration are constituted by and in dominant discourses. Multiple discourses can co-exist and their relative influence over the purposes, forms and practices of collaboration varies depending on underlying structural and agentic factors. The article examines the likely impact of austerity on the prevailing discourses of collaboration and on the potential for future collaborative action.

The article begins by identifying the significance of discourse in shaping the potential and limits of collaborative action. It outlines the main discourses driving collaboration, specifies their roots, describes their contents and explores cross-sectoral variations. Boundary object theory is introduced to provide an analytical framework that incorporates the whole as well as the component elements of collaborative discourses. The article uses this analytical framework to offer new insights about and explore future options for intra and inter-sectoral collaboration. The article concludes with some proposals for research and practice.

DISCOURSES OF COLLABORATION

Discourses are systems of meaning that frame, make and express public policy. They comprise 'all practices and meanings shaped by a community of social actors' (Howarth 2000: 5) and 'are revealed as narratives, rhetorical strategies, organizational metaphors, traditions, collections of storylines, and cognitive normative frames' (Jeffares 2008, page 46-47). They persist over time and become 'sedimented', that is, 'taken for granted' as significant influencers over how actors perceive the conditions of possibility and their consequent room for manoeuvre.

However, while sedimented, discourses are also dynamic, subject to constant modification in both incremental and radical ways. Actors' thinking and acting will generate discursive modifications, while crises and other traumatic events can transform existing discourses, dislocating established systems of meaning but also offering productive possibilities. Jeffares (2008) argues that during periods of dislocated policy making, the role of agency is accentuated. 'The process mobilizes agents to articulate a new discursive order, and meanings become up-for-grabs' (2008 page50).

Exploring collaboration through the lens of discourse enables us to draw out and elaborate the various systems of meaning at work in driving collaboration. It also offers the possibility of examining how discourses are modified over time and space, actors' role in these processes of modification, whether and how different discourses are able to accommodate each other and what happens at a point of crisis.

Throughout the seminar series we reflected on seminar discussions to identify and draw out the

different collaborative discourses at work. These discussions were rarely conducted in the language of discourse but rather focused on the ideas, drivers, motivations and contexts for collaborative action that underpinned the position participants were taking on collaboration, the research they were engaged in or the policy and practice they were presenting. These discussions were checked against our ongoing critical review of the literature on intra and inter-sectoral collaboration (see for example Sullivan 2010). Through this process we identified four main discourses informing the research and practice of academics, policy makers and practitioners involved in collaboration. These can be described as: efficiency, effectiveness, responsiveness and cultural performance. They are analytically distinct and co-existent, though the differences between the four discourses mean that one or more will dominate in any given context. It is important to emphasise that these discourses were not necessarily 'owned' and promoted by one or other group. Rather they emerged from our conversations with seminar participants informed by our ongoing literature review. At the end of the series the emergent discourses were tested out and refined in discussion with our core advisory group of academics and practitioners.

The 'efficiency discourse' endorses collaboration as a way of making the most efficient use of resources, through intra-sectoral alliances and joint ventures, improved supply-chain management, cross-sectoral public- private partnerships and other forms of contracting out involving different combinations of public, private or third sector providers. The 'efficiency discourse' is an underpinning element of neoliberal strategies and practices that re-create national and local states by deregulating capital, financial and labour markets and emphasising

local policies of entrepreneurialism, resource constraint and marketization and the practices of New Public Management (Leitner et al 2007). A key innovation is the introduction and normalisation of public-private partnerships as a conduit for policy and service delivery. These developments have not necessarily reduced the role of the state, but they have reshaped it by limiting the influence of representative government and focusing on executive rather than representative functions amongst local politicians (Harvey 2005). At the same time the discourse promotes the role of public managers and external experts from the private and third sectors in elite institutions including partnerships and networks (Geddes and Sullivan 2011).

The 'effectiveness discourse' promotes collaboration as a way of dealing with contemporary societal concerns including: the emergence of complex policy challenges or 'wicked issues' (Rittel and Webber 1974), rising public expectations about service quality and responsiveness, and increasing public disaffection with government and its capacity to act (Barnes et al 2007). These conditions challenge governments' ability to govern through conventional means, requiring the adoption of new tools and techniques and the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders within and beyond the state to eliminate duplication and secure better coordination between people and organisations (Agranoff and McGuire 2003). Governing through a network of interdependent, trusting actors who share expertise, knowledge and resources is argued to be more appropriate to public policy challenges, than governing through hierarchies or markets (Kickert et al 1997). Considerable effort and skill is needed to build and maintain these collaborative relationships. In public policy collaborations this work is done by key public officials, usually managers, identified as 'network or process managers' (Koppenjan and Klijn

2004) or 'boundary spanners' (Marchington et al 2005; Williams 2002). In the private sector the 'effectiveness discourse' is associated with innovation and developing new products or services to meet or create consumer demand. Networks are key and the work to develop and support them is often undertaken by dedicated 'alliance managers'. The effectiveness discourse has strong support from public service managers and professionals directly concerned with delivery and impact, although the increasingly complex web of performance management frameworks and regimes necessitated by network forms of governance make transparency and accountability more difficult to secure (Sullivan 2003).

The 'responsiveness discourse' identifies collaboration as a way of improving interactions between citizens, consumers, service users and providers in the design and delivery of services. Users and citizens are defined as active agents in the delivery of public services, taking on more responsibility for their own well being partly through institutions and practices of 'co-governance' (Newman 2005). Likewise in the private sector consumers may be actively engaged in the co-production of their services, from the day to day work of on-line banking to 'one off' product innovation engagement. Co-production and co-governance may be enacted through collaborative arrangements created either by the state/private sector or by citizens and consumers themselves operating outside of established systems and structures. Public officials – elected and appointed – work to provide support for co-governance by engaging in empowerment activities, opening up decision making institutions to citizen/user influence, and ensuring that the voices of marginalised citizens and users are represented (Barnes et al 2007). Third sector interests champion the 'responsiveness discourse' although they acknowledge the

continued influence of dominant power relationships on collaborative institutions and outcomes (Taylor 2002).

A fourth discourse driving collaboration – the ‘cultural performance discourse’ – is the most underrepresented in the literature, although it emerged during seminar discussions about why collaboration retained its appeal despite all the attendant difficulties in practice. The ‘cultural performance discourse’ challenges the instrumental view of collaboration for achieving positive outcomes for citizens and/or users/consumers. Drawing on Performance Studies literature McKenzie (2001) identifies cultural performance as an expression of staged or ritualised representations or enactments of particular social and cultural traditions. Performances may be transformative or transgressive, encouraging and securing conformance to a set of traditions and values or promoting subversion of those same traditions and values in pursuit of others. Actors engage in performative acts as a way of confirming their allegiance to a set of values and norms. Decisions to collaborate are then complex, driven by motivations that are not rational but reflective of particular values or meanings that are attached to collaboration. The ‘cultural performance discourse’ is equally applicable to collaborative practices in the public, private and third sectors. It encourages us to examine what political, personal or professional satisfaction actors gain from engaging in collaboration and to consider the implications of this for existing organisational or institutional practices and the future role of collaboration (Dickinson and Sullivan forthcoming).

The remainder of this article considers the impact of the ongoing economic crisis on these collaborative discourses and potential collaborative action. It does so by making use of boundary object theory, which provides an analytical framework for discourses and their constituent elements and offers new insights into collaborative practices.

BOUNDARY OBJECT THEORY AND COLLABORATION

Boundary object theory offers a useful analytical framework to explore collaborative discourses and their impact and implications for the future. This theory has not previously been used for this purpose and indeed is under-utilised in contemporary accounts of UK collaboration (Sullivan and Williams 2012). Its potential for our purposes rests with its focus on the role and function of particular objects in settings where multiple stakeholders with various interests need to be able to work together. This focus on 'objects' can generate new insights into collaboration that enhance our understanding.

According to Star and Griesemer (1989) boundary objects are those that occupy several intersecting worlds; are flexible enough to be interpreted in different ways in these worlds, whilst at the same time robust enough to preserve a common identity and coherence across them. Actors need to be able to translate their meaning so that boundary objects can be credible within and across social worlds, whether at a global level encompassing national governments and stakeholders such as charities or multinational firms operating in PFI markets, or at a more local level of the parties to a particular collaborative endeavour. As meanings are dynamic actors need to engage in constant negotiation (Star and Griesemer, 1989). Boundary

objects can also serve as a resource to form social identities, to enable actors from diverse worlds to create a distinct identity that binds them together in support of an ideal or outcome, for example between different sectors.

Boundary objects may take a variety of forms depending on the context. They may be both tangible e.g. buildings, reports, processes and systems, and intangible e.g. narratives, concepts, theories and common ideologies (Thomas and Hardy 2007). In the context of collaboration tangible boundary objects may include shared facilities that house staff from different organisations engaged in a joint project, or shared information technology systems. Intangible objects may include ideas such as 'integration' or narratives such as 'personalised care', that each attempt to foster new ways of working amongst diverse professional groups.

Star and Griesemer's original formulation identifies boundary objects as productive and synthetic, functioning as 'anchors and bridges'. Critics argue that boundary objects may also act as 'barricades and mazes' generating conflict and reinforcing boundaries and existing power relations by protecting or privileging different interests' frames of reference or occupational positions rather than creating new shared understandings (Oswick and Robertson 2009).

Boundary objects are not inherently apolitical or inert, and may function in mediating or performative ways. There is a strong connection between interests and objects (Kimble et al 2010), with outcomes determined by negotiations, contested interactions and power relationships (Thomas and Hardy 2007) within a wider set of interacting influences (Barrett and Oborn 2010).

In what follows we draw on boundary object theory in two ways. We explore collaborative discourses as 'boundary objects' that 'sit in the middle' of a number of distinct social worlds while enabling 'shared content' to be developed (Star and Griesemer, 1989). Here collaborative discourses function as 'boundary object infrastructure' (Bowker and Star, 1999) shaping the nature and course of collaboration. We also identify specific boundary objects at work within collaborative discourses. These may include physical artefacts, new structures, knowledge and practices, reshaped organisations, government legislation and policy instruments and actors performing roles as leaders and brokers. We examine the interests that are attached to, and sponsor boundary objects, and the extent to which boundary objects offer conceptual and/or practical coherence across intersecting interests – sectoral, policy and disciplinary – the extent to which they function as 'anchors and bridges' or 'barricades and mazes'.

COLLABORATIVE FUTURES

Earlier in this article we pointed to the role of crisis and trauma in transforming discourses, destabilising established systems of meaning and opening up the possibility for new meanings to emerge. The global financial crisis and the period of economic austerity following it created the conditions for discursive displacement and realignment in relation to the four identified discourses of collaboration. Given the ongoing debates about the strength of the evidence base for collaboration (in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and/or responsiveness) one plausible option is 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. This 'anti-collaboration' discourse could find purchase in public services where evidence about the efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness of collaboration is very contested.

To date an 'anti-collaboration' discourse is not evident in public policy towards public services. Rather the emphasis on collaboration remains strong albeit with important differences in discursive content in England, Scotland and Wales. Why this might be and what the dominant discourses are in these different territories is explored below with particular reference to the role of key agents in mobilising and articulating new discursive orders (following Jeffares 2008) that function as boundary object infrastructure.

The UK Coalition 'Programme for Government' published in May 2010 (HMG 2010) foregrounds the idea of partnership and makes much use of the language of collaboration in the text, and in terms of its intentions. The 'Programme for Government' proposes the opening up of public services to a wide range of potential providers: private sector (independent), employee co-ops, community orgs, parents etc, generating a similarly broad (and potentially conflicting) range of agents and audiences as that under New Labour – through the creation of new markets for private and third sector provision, and the evolution of new kinds of mutual organisations and mechanisms involving users and beneficiaries of services.

Integral to the 'Programme for Government' is the promise of a 'new politics' appropriate to a more rational and less adversarial sensibility apparently detected in the public mood. This 'new politics' is associated with the valorisation of consensus and an 'end to easy right and left distinctions', which Sullivan (2010) argues is articulated as a new discourse of collaboration as governance,

[u]nlike under New Labour when collaboration was identified by some as a refuge from party politics and reconstituted as an anti-political institution in which 'experts' could deliberate unencumbered by politicians and their manifestos, under the Coalition, collaboration is represented as a way of working that is 'beyond politics altogether' an expression of a lately voiced public will to govern differently. It combines the 'new politics' promise of rational deliberation with the 'new common sense' consensus about the nature of the problem to be solved (the deficit) and the means of solving it (public spending cuts, greater involvement of independent providers and more self-reliance) – articulated through apparently collective appeals – 'we are all in this together' and offers a particular (albeit one sided) vision of collaboration as the ultimate expression of governing in a post-political world' (Sullivan 2010 page 16).

This 'common sense' (used in the Gramscian sense to denote culturally constructed consent) suggests that 'the public' is unconcerned about who delivers public services, provided they are delivered to a good standard and at reasonable cost. This view is supported implicitly and explicitly in public service professional journals where key figures including leaders of councils, directors of public bodies and consultants describe how they have made use of new kinds of

collaborative arrangements with private and third sector bodies to save money and improve services. These experiences are increasingly reported uncritically with collaboration characterised as a neutral instrument absent of values. However, these collaborative practices necessitate the destabilising of organisational structures, reducing the pay and conditions of existing workers, and limiting the provision of services to citizens – especially those at the margins of society (Marchington, Hadjivassiliou, Martin and Cox 2011).

This discourse of ‘collaboration as governance’ combines and adapts expectations of efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness in a boundary object infrastructure designed to appeal to a broad range of local and global stakeholders and their distinct social worlds. The efficiency discourse is amended to emphasise financial prudence, exemplified in the deficit reducing government budget strategies of the UK Coalition. This has implications for collaborative instruments such as Public Private Partnerships and the Private Finance Initiative and it highlights the ongoing debate about the extent to which these instruments offer value for money and represent the best use of public funds (Hellowell and Vecchi 2012). Contracts re-emerge as prominent boundary objects serving to regulate partnership relationships between public and private actors.

The effectiveness discourse is recast to focus on organisational reconfigurations. This means emphasising strategies such as shared services, joint appointments, merged departments and joint commissioning. The model of integration functions as an important boundary object as it

appeals to a collective ambition for improved service outcomes, but does so in different ways to different professional, practitioner and user groups (Sullivan and Williams, 2012).

The responsiveness discourse is re-orientated to emphasise how citizens and users can contribute to their own well-being. This may be expressed in relational terms e.g. co-production with professionals, or it may highlight the values of citizen or user-led action. The idea of the 'Big Society' is the key boundary object, promoting the role of the innovative citizen and empowered professional in place of the state.

In the 'collaboration as governance' discourse efficiency dominates and influences how effectiveness and responsiveness are constituted. This reflects the significance afforded to the private sector in the consultations over the development of the Coalition's 'Programme for Government' coupled with the Coalition's stated preference for greater involvement of private sector actors in public service delivery, for reasons of cost saving and because of the assumption that the commercial orientation of the private sector will generate creativity and innovation in product and service design advocated by some for re-engineering public services in the UK.

The dominance of efficiency is also felt in terms of leadership for collaboration, with a shift from a facilitative, empowering and distributed approach (Sullivan et al 2012), to one that is less expansive and more concentrated on the boundaries of professional hierarchies, individual performance management regimes and narrow forms of accountability.

By contrast in Scotland and Wales the efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness discourses remain more distinct. In Scotland the Christie Commission Report (2011) outlined a new approach for public services in Scotland that emphasised collaboration as a means of improving effectiveness and responsiveness and ultimately outcomes for communities. In Wales, which has less financial independence than Scotland, there is perhaps more limited scope to resist a new dominant discourse. However to date Wales policy for public services continues to function within the discourses of effectiveness and responsiveness, though recent statements by ministers in the Welsh Government about the need to merge local public service providers offer some indication of a discursive shift (Sargeant 2012).

The discursive distinctions between England, Scotland and Wales also illuminate the contribution of the 'cultural performance' discourse. If, as we argued in the previous section, cultural performance communicates social values and norms through collaboration, then the discursive realignments we suggest above offer some insights into what and how collaboration will mean in these distinct national contexts. Cultural performance also offers a way of understanding collaboration's capacity to both mediate and constitute social values and norms through the performative acts of different agents. As cultural performance can be an expression of transgression as well as support then it may also be possible to find and examine alternative expressions of collaboration as cultural performance that is collaboration used as a way of expressing alternative norms and values to those proposed by the Coalition in England for example.

This discussion also highlights the different analytical function performed by the 'cultural performance' discourse. Unlike the discourses of efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness that comprise a set of values, institutions and instruments linked to the achievement of improved outcomes through collaboration, the cultural performance discourse illuminates the prevailing norms and values of key actors and institutions in pursuit of a particular objective, whatever it may be and however disconnected it may appear from the content of collaboration.

CONCLUSION

This paper offers new insights into collaboration in the UK. It highlights the contribution of discourses to constitute the potential and limits of collaborative action and offers a framework for thinking about the impact of austerity on discourses and on future collaborative options. In addition its use of boundary object theory enables the examination of discourses holistically and through the workings of component boundary objects. In this concluding section we consider some of the key lessons of the seminar series and this article for future research and practice in collaboration.

Exploring collaboration through discourses provides an opportunity to engage with theory in a rather different way. What became evident to us is the importance of understanding the contextual roots of different theoretical contributions as these can reveal a great deal about the utility of the theory in different contexts. For example discourses of effectiveness owe a great deal to the Dutch school of collaboration (network) theorists, such as Kickert et al (1997), while discourses of responsiveness are informed by the work of Danish scholars including

Sorenson and Torfing (2008) on network governance. In both cases the theoretical insights are helpful but it is important to note that Dutch scholarship is informed by the experience of coalition governing and the necessity for collaboration to address significant societal challenges particularly in relation to natural resources. In similar vein Danish scholars are informed by a tradition of governing that is highly participative and which valorises consensus. By contrast the UK is (still) a largely adversarial system and one in which collaboration has been deployed in pursuit of ideological ambitions, influenced primarily by neoliberalism and new public management. All this suggests that future theoretical work on collaboration needs to be more attentive to its contextual roots and to the implications of 'borrowing' theory from one context for use in another.

Given the uncertain evidence base collaboration research still needs to find a way to satisfy critics about its benefits and limits. Here too the focus on discourse is helpful as it offers a way of understanding the way in which different evaluation approaches appear to 'fit' with different kinds of collaboration. Through the lens of the four discourses discussed in this paper, the implications for any of the seminar series themes (leadership, governance, learning, innovation human resource management, and evaluation) reveal significant variation, and can help elucidate opportunities and constraints for sharing knowledge of collaboration across sectoral, geographical and disciplinary boundaries. For example, for theme of performance and evaluation, the efficiency discourse emphasises value for money and the achievement of key performance indicators, through the application of relatively simple instruments that offer a 'snapshot' assessment as well as more complex research methods that assess change over time. The effectiveness discourse, often associated with determining 'what works' in complex

policy contexts, appeals to more comprehensive evaluative frameworks based on theory-based approaches. The responsiveness discourse highlights the importance of consumers/users and citizens as active agents in the process of determining what 'success' looks like in terms of collaborative performance, and how to evaluate it. By contrast the cultural performance discourse offers a critique of the emphasis on performance in assessment and evaluation, suggesting that performance is interpreted in a very narrow way through the achievement of tangible key performance indicators or outcomes but needs to be viewed more broadly, operating in a way that is in keeping with dominant values and norms. It also questions the dominance of 'performance' as the central focus of evaluation to the exclusion of other legitimate evaluation concerns such as formative assessment or process analysis.

Developments in governance also point to new directions for future research and collaborative practice. As it becomes increasingly difficult to govern in a way that does not take active account of the global/local dynamics so too those dynamics will be present in collaborative action, whether through the operation of global firms as public service providers, or through more interconnected global and national governance arrangements. Boundary objects are likely to be found at these different levels as Thomas and Hardy (2007) suggest, boundary objects are themselves 'nested' across different levels of artefacts, interactions and a wider decision making processes. It remains to be seen how these high-level shifts in England and divergence in collaborative discourses across the UK will play out at local levels in the long term. And shifts and divergences mean (more or less overt) conflict and associated changes in related boundary objects across different levels and settings.

It is also possible that collaborative research and practice will become further differentiated by the scale at which collaborations operate, e.g. megaprojects with their complex legal frameworks and often opaque accountability arrangements generate a particular kind of ‘mega collaboration’, while citizen led projects focused on ‘co-production’ offer rather different collaborative challenges. Understanding the differences in collaborations of and at different scales and how each is informed by particular discourses of collaboration will be an important challenge for researchers and practitioners in the future.

The use of a boundary object analytical framework to explore the role, function, weight and dynamics of competing collaborative discourses has considerable research potential in the future both in terms of theory and for policy and practice. A future research agenda might productively focus on discourses, the interests sponsoring them and the associated system of power relationships. The challenges lend themselves to case study methodologies to accumulate evidence from different contexts and policy areas, longitudinal studies to reflect the dynamic nature of collaboration, and ethnographic perspectives to highlight cultural aspects and social group behaviours. The ultimate aim should be to generate a base of fine-grained, dynamic, embedded and politically imbued (Oswick and Robertson 2009) research to assist in the understanding and practice of collaboration which challenges the simple ‘solutions’ put forward by governments and management consultancies alike.

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to the ESRC for funding the seminar series. We would also like to acknowledge all those who contributed to the seminar series, especially Professor Chris

Huxham, Co-Investigator for this ESRC Seminar Series. We thank in particular Mark Wardman (Senior Advisor, Audit Commission) and Sian Harrop-Griffiths (Cardiff and Vale University Health Board) who worked with us throughout the series and helped shape the material contained in this paper.

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