Creating space for playfully learning to collaborate across organizational boundaries

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to introduce the authors’ action research praxis regarding the development of collaborative relations between organizations that incorporates an element of play. Based on transitional change thinking, the authors use play and simulation, creating a naturalistic setting, and provide spacing for relational dynamics to unfold so as to learn from these.

Design/methodology/approach – The perspective taken in this paper draws on organizational psychology, systems psychodynamics and organization development.

Findings – One workshop is described in detail, namely, “The Yacht Club.”

Originality/value – The rationale for and design of workshops that provide transitional space for experiencing, researching and learning about interorganizational dynamics as a valuable alternative to positivist experimentation are described.

Keywords Play and simulation, Transitional change, Interorganizational collaboration, Action research, Group dynamics

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

As the world has become more interconnected, new organizational forms came into existence to deal with complex societal issues that often present themselves as wicked problems. In network
organizations, public–private partnerships or other interorganizational forms, collaboration across organizational boundaries has become a key relational competence. It is people, employees of the involved organizations, that need to develop collaborative relationships, in order for the interdependent organizations to attain their common goal. Yet developing collaborative relationships is far from easy. Tensions as a consequence of the diversity involved (in interest perspectives, identities, etc.) and the complexity of the task at hand get expressed in relational, often dysfunctional, dynamics. As action researchers and facilitators, we work with those who represent the organizations and who meet at a table or other settings (e.g. work conferences) – they form a temporary group, with group members belonging to different organizations. We bring them together around their projects or in workshops to facilitate joint learning. In our work, we like to introduce a deliberate element of play as a different modality of expression, while play is also helpful in learning about the dynamics encountered and dealing with change.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce our action research approach regarding interorganizational collaboration that incorporates an element of play. We provide some illustrations of our work and reflect on our praxis. Our approach is grounded in organizational psychology, organization development (regarding change processes of human systems (e.g. Cummings and Worley, 2005) and system psychodynamics, in which (conscious and unconscious) dynamic processes in and of groups and organizations are considered in their appropriate context, drawing its insights from psychoanalysis and systems theory (e.g. Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008). This paper is intended as a reflection piece, offering a particular point of view. It is not a research or method paper. Furthermore, no particular model of conducting action research is advocated. We work from an action research approach, respecting its main principles including producing “actionable knowledge” for the client system as its primary focus (Argyris, 2005), working with the whole system as much as possible, close collaboration between insiders (client) and outsiders (researchers), joint reflection and learning, in this case, regarding the development of interorganizational relationships and understanding their dynamics (e.g. Eden and Huxham, 1996; Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Reason and Bradbury, 2000). Our aim is not Erklären but Verstehen: understanding the richness of human interaction within and between groups in the here-and-now, how these interactions develop over time, in a specific context. We work with experiences, also our own, and thus use our subjectivities, which happens in system psychodynamics and in ethnography (Zilber and Zanoni, 2020), yet is not common in mainstream academic research.

Below, we first will describe the subject of our action research, the development of collaborative interorganizational relationships. Then we focus on the issue of play and learning, introducing a transitional change approach. Subsequently, we present in more detail how we have developed and work with a two-day behavioral simulation to help participants experience, reflect and learn about relational dynamics that color multiparty interactions. In the discussion section, we reflect on some implications and complications of our way of doing research in the current academic climate.

**Interorganizational dynamics**

We are interested in the group dynamics of interorganizational relationships, as these occur among representatives of different parties as they meet, often around a table, to work with their interdependencies to address a common goal (Gray, 1989). These parties might form partnerships, develop joint ventures or work in networks. They aim to maintain their legal autonomy, yet they are interdependent with respect to addressing a particular problem domain and formulating a joint task. For example, regarding health care, infrastructure and
climate change – all major societal problems that require working across organizational
and/or sectoral boundaries (Gray and Purdy, 2018). We focus on the human side of
collaboration, as it is people who are framing the problems, coming to a shared problem
definition, developing a joint goal and needing to relate to others who represent their
organizational interests. Research has shown that collaborating across boundaries, although
important and often expected to be effortless given the interdependencies, is no easy task for
those involved (Gray, 1989; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Bouwen and Taillieu, 2004). The
collaborative process is fraught with feelings of tensions manifested in distrust, negative
stereotyping, power play, exclusion, etc. It is the collaborative table where these dynamics,
conscious and unconscious, shaped by the complexities, diversities and ambiguities
involved, get played out. Yet, the table is also a place for possible interventions to develop
collaborative relationships.

Major issues protagonists around the table face pertain to, for example, how to develop a
joint goal that also serves their own organizational interests? How to work with a diversity
of different interests and their concurrent interdependencies? How to remain autonomous
while also being an important stakeholder? How to develop trust where trust is likely to be
absent at the start of the endeavor? How to bring in one’s perspectives without stirring up
relational conflict? How to deal with pressures originating from constituencies and/or from
the larger society? Which parties to include in the deliberations and when? How to know
whether one is making progress with respect to the collaborative agenda? Furthermore, no
party has legitimate authority over the other organizational actors, while trust as a
coordination mechanism still needs to be developed; the start of any interorganizational
collaborative process is underorganized (Gray, 1989). We aim to understand these and other
dynamics and to develop interventions that help the protagonists handling them.

Examples of projects we have been involved in as action researchers include: developing
a modern “mental health policy” in Malta, that was acceptable to all political parties and
other stakeholders such as health care, police and unions; actors’ divergent framing and
reframing concerning water management issues; and redeveloping a major highway with
governmental and contractor bodies (e.g. Schruijer, 2020; Dewulf et al., 2005). As action
researchers and facilitators, we design the process together with the client system. We create
a setting in which the various stakeholders can meet (e.g. in working conferences or
multiparty meetings), help to establish an appropriate setting (establishing ground rules,
adequate working space and materials, coming to a joint agenda), observe and explore the
here-and-now group dynamics during these encounters, act as a process consultant and
organize review sessions in which observations (ours and those of participants) are shared
and jointly reflected upon, while judgements are postponed (Vansina, 2005). Often, we also
conduct (individual or group) interviews before and after meetings and, if deemed desirable,
distribute questionnaires throughout the process to discuss the findings in subsequent
meetings.

**Playing, learning and actionable knowledge**

We are especially concerned with how to help protagonists learn about group dynamics in
interorganizational collaboration and how to work with the relational complexities in a
relatively safe context. A key concept in developing these workshops is that of transitional
change (Amado and Ambrose, 2001; Amado and Vansina, 2005; Vansina and Schruijer,
2013), referring to conditions and principles that are needed to help a client (system) learn
and develop. The conditions and principles are:

- The provision of sufficient time and space for joint exploration concerning a
  relevant issue, in our case an issue involving multiple parties;
The existence of open-endedness, that is, behaviors and learning outcomes are not predetermined or prescribed; participants are free to come up with new ideas or new behaviors with respect to the task at hand;

The task is real enough and represents adequately the day-to-day struggle of participants, while simultaneously it is not real, that is, it is not a formal task with formal consequences;

An element of play is present that encourages participants to experiment and try out new behaviors;

Such play often involves a so-called “transitional object” – an object that is created or discovered by the group itself, an object that helps participants deal with the tensions that accompany working on the task and engaging in new explorations; it helps the group to transition;

There is sufficient psychological safety for experimenting in the here-and-now, and real safety, such that behaviors enacted in the transitional space will not have real consequences outside this space;

The learning is experiential and there is ample attention given to the here-and-now relational dynamics as they emerge while working on the task;

There is space for jointly reviewing: both participants and facilitators reflect on what the dynamics have been, while judgments are suspended. After this joint sense making, it is explored what the possible implications are for future multiparty encounters and which actions are important to take; and

The climate for learning is supportive: this not only pertains to the learning climate during the workshop but also to organizational leadership being open to development and “not knowing” (Bion, 1970) and the role and attitude of the facilitators during the workshop.

An illustration involved a care home where all stakeholders (care staff [e.g. nurses, doctors, helpers]; managerial staff [managers, directors]; facilitating staff [e.g. quality control, technical staff]) took part in a series of working conferences (Vansina and Schruijer, 2013) that fulfilled the criteria of a whole system transitional change process (open-ended, attention to here-and-now dynamics, reviewing, supportive management and facilitation). As an activity in one of these working conferences, participants were asked, in heterogeneous groups, to envision a care home where it was good to live and work and to express the vision by building a three-dimensional home. The created objects then were jointly reflected upon. After the conference, the homes were displayed in the reception hall of the care home. Over time, poems were added, and visitors were invited to reflect on that what they saw. The homes became a transitional object in making the change into a new way of working – a way that was initially explored and developed during the working conferences.

Another illustration refers to a one-day working conference with stakeholders involved in fighting child trafficking: police, immigration, custodians, health care, public prosecutors and lawyers, among others (Schruijer, 2020). As a way of discussing the (re-)design of their organizational network and the quality of their relationships, a scenario was constructed around a fictive case, a girl who was trafficked and ended up at Schiphol airport, based on interviews with all the stakeholders (thus also “real”). A doll was made by girls in sheltered care that represented this case; she was put on a cart with wheels and was placed in the center of a large hall. Nineteen stakeholders were seated around her with a table for each
stakeholder. During the working conference, the vicissitudes of the trafficked girl in The Netherlands were described through the scenario that was read aloud. Stakeholders manifested themselves when they felt they needed to get involved and drew the girl toward them, while speaking out loudly what they were doing and why. This way, all roles became clear, the interdependencies were explored and possible needed changes in the process of working with trafficked children could be made. Moreover, besides redesigning the process flow of which stakeholder needs to act when, the working conference provided space to express and review the relational dynamics.

A workshop on playing in and learning about interorganizational dynamics: the Yacht Club

We developed a workshop that allows participants to engage with a real issue in a naturalistic setting and in which here-and-now dynamics unfold. The workshop is of limited duration and is suitable as an open as well as an in-company program. The Yacht Club (Vansina et al., 1998) is a two-day behavioral simulation that aims to help participants gain an experience of the group dynamics that can arise when working across organizational boundaries. Learning goals pertain to: How to work with negative intergroup stereotyping and distrust? How to deal with the tensions of building relationships with other parties at the table on the one hand while also serving one’s constituency? What does leadership entail when no one around the table has position power? How does one cope with the ambiguity and complexity that surround multiparty issues?

The Yacht Club is based on a real socioeconomic issue in a political context that emerged in the St Petersburg region in the early nineties of the past century. The setting was used to develop the simulation. It describes how after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a shipyard that was the main employer on the island of Kotlin just outside of St Petersburg, was struggling to stay alive without orders from the Russian marine. Also, the local public authorities were concerned, as unemployment loomed on an island that was relatively crime-free, compared to the large city of St Petersburg. The dismantlement of the Soviet Union, though, also meant new possibilities, for example tourism – an opportunity that was positively received by three yacht clubs: one on the island, one on the mainland next to St Petersburg and one in Finland, whose members longed to visit Russia. Then there was a Russian bank that had an interest in the socioeconomic developments, as well as a group of young Russian entrepreneurs that had an emotional tie to the island, while also being interested in making money.

Participants are asked to indicate the preferences for a particular party and are assigned to parties, as much as possible, in function of these. Each party receives a booklet that depicts the setting consisting of the same information for all parties yet also information specific to the party. Rooms are allocated to each of the seven parties. Participants are asked to identify as much as possible with the setting and the interests of their party and be themselves in how they enact such identifications. In other words, they are asked not to engage in making caricatures or enacting stereotypes (of “a Russian person”, “a bank”, “a municipality”, etc.). Furthermore, they are asked to stick to the reality as depicted in the booklets and not to pull rabbits out of a hat: no extra funds can suddenly be invented, for example, and it is only with these parties that they can interact. Furthermore, each minute is a minute – they play in real time. Plans and decisions need to be checked by one another on its reality basis. Of course, they can imagine, think about the future, make plans, etc. yet they start from where they are. There are no objectives given by the facilitators – it is totally up to the participants how to make use of the simulation time and what to achieve – if anything at all.
Parties are assigned to their own room and a timetable with activities is set for the simulation, which is to be adhered to. The simulation starts with within-party reading and planning. After that there is an alternation between two types of activities: so-called “visiting” where parties can visit other parties and be visited, with the rule that no more than three parties can be present in the same room. The other activity is a so-called “town hall meeting”: this takes place in the room of the public authorities: all parties can send a delegate to a table while the constituencies can take place behind him or her and send notes to the delegate. Taking part in the town hall is voluntary. After approximately five visiting rounds alternated with five town hall meetings, the simulation ends mid-morning of the second day. The facilitators of the Yacht Club (the authors) do not intervene during the simulation. Yet, they follow groups and themes that are being developed and meet briefly throughout to share observations among one another. At the start, during and at the end of the simulation, questionnaires are distributed (e.g. regarding the within- and between-group climate, power, collaborativeness, obstacles in the process).

After the simulation ends, the remainder of the second day is spent reviewing the dynamics jointly. The facilitators share their main observations with the participants. Together, attempts are made to make sense of what has happened, what could have changed the dynamics and how and when so. The understanding arrived at is a combination of insider and outsider experiences and observations, thus validating and enriching the insights. Questionnaire findings (computed overnight) are also shared and discussed, to stimulate reflection. Furthermore, time is spent to relate the dynamics experienced in the simulation to those in their back home organizations. Normally, between 20 and 25 participants take part. We have played the Yacht Club more than hundred times in the past 30 years.

All participants are almost always fully engaged. For them it is an eye opener to learn about the dynamics between and within parties in a system context. Major learnings for us as action researchers are, for example, that time and time again participants are not aware of the group dynamics that unfold, even though they may be knowledgeable about group dynamics or even work as a consultant, trainer or psychologist. We see all kinds of dynamics (e.g. stereotyping, scapegoating, conflict avoidance, power dynamics, relational conflict, task conflict) emerge over time, at various system levels, and observe the various ways in which these are handled as they occur – whether they are aware of them at that moment or not (mostly not). It is amazing to see how early events have an impact on later outcomes and how protagonists are generally unable to ward off the negative consequences of these events, unless process interventions are made. Yet this happens rarely, especially when the involvement (and thus entanglement in the group dynamics) is very high – an “unhappy learning” experience for participants, also for participants who are process consultants themselves and now can experience how they may be fully overwhelmed by the dynamics. The Yacht Club has proven to be a rich experience, for participants and for us as action researchers. Observing dynamics as they emerge is hard to come by in “traditional” research.

Using simulations as a research tool in organization research has been advocated before (Dutton and Stumpf, 1991; Gist et al., 1998). Indeed, as researchers we too learn about multiparty behavior: we observe the group dynamics over time when the participants work on a real and complex multiparty task – unlike what can be obtained in a laboratory setting or through questionnaire research. We attend to all aspects of group and intergroup dynamics as well as to how the context affects these dynamics. Thus, this includes how participants come to shared problem definition and goal (or not), how they advance their organizational interests, how they deal with diversity between and within groups, what type
of leadership is called for and how this is enacted, how distrust develops among participants and how they try to restore it, how trust is built (if at all), how negative stereotypes are dealt with, how they represent their organizations at the table while constituents are monitoring their behavior, how participants engage in constructive or destructive conflict or how these are avoided, how ambiguity and complexity is coped with, how they deal with rejection and exclusion, how early events impact later dynamics, how the context affects the dynamics (e.g. their organizational backgrounds, influential societal events at that very moment) and more. We refer to some of our publications for further details (Vansina et al., 1998; Schruijer, 2015, 2021; Curşeu and Schruijer, 2018, 2020, 2023, 2024; Schruijer and Curşeu, 2023).

Concluding comments
In this paper we advocated to play when wanting to learn about the dynamics of working together across organizational boundaries and gave various illustrations of our work. Play is central to human culture and human development (Henricks, 2014; Huizinga, 1938; Winnicott, 1971). Creating a safe space for playing helps people to experiment with, reflect on and learn from complex and emergent relational dynamics, while it also allows researchers to observe and understand more deeply how people take up this space meaningfully and engage in human interaction and joint development. Joint reviewing of these dynamics, by those who engaged in the play and by the researchers, enriches the insights on both sides and fosters actionable knowledge. The approach we advocate in this paper marries action, intervention, learning and researching. The Yacht Club simulation proves to be an excellent tool in this endeavor. Over the years other multiparty simulations, sharing various characteristics with the Yacht Club, have been developed (e.g. DeRidder and Callewaert, 1999; Stefanska et al., 2011).

The Yacht Club has been designed with the principles of transitional change in mind, namely, learning through experience, attending to the here-and-now relational dynamics and joint reviewing. Time and space for joint exploration is provided and the here-and-now gets ample attention. No outcomes are prescribed or can be predicted, and there are only some minimal rules within which dynamics can arise. Also, we do not intervene as facilitators or come up with new data. What the exact dynamics are is unknown beforehand and is a function of how the participants themselves engage with the task. The task is naturalistic, while the behaviors enacted in the workshops have no real consequences regarding their formal jobs, although, of course, they do learn and bring their insights into their working lives. Ground rules and confidentiality build toward a climate that is psychologically safe, as of course how facilitators enact their role. The workshop invites to play and try out. A transitional object is often developed in the form of a slogan (e.g. “we develop the 'Ibiza of the north!!!”) or a particular metaphor which the participants bestow with meaning.

We hope that we have given a glimpse of our action research approach and what it offers in terms of learning for all actors involved. Action research plays a smaller role nowadays at universities as compared to the sixties of the last century, while studying group dynamics emerging in the here-and-now, using psychodynamic and systems theories as theoretical inspiration, was commonplace in the United States (National Training Laboratories) and in Europe (Tavistock Institute for Human Relations) (Fraher, 2004), yet the gap with academic practice widened substantially. Despite the current calls for valorization, impact and engagement, strict positivist thinking aimed at discovering decontextualized and universal laws still dominates academic social and organizational psychology. We consider action research in the complex world that we live in of utmost importance. Fortunately, in the context of multiparty learning, action research is being conducted (e.g. Coghlan and
Our systems psychodynamic approach is rare in academia these days, as the role of psychodynamics has dwindled over the years (Schrijver and Cursu, 2014), yet, it is certainly not absent and has entered organization studies (e.g. Fotaki et al., 2012; Mikkelsen et al., 2020; Stein, 2019). And play and imagination have been introduced in the past decades as part of art-based research practices (e.g. Knowles and Cole, 2008), although it has hardly been adopted by academic psychology.

As researchers we engage in a relationship with those whose behavior we study and aim for joint reflection and learning. We deliberately use our own subjectivities to make sense of what is going on. Our focus is dual: observing dynamics out there, while also attending to what is going on within us. Such dual focus is normal in system psychodynamic work yet seems to be at odds with the notion of science as value free and objective. Yet, we maintain that one has to get close to what one wants to understand when it concerns the emotional life of groups (and other social systems), so as to get a glimpse from within, of course without becoming immersed. Also, for a group to enact its inner workings, a certain level of trust in the researcher is required. Finally, when a researcher uses his or her subjectivity, a deeper understanding may be arrived at (due to processes of projective identification, for example). Openness on the side of the researcher is required as concepts, hypotheses and theories may stand in the way of observing without preconceptions; an attitude of “not knowing” and a stance of wonder are considered valuable. One is very aware how easily new reality gets unjustly interpreted in function of existing knowledge (Bion, 1970). Yet one remains an outsider, and one does not want to mistake one’s own inner life with that of the group. Therefore, conscientious sorting out is needed. With oneself, with one’s co-researchers and with those who are studied through continuous joint reflection. Furthermore, through publishing our findings, we continue reflection with reviewers and readers.

The current university climate does not make it easy for researchers to adopt an attitude as described above. Can the researcher play, can she/he “research creatively” (cf. “living creatively”, Winnicott, 1986)? The need for control and the existence of fixed ideas what “good science” should be can stifle creativity and imagination. It needs to be objective and “evidence-based.” Clear guidelines exist on how to write an academic article and what a good journal is. And it is articles one should write, books “count” less. We do not disapprove of guidelines and do not reject positivism or laboratory experiments for that matter. Experimentation accounted for much progress in the natural sciences, medicine and fundamental social science. Yet, systematic and participative observation, action research, simulations, play and improvisation as ways of developing relevant theoretical – besides actionable – insights are often disregarded, undervalued and deemed as “not scientific.” Such methods, however, are extremely important to fathom relational complexities of social life. Therefore, when it concerns social matters, we call for a better balance between different philosophies of science and methodologies that go along with these.

References


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