

Navigating taboos: A study of the interplay between system levels within inter-organizational projects.

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Track: Inter-Organizational Collaboration: Partnerships, Alliances and Networks

Ilja R. van Rijn, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, i.r.van.rijn@vu.nl

Alfons H. van Marrewijk, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, a.h.van.marrewijk@vu.nl

Sandra G.L. Schruijer, Utrecht University, s.g.l.schruijer@uu.nl

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Introduction

“Taboos are about ultimate values, values that are not open to argument”

(Hofstede, 1998, p. 209).

Often unspoken and unwritten, taboos are defined as a proscription of certain behavior within a specific group or community (Allan, 2018; Trice & Beyer, 1993). These proscriptions function as an unquestioned and uncompromising type of social norm which indicates that which is forbidden or prohibited (Trice & Beyer, 1993). Taboos are an universal feature of social systems, and thus always impact the members and activities of organizations (Schoemaker & Tetlock, 2012). As features of organizations differ, so do their inherent taboos, which could lead to clashes. On top of that, the hidden and unspoken aspect of taboos can make the resulting behavior incomprehensible for outsiders (Fershtman et al., 2011; Schoemaker & Tetlock, 2012).

Within inter-organizational collaborations, social norms have been shown to influence behavior by establishing a framework of expected behavior and functioning as a form of social control (Dekker, 2004; Huo et al., 2019). These expectations are critical in establishing and maintaining trust (Swärd, 2016), in shaping perceptions of roles and responsibilities (Haas & Park, 2010; Valentine, 2018), and in managing communication and conflict (Saukko et al., 2020). Similarity in and understanding of these social norms facilitate interaction between actors, thus facilitating inter-organizational collaboration (Fang et al., 2008; Knoben & Oerlemans, 2006).

Given that taboos function as a type of social norm, and social norms have been shown to influence inter-organizational collaborations, it can be inferred that taboos may similarly shape such collaborations. By studying the influence of taboos on an inter-organizational renovation project, this study aims not only to create knowledge that will help in facilitating inter-organizational collaborations but also, given the hidden nature of taboos, aims to create insights that would otherwise stay concealed (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2014).

This study is part of a larger research project which focusses on how the Dutch construction sector can deliver scalable circular renovations. As such, the research question will be answered by studying a renovation project with high circular ambitions. Multiple organizations are involved within this renovation project, including a client organization, an architect, a contractor, and 25 sub-contractors. The data collection for this study is currently

ongoing: qualitative, in-depth research is executed through an ethnographic approach with action-research elements.

In order to understand the impact taboos can have on inter-organizational collaborations, this paper will first start by outlining the manner in which the concept of taboos is understood in this study and how taboos function in groups. Second, this paper will continue with discussing relevant topics and concepts that are needed to understand and interpret the goings-on within an inter-organizational renovation project. Third, this paper will outline two characteristics of taboos that might reveal the impact taboos could have on inter-organizational collaborations. Fourth and last, the paper will outline the methodology that is utilized within the study this paper describes.

Taboos

This study sees taboos as a proscription of certain behavior, which functions as an uncompromising and unquestioned type of social norm, and is found within a specific group or community. (Allan, 2018; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Deeply seated values of this group are signaled through these proscriptions (Hoon, 2017). Taboos exist because the behavior they proscribe is perceived as harmful or causes concern (Allan, 2018; Douglas, 1966). Therefore, these proscriptions are, often unconsciously, used as a way in which people manage and alleviate anxieties or other negative emotions (Gabriel, 1998; Trice & Beyer, 1993). As such, taboos often align with collective self-interest or serve another function within the group (Barnard & Spencer, 2002).

The emotional aspect behind taboos causes these proscriptions to function as a form of ‘thought police’, thereby creating adherence to the social system of which they are part. As people fear the consequences of breaking a taboo, taboos are enforced by severe social sanctions such as judgement, criticism, harassment, or even ostracization (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2014; Schoemaker & Tetlock, 2012). Through these sanctions, taboos show what is considered appropriate behavior, therefore providing a reference framework for normative behavior (Hoon & Jacobs, 2014). When a taboo subsequently becomes internalized, even thinking about breaking a taboo can be considered appalling and result in self-inflicted punishments (Fershtman et al., 2011). As a result, taboos often result in unconscious dynamics (Gabriel, 1998), cause adherence to the existing social system, and create stability within a group (Hoon & Jacobs, 2014; Trice & Beyer, 1993).

Inter-Organizational Renovation Projects

Work in the construction sector is often undertaken within inter-organizational projects (Papadonikolaki et al., 2019). Inter-organizational projects are understood as groups involving employees from multiple organizations working together to achieve a common goal with a clear deadline (van Marrewijk et al., 2016). The involvement of multiple organizations results in complexities, as project actors representing their organizations need to deal with differences concerning, for example, interests, identities and perspectives (Schruijer, 2020). As such, effective collaborating in inter-organizational projects not only requires the sharing of both resources and knowledge (Hardy et al., 2003), but also the building of trust (Newell & Swan, 2000; Özer & Zheng, 2017) and the aligning of relationships with the needs of the collaboration (Caldwell et al., 2017; Nahapiet, 2008).

There are a number of factors that impact inter-organizational collaboration. We will discuss two specific factors that will help to understand the impact of taboos on inter-organizational collaborations. First, we will discuss the influence of social relations within inter-organizational collaboration. Second, we will discuss the influence of system levels. Third, we will discuss the impact of power asymmetry.

Social Relations & Soft Control

Social relations act as both enablers and regulators of inter-organizational collaboration, making them essential for sustained cooperation and innovation. Strong relations facilitate knowledge sharing, align mutual interests, and enhance collaborative capacity. Additionally, social relations shape trust, coordination, and can help to achieve shared goals (Caldwell et al., 2017; Steinmo & Rasmussen, 2018). Soft control refers to these informal mechanisms, such as trust, shared norms and mutual understanding (Frid et al., 2024). Within inter-organizational collaboration, soft control can complement harder forms of control such as contracts and explicit guidelines. However, if soft control isn't sufficient, collaborators will fall back on hard control, which could negatively impact collaboration (Frid et al., 2024; Kreutzer et al., 2016). Considering the social sanctions that accompany taboos, it could be interesting to study the impact of taboos on soft control within inter-organizational collaborations.

System Levels

Inter-organizational collaboration involves multiple social system levels, which influence one another and add complexity to the collaboration process (Phillips et al., 2000; Schruijer, 2020). Projects are part of these social systems, and project actors will reflexively pick up the systems

characteristics such as the social norms and standard behaviors (Bion, 1969; Sydow & Windeler, 2020). These characteristics are referred to and applied during project activities, as this allows the actors to analyze and judge both their own activities and that of others (Arvidsson, 2009). By acting upon these characteristics, the project actors simultaneously reproduce the social system (Sydow & Windeler, 2020). The influence of these system levels on inter-organizational projects is especially visible in the Dutch construction sector. Clegg et al. (2023) illustrate this as follows: on a sector level, the construction sector is defined by unrealistic time and budgetary constraints, dysfunctional relationships, and unanticipated challenges. On a project level, these characterizing factors often results in a project culture that is commonly defined by conflict and ambiguity, opportunistic behaviors and toxic practices (Clegg et al., 2023).

Power Asymmetry

A third factor that has significant influence on inter-organizational projects is power asymmetry. Power differences and asymmetry are inherent in the Dutch construction sector. The client nearly always has a dominant position: this organization is closest to the end-user, holds the financial resources, and can easily replace a contractor, making the contractor dependent on the client (Koolwijk et al., 2022). Power asymmetry influences how resources are distributed and decisions are made. These power imbalances can create distrust and hinder open communication (Eikelenboom & Van Marrewijk, 2023), whereas more equal power can lead to deeper collaboration (Kähkönen, 2014). Often, the more dominant party will impose its institutional logics and norms on the weaker party (Nicholls & Huybrechts, 2016), which has implications for the manner in which taboos can clash.

Taboos in Organizations and their Collaborations

Taboos can exist on multiple levels: they can be a feature of society as a whole or they can be refined to a particular social context (Hofstede, 1998). However, taboos are universal features of all social systems, and as such, all organizations are impacted by them (Schoemaker & Tetlock, 2012). Two specific characteristics of taboos are relevant for considering the impact taboos could have on organizations and inter-organizational collaborations. First, taboos can cause the avoidance of critical issues and can suppress important discussions. Second, taboos have an essential function in creating and maintaining a social system. Both of these characteristics result in implications for inter-organizational collaboration, specifically for the relational aspects of these collaborations.

First, research has shown that the avoidance of taboo topics can impact the ability of organizations to adequately address important issues (Hoon & Jacobs, 2014; Martin, 1990; Schoemaker & Tetlock, 2012). For example, Schoemaker and Tetlock (2012) showed how an taboo on addressing worst-case scenarios caused BP (British Petroleum) to fail to foresee the risks of deep-water drilling, which lead to a catastrophic blowout, a massive oil spill, and the deaths of 11 workers. Within inter-organizational collaborations, research has shown the importance of addressing relevant topics in order to deal with the complexity and dynamic nature of such collaborations. Paulraj et al. (2007) argued, for example, that openly discussing and resolving issues fosters trust and mutual understanding, therefor improving the collaborative relationship. As such, taboos have the potential to negatively impact inter-organizational collaborations.

Second, the involvement of multiple social systems can bring together taboos that might clash. Taboos can vary from organization to organization and between system levels (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2014). When taboos clash with other taboos or even other values, individual actors are forced to violate one or another (Schoemaker & Tetlock, 2012). As taboos have an essential function in creating and maintaining a social system, social sanctions likely result from these violations (Fershtman et al., 2011). On top of that, the hidden and unspoken aspect of taboos can make the resulting behavior incomprehensible for outsiders. Taboos can thus additionally lead to misunderstandings (Fershtman et al., 2011; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2014; Schoemaker & Tetlock, 2012). As inter-organizational collaborations inherently entail multiple social systems (Bion, 1969; Sydow & Windeler, 2020), these collaborations will likely need to deal with multiple taboos. Roberts (2013), for example, showed that multiple organizations must navigate multiple taboos from different social contexts, which requires sensitivity and adaptation.

Methodology

As taboos are tacit proscriptions of certain behavior, qualitative, in-depth research is needed (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2014). This study therefore utilizes an ethnographic research approach with action-research elements. Ethnographic research takes a systematic approach to studying the social life of groups, making it suitable for generating deep understanding of the social and cultural aspects of the research (Barnard & Spencer, 2002; Bernard & Gravlee, 2014; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). At the center of ethnographic research are participant observation and semi-structured interviews, which have proven to be a suitable approach for

gaining insight into social systems (Bernard & Gravlee, 2014; Gusterson, 2008). The resulting insights will then be used to facilitate the action-research elements of this study. Action-research utilizes reflection and collaboration in order to develop deep understanding (Loughran, 2010). Specifically, reflectivity as mutual collaboration will be utilized. One important aspect of reflection is the creating of an environment which allows sensitive topics to surface (Loughran, 2010), which is necessary for studying and understanding taboos.

In order to analyze the data that emerges from these methods, an iterative approach to coding will be taken. Three main stages will be followed: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Williams and Moser (2019) state that, during open coding, distinct concepts and themes are identified and organized. Then, during axial coding, the emerging themes are organized into comprehensive categories. Lastly, selective coding is aimed at refining these categories into unique themes (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Operationalization

Taboos are proscriptions of certain behavior within a specific group, and are based on the belief that the actions they constrain can result in unwanted consequences (Douglas, 1966; Schoemaker & Tetlock, 2012; Trice & Beyer, 1993). The tacit aspect makes it difficult to study taboos: they describe what is not done, instead of what is done. Still, although taboos are not directly observable, their effects on the social system and its members can be observed. The behavior that results from the normative framework taboos provide can be observed, as well as the social sanction that arise when taboos are broken (Fershtman et al., 2011; Hoon & Jacobs, 2014; Schoemaker & Tetlock, 2012). As such, observing social sanctions such as expressions of judgement, criticism, harassment or ostracization will serve as a starting point for this study. Additionally, as taboos arise out concern (Douglas, 1966; Trice & Beyer, 1993), studying stress or anxiety inducing factors within the research context will lead to a better understanding of the circumstances that have led to a taboo.

This study is conducted within a renovation project. This project involves multiple organizations, including a client organization, an architect, a contractor, and 25 sub-contractors, making it an interesting setting to study the relation between multiple social systems and taboos in inter-organizational collaborations. Multiple levels are studied. First, this study observes the individuals involved in the project. Second, this study observes the project team. Third, this study observes the client organization and its involved departments: the renovation department and rental department, and a working group aimed at improving circularity. The data collection for this study is currently ongoing: 10 in-depth interviews with members of the project team

have been conducted and more are planned, and participant-observations has been ongoing for 10 months.

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