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# Shaping meaning about joint action in meta-organisational meetings

Jane Webb

Department of Technology Management and Economics,  
Chalmers University of Technology,  
Gothenburg,  
Sweden

[janew@chalmers.se](mailto:janew@chalmers.se)

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Jane Webb

## Abstract

Collaboration between different organisations creates a new organisation made up of organisations – a meta-organisation. In meta-organisations, where there is scope for experimentation and innovation, dialogue about the meaning of joint action is ongoing. I explore meta-organisational meetings as spaces that support representatives from different organisations to shape meaning about joint action. I draw on a two-year ethnographic study of a partnership of fifteen organisations that worked together to test and develop electric buses and related infrastructure live within the public transport system of a Scandinavian city. I consider a conversation between a group of senior leaders representing member organisations that was orchestrated by the coordinators of the meta-organisation. Engaging in relationally-responsive practices, the participants inquire into what they can do collectively and what this means for the meta-organisation. The paper makes clearer how meetings offer a site for understanding more of meaning-making for the joint action of meta-organising.

## Keywords

Meta-organisations; organisational ethnography; inter-organisational collaboration; meetings; relational-responsivity; practical authorship; arresting moments; societal challenges; sustainability

## Wordcount

6,984

# Introduction

Activities intended to tackle societal challenges such as environmental sustainability, increasingly take place between organisations from across society in collaborative forms (Gray and Purdy, 2018, Sharma and Kearins, 2011). Bringing together diverse organisations from the public and private sectors requires careful coordination, especially when activities are distributed across time and space. While it is important in any setting to consider what the people of partner organisations expect to achieve through joint work, Dougherty (2017) alerts us to the multiple objectives when people work together on what they consider as societal challenges. Such complex innovation systems appear as an “ecology of organisations, agencies and agents...who grapple with a particular grand challenge even though they have diverse objectives” (ibid:12). These diverse objectives makes it important that participants consider questions of *Who are ‘we’? Who are ‘we’ not? What do ‘we’ stand for? What do ‘we’ not stand for?* as a part of formulating a vision, goals, activities, roles and responsibilities for joint action.

One way to conceptualise organising between organisations is the concept of a meta-organisation (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005, Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008). Through meta-organising, representatives from different organisations create a sense of the difficulties in tackling societal challenges as they attempt to work together (Berkowitz, 2018). Despite having a shared system-level goal that provides purpose and justifies the effort of collaboration, there are fewer norms, rules and models for how to organise as meta-organisations than for individual-based organisations (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008). Participants in meta-organisations must engage in processes to construct meaning about joint action that are quite different to those processes for employees working within the boundaries of an organisation. To date, researchers of meta-organisations have been concerned with the interaction of organisations, rather than of the individuals who represent those organisations. Analysing what happens at the individual level can aid insights into how meta-organising may differ from organising.

Since meetings are “spaces in which meaning and actions are worked out between people in everyday ‘back and forth’ dialogue” (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1434), my aim is to explore how meta-organisational meetings are spaces that support representatives from different organisations in shaping meaning about the joint action of meta-organising. I draw on the ideas of participants as 'practical authors' in organisations (Cunliffe, 2002, Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003) and of 'arresting moments' when people are moved by the words of others to become unstuck from previous understandings (Shotter and Katz, 1999). I base my discussion on material from a two-year ethnographic study of a meta-organisation, where fifteen different organisations worked together to develop and test electric buses and related infrastructure live within the public transport system of a Scandinavian city. I interpret the interaction during a meeting that followed a story told about one organisation’s experience. I describe how the participants were struck by new realisations about the constraints of meta-organising. Through exploring the unfolding of an orchestrated conversation between senior leaders from member organisations, I illustrate how such moments can help participants develop a relational sensibility (Cunliffe and Locke, 2019, Shotter and Katz, 1999).

I begin by describing a relational-responsive perspective, referring to research by John Shotter and Ann Cunliffe. I then relate this to the theory of meta-organisations set out by Göran Ahrne and Nils Brunsson. Next I describe the research setting and methods. I then present an ethnographic vignette from one meeting, discussing what the conversation illustrates of how meetings support representatives from different organisations in shaping meaning about the joint action of meta-organising. I conclude by summarising the implications for meta-organisation theory and for participants, particularly leaders, in meta-organisations.

# Theoretical framework

## Arresting moments and relational-responsivity

Relational and dialogical perspectives on organising consider organisations not “as structures and systems but communities of people and conversations” (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011:1431). This leads to a conceptualisation of particular practices of organising as relationally-responsive (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). Such practices are often necessary in order to create collaborative relationships (ibid). To adopt such a perspective helps with understanding how language and communication work in the creation of an organised social group for joint action (Shotter, 2008). It brings to the fore how organising is about the dialogical relations between people as they engage in reflexive dialogue for joint action.

Drawing on psychotherapy, Shotter and Katz (1999:81) describe how therapists “[help] their clients create new ways of understanding things already known to them, to create new ways of ‘going on ’ in their lives by interconnecting and relating old facts in new ways.” Such skills in helping others see connections are valuable in a wide variety of contexts. However, the words of conversations, do not “do anything” in themselves (ibid). Instead, “they have a meaning only in those situations in which living human beings make some *use* of them in relating themselves to other human beings” (ibid). The meaning is “‘in’ the surroundings of the expression at the moment of its expression” (Shotter, 2008: 506). The use of words may move or strike others into seeing new possibilities (Shotter and Katz, 1999). Such words call people to participate (Shotter, 2008), and then “meanings are created in the spontaneously coordinated interplay of people’s responsive relations to each other” (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003: 17).

In such ‘**arresting moments**’ when people speak not only for themselves but also with others (Shotter and Katz, 1999), much may be altered. Participants have been moved by the words of others, often with bodily responses, to become unstuck from a previous understanding and to adopt a new sensibility for dialogical activity and understanding (Shotter and Katz, 1999). Participants now “explor[e] something that has become important to them from within the shared moments between them and the others around them” (ibid: 82). For participants, this is “a special form of life...a ‘world’ in which they feel they are safe, in which they belong and in which they have a rightful place” to give different kinds of responses and to consider new options (ibid). This is **relational-responsivity** and leads to the exploration of multiple possibilities for living their lives differently. Rather than knowing about facts or about skills, this is a “third kind of knowing”:

It is a moment-by-moment changing *felt* kind of practical knowing to do with how to *organize* or *manage* our own behaviour *from within* our lives together with the others around us like ourselves (Shotter, 2008: 507).

This means that participants’ activities take into account and are accountable to the people around them (Shotter, 2008). Participants listen for sounds of agreement, objection and compliance etc. from one another that have an ‘action guiding’ function through their evaluative attitude (ibid). Participants are also morally answerable to others (Cunliffe and Locke, 2019) through a moral interdependence that arises from acting in a socially shared responsive way (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003:32). This requires, then, a “form of talk oriented towards *organizing* a group of people into a social group capable of coordinating their disparate actions into the achievement of a shared, overall goal” (Shotter, 2008: 514). The group are “co-participants in a common circumstance...[acting] as a collective-we” (ibid: 515, 517). They wish to keep dialogue going, rather than shut the conversation down, accepting and working

with differences (Cunliffe and Locke, 2019: 2). Who speaks, and how they relate to others, matters in shaping the intersubjective relationships (Cunliffe and Locke, 2019). While “the intersubjective constitution of meaning may be a complex ebb and flow of connecting/disconnecting, dialogue with self/others, listening, and feeling” (Cunliffe, 2002:143), it is this that constitutes a mutually enabling community where participants are “resourceful conversation partners” (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003:34).

## Meta-organising as representatives of organisations

While there are many different ways of labelling the communities formed through inter-organisational relations, such as partnerships, strategic alliances, joint ventures, collaborations, cooperative agreements, consortia, clusters and networks, I am specifically interested in meta-organisations and what distinguishes the practices of *meta-organising* from *organising*. Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) define a meta-organisation as an organisation where the member organisations have applied for membership and where organising principles often protect the ability of member organisations to retain autonomy and identity. A meta-organisation allows new relationships with people from other organisations – now they are members of the same (meta-)organisation with a new organisational boundary around them (ibid).

In introducing the concept of meta-organisations, Ahrne and Brunsson (2005; 2008) argue that the special features of these forms of interaction require a theory that complements the theory of organizing for individual-based organisations. The three important elements of meta-organisations are: 1) a social order where the continuation of social interaction is the result of decisions rather than institutions, norms or status differences; 2) voluntary membership; and 3) the members choose to contribute their own resources to the meta-organisation (Berkowitz and Bor, 2018). This dependence on member organisations, sometimes even being in competition with them; the production of outputs such as standards and guidelines; and the pursuit of distinct purposes; set apart meta-organisations from individual-based organisations (Berkowitz and Dumez, 2016).

The very reasons for forming a meta-organisation may have been to change the relationships and the conditions for interaction between organisations (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005). A meta-organisation can be conceptualised as a form of governance device collectively shaping and organizing practices (Berkowitz, 2018) and may also be a way of enabling concerted action, where the collective identity allows greater credibility for that action (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008). Meta-organising enables gathering people in a flexible organisational form that constitutes “a neutral space of dialogue, negotiation and capacity building” (Berkowitz, 2018:427). Such a collective playing field is often one where voluntary self-regulation and decision making by consensus are prized (Berkowitz and Bor, 2018). However, there are challenges in meta-organising:

Meta-organizations are organizations that do not know who they are. There are fewer clear norms, rules, and models for meta-organizations than for individual-based organizations, a situation that provides greater scope for experimentation, innovation, and conflicts in ways of organizing (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008:5).

Since there are fewer clear norms, rules and models, it is vital to pay attention not only to how meta-organisations emerge and how they are terminated, but also to how they are sustained (Berkowitz and Dumez, 2016). This area of research particularly relevant today due to the rising numbers of meta-organisations and their increasing influence in society (Berkowitz et al., 2017, Valente and Oliver, 2018). However, creating such conditions takes ongoing work, especially in multi-stakeholder meta-organisations, where rather than similarity between

member organisations such as in trade associations or international government organisations, there are many different types of organisations (Berkowitz et al., 2017). In coordinating collective action and in meta-organizing between organisations, the unifying power of a shared-system level goal (Valente and Oliver, 2018) and a culture of consensus (König et al., 2012) are often deemed essential. More research is required to look at what this means for individuals.

## Practical authorship in meta-organisational meetings

Cunliffe (2002:131) discusses how “organisational participants, particularly managers, act as **practical co-authors** of their organisation’s social landscape and their sense of identity”. Managing in such a way is about “embedded interactions that draw on everyday, metaphorical, and poetic ways of talking (dialogic) rather than theoretical (monologic) talk” (ibid: 133). Managers might “move others to experience a felt and actively lived sense of an (as yet) non-existent reality” (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003: 20). This means considering managing as a “dialogical practice in which features of experience and surroundings are articulated and brought into prominence” (ibid: 22). This might mean dramatising something to make its shape and character graspable (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003: 23).

In meta-organisations, there is often no visible leadership or management (Ahrne et al., 2016), since this would threaten the autonomy of member organisations. In such settings, it is necessary to take seriously that all participants are co-authors, authoring a common sense of their shared circumstances that allows them to act in ways that each other can understand (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003:17, 23). As meta-organisations are dependent on the continued membership of organisations, participants engage in conversations that are or will critically affect relationships between existing member organisations, with new member organisations, and with stakeholders not formally member organisations of the meta-organisation. Communication as a “way of working out what is meaningful and possible” (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1434), becomes particularly important in meta-organizing. Meetings are “spaces in which meaning and actions are worked out between people in everyday ‘back and forth’ dialogue” (ibid: 1434). This is about “negotiating and shaping a sense of what may be happening and what *we* need to do” (ibid: 1444). Within the present moment, participants anticipate what comes next, engaging in expressive movements towards the future (Shotter, 2008).

Since there is a continual need to engage in dialogue when organising (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1435), those people organising meetings in meta-organisations may attempt to orchestrate how participants work together “in the conversational moment...by asking questions, reflecting on issues and coming to some agreement about how to move on” (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1436). Such moments may be about “creating spaces for dialogue...in which differences...collide, are recognized and worked with” (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1436). When there are ‘orientational difficulties’, where the group needs to “resolve a line of action, a style, an approach, or way of proceeding with respect to an other or to a circumstance” (Shotter, 2008: 513), it may be necessary to “[keep] differences in play rather than minimizing them” (Cunliffe and Locke, 2019:16). Working with differences at a practical level may involve “being responsive to the unique details of a situation by one’s actions within it” (Shotter, 2008: 514). Such everyday sense making and spontaneously felt reactions to a circumstance are quite different to a theoretical representation and causal reasoning (ibid). Instead there is a practical accomplishment (Cunliffe and Locke, 2019).

An unfolding relationality and interpretation (Cunliffe and Locke, 2019) is important in meta-organising as people bring together different purposes associated with the organisations they represent. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) emphasise that a relational sensibility is distinct from practices of persuading, instructing and managing impressions. Instead this is

about “remaining open and responsive to others and to the features of the conversation” (Cunliffe and Locke, 2019:16). Coordinators in meta-organisations have a role in helping participants to engage in relational dialogue and to find ways to inquire into differences (ibid). Fostering an “ethics of reciprocity - of living well with others” (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1439), not only requires the relationally-responsive practices of coordinators, but also their ability to help others develop a relational sensibility.

## Materials and methods

### Research design

In order to understand the practices involved in meta-organising, I carried out an ethnographic study (Berthod et al., 2018, Cunliffe, 2010, Garsten and Nyqvist, 2013) totalling 140 hours. The aim of the study relates to studying the collaborative dynamics of meta-organisations, an avenue of research that Berkowitz and Dumez (2016) set out as important for the development of meta-organisation theory. Through participant observation at meetings, I designed the study to provide insights in organising between organisations as a meta-organisation, rather than to take a focal organisation perspective. In this paper I refer specifically to the fieldwork from one of the groups whose meetings I attended over two years. Meetings, as a routinised practice, are an example of the concerted accomplishment of practices within orderly scenes (Nicolini and Monteiro, 2017). The meetings act as a window into meta-organising, providing a site in which to encounter collective performances through which people coordinate their relationships and activities as a meta-organisation. Through the mundane details of conversations in meetings, researchers can pay attention to attempts to create and maintain relationships intersubjectively through practical sensing (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1431).

### Research setting: A meta-organisation for sustainable public transport

During the study, fifteen organisations, including private companies, public authorities and a university, were partners in SustainACity, a co-operation for public transport based in a Scandinavian city. See Table 1 for background information about SustainACity. The organisations together developed and tested electric buses and related infrastructure live within the city’s transport system. The activities that the member organisations undertook related to creating new options for transport and for city development. By electrifying public transport, the ambition was to decrease noise pollution and to improve air quality. This aligned with political objectives in the region to support sustainable development, create new infrastructure for public transport and to develop so-called test and demonstration arenas for implementing new ideas.

Two organisations initiated SustainACity in 2013. By June 2015, fourteen organisations established a test and demonstration arena for electric buses, charging infrastructure and indoor bus stops. For the next phase (2015-2018), a year into which I began the study, the partners developed a portfolio of project activities to complement the ones from the earlier phase. The partners worked towards a large public event in June 2018, when high capacity electric buses would begin running in the city as new services and infrastructure were launched.

Representatives from the member organisations signed an overarching agreement to work together as SustainACity. In various constellations, member organisations carried out project activities that fit within the scope of SustainACity. The partner organisations concerned contracted separately with one another for these activities, according to the specifics of the



**Table 1.** SustainACity, a meta-organisation of fifteen organisations.

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Description</i>
History	<p>Spring 2013: the partnership begins after senior leaders from CityAuth and AutomotiveCo agreed to test an electric bus route ‘live’ in the city.</p> <p>June 2013: RegionalAuth, NationalEnergyAgency, WestSciencePark and EastSciencePark join CityAuth and AutomotiveCo in signing a letter of intent. This sets out a vision for a demonstration platform of future electrified public transport, with the first step working together on a project to introduce a new electric bus route in the second quarter of 2015.</p> <p>June 2015: fourteen partner organisations launch an 8 km test bus route for prototype electric and electric hybrid buses that runs through the city centre, linking the two campuses of TechUni and running between WestSciencePark and EastSciencePark. Additional tests included charging stations for the buses and an indoor bus stop, as well as new products and services connected to the new route.</p> <p>June 2016: a fifteenth partner organisation joins.</p> <p>June 2017: one partner organisation leaves.</p>
Vision	<p>The wording of the vision agreed by the partner organisations in June 2017, states that the partnership between city, region, private sector and academia makes possible an arena for testing new products and services for sustainable and electrified travel and transport. The partnership is seen as related to inspiring future urban development; to attracting expertise, investments and enterprise to the region; and to contributing to the automotive and ICT industries.</p>
Partner organisations	<p>TechUni, CityAuth, RegionalAuth, NationalEnergyAgency, CityAreaDevelopment, RegionalTransportCo, WestSciencePark, EastSciencePark, AutomotiveCo, EnergyCo, CampusPropertyCo, AcademicPropertyCo, BusOperatorCo, TelCo (partner from June 2016), RegionalGrowthAgency (partner until June 2017)</p>
Partnership organisation (2016-18)	<p><u>GreenTime</u>: Two consultants, Thelma and Louise, employed 2013 - 2018, and contracted by TechUni, CityAuth, RegionalAuth and AutomotiveCo to act on behalf of all partner organisations in SustainACity, orchestrating meetings of the coordinator group, steering group and partner group, and supporting project activities as required.</p> <p><u>Partner Group</u>: Senior representatives of all fifteen partner organisations. Met annually. Some members also in steering group. Chaired by Ian from AutomotiveCo. GreenTime consultants organised meetings.</p> <p><u>Steering Group</u>: Senior representatives from six main partner organisations. Meet six times a year. Chaired by Ian from AutomotiveCo. GreenTime consultants organised meetings.</p> <p><u>Coordinator Group</u>: Project managers from four to six partner organisations that meet about ten times per year. GreenTime consultants organise and chair group’s meetings, as well as representing other partner organisations.</p> <p><u>Communications Group</u>: Communication officers from five to seven partner organisations. Meet as required to coordinate joint communications strategy under the brand of SustainACity. Partner organisations use their usual communication channels to synchronise communications on the partnership with consistent messaging.</p>

project. Participants referred to SustainACity by labels such as demonstration arena, platform, consortium, project, living lab, field test, showcase, programme, triple helix collaboration and public-private partnership. I consider SustainACity as a meta-organisation for three main reasons: 1) organisations are members, voluntarily choosing when to join and when to leave; 2) the purpose relates to collective action (demonstrating joint services and products for environmental sustainability); and 3) there is no specified end date.

## Fieldwork & materials

I draw in detail on a vignette from a meeting of the SustainACity steering group. I attended ten meetings of the steering group from September 2016 to May 2018, totalling 25 hours of the 140 hours in the study. See Table 2 for information about the steering group. From in-the-field jottings, I later typed detailed fieldnotes at the desk, as well as in-process analytical memos (Emerson et al., 2011). I also gathered temporally-embedded material such as the agendas, project documents, minutes and presentation slides used during thirteen meetings of the steering group. This secondary set of materials allowed seeing how visual representations and descriptive texts about SustainACity changed over time.

The steering group is made up of representatives from six of the organisations that are responsible for different areas of activities within the partnership. Together the group decides about overarching communications messages; evaluation of the activities within SustainACity; and structure, organising and reporting within SustainACity. The group also considers requests from current member organisations to involve a non-member organisation in a SustainACity project; and considers the goals set for each area of activities by the concerned organisation.

Thelma and Louise are consultants, employed to coordinate central activities on behalf of all the organizations in SustainACity (see Tables 1& 2). One part of their role is to arrange the meetings of the steering group. The snippet below is from a conversation where I asked them, together with Nick who works for AutomotiveCo, about what they saw as the role of the steering group meetings in wider organising in SustainACity. They reflect on how important the meetings are in providing a deadline for tasks, as well as the important symbolic value of the discussions by the steering group. This contrasts to the formal decision-making body of the partner group (see Table 1).

- Thelma:* They [steering group] have the right to decide about what is allowed to be called SustainACity or not. Informally they have a lot of power.
- Louise:* Informal decisions in the steering group mean that things will happen.
- Nick:* It takes the process forward. It's a commitment from those participants who are there at those meetings.
- Thelma:* Yes, I totally agree with you. We use the steering group. We [Thelma and Louise] were thinking about this the other day, about how the big impact from the steering group comes from saying: "This is going up to the steering group now. Now we're going to talk about this thing. Now it's time to take this to the steering group." Then it's a target that's been set. It's been fussed over long enough. There's a huge value in the decisions from the steering group, even though the formal value is very little.
- Nick:* Any party can back away from a decision in the steering group. But you don't do that lightly. That's tied up with the prestige.

Talk at the meetings of the steering group was often about the SustainACity "brand", and its connection to a "frontrunner city ahead of other cities" in trialling electric buses as part of the public transport system. The people of the steering group frequently referred to a variety of "sister projects" – partnerships, alliances and projects where their home organisations were collaborating with other organisations (some of them also partner organisations in SustainACity). The steering group members wanted to find "synergies" between these and the activities under the banner of SustainACity. As time went on and SustainACity matured into a complex organisation, the steering group became more and more engaged in talking about the organisational groups, processes and structures of SustainACity, considering whether to

**Table 2.** Description of SustainACity steering group, May 2016-May 2018.

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Description</i>
Venue	Meetings generally took place in the offices of one of the member organisations. Nine different locations - three at AutomotiveCo offices; two on the campus of TechUni; one at the main office of TelCo, one at CityAuth's office and one at EastSciencePark. When leaders from a consultancy company presented activities they proposed to carry out within the partnership, the meeting was at their offices. Members only very rarely attended by audio conference.
Frequency	The meetings took place about six times a year.
Length	The shortest meeting was 90 minutes, the longest three hours.
Members of the steering group	<u>Ian</u> from AutomotiveCo chairs the meetings. Five other members of the group remained the same throughout the research study: <u>Spencer</u> from TechUni, <u>Robin</u> from CityAuth, <u>Adrian</u> from RegionalAuth, <u>Harry</u> from RegionalPublicTransport and <u>John</u> from AutomotiveCo. <u>Nigel</u> , the coordinator from TelCo attended the May 2016 meeting just before TelCo joined as a partner organisation in June that year. In 2017, <u>Peter</u> from CampusPropertyCo or <u>Audrey</u> from AcademicPropertyCo alternated as the eighth member when their project received new status within the partnership.
Additional attendees	Employees of member organisations with responsibility for coordinating their home organisation's activities in SustainACity attended to present updates of project activities, sometimes also standing in for a steering group member. The person who coordinated SustainACity communications between the member organisations as part of her position at AutomotiveCo, also regularly attended. Other attendees came from member organisations presenting on a particular issue, as well as from organisations hoping to join as a member organisation. Thelma and/or Louise attended, primarily as note-takers and support to Ian in chairing the meeting, but also providing information when called upon. Invited guests normally only attended for the particular item they spoke about. The author was the only observer.
Discussion topics	Operation of the bus route launched in 2015; overall goals, scope and vision for the partnership; status of project activities; potential partner organisations and processes for becoming a partner organisation; joint communication activities; partnership agreement and memorandum of understanding; joint funding applications for project activities; organisational processes and the partnership brand.
Routines	Thelma and Louise, consultants from GreenTime, scheduled the meetings and arranged a venue; met with Ian before each meeting to brief him and agree the agenda; emailed the agenda and related documents to members before meetings; kept the meeting to time and took notes during the meetings, ensuring that the members agreed on actions and owners for those actions; emailed the minutes, presentation slides and documents to the group after meetings.
Documents	48 email messages, minutes of meetings (41 pages), presentation material (373 slides) and documents (80 pages).
Meeting dates * author not present	2016: 26 May*, 13 June*, 28 September, 11 November 2017: 7 February, 21 April, 30 May*, 12 September, 23 November, 19 December 2018: 21 February, 11 April, 22 May

introduce new terms to distinguish between the partner organisations (*main partner*, *partner* and *project partner*), and between the activities (*demonstration arena* and *project activities* connected to demonstration arenas).

## Analysis

In tandem with reviewing my in-the-field jottings, fieldnotes and in-process analytical memos, I also looked at the official descriptions, set out in the minutes of the steering group. I considered what had been documented by Thelma and Louise in the minutes, alongside my own summaries of the exchange of views between participants. I used open coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994) as I read the material, finding over 50 codes within the minutes and many more in my richer descriptions of the meetings. As I moved into axial coding (ibid.), I found four main themes within the talk at the meetings of the steering group: 1) the identity and brand of SustainACity; 2) the interaction between the member organisations of SustainACity; 3) the relations between the groups within SustainACity; and 4) the roles and responsibilities of individual steering group members.

While the first theme was about how the people of the member organisations represent the SustainACity partnership to others not within the partnership, the second was about how the (people of the) partner organisations interact with one another. The third theme encompassed how groups internal to the partnership relate to one another through work processes. The final theme was about what each individual member of the steering group contributed to the group. Having found these themes within the sayings at the meetings, I scoured my fieldnotes to find portions of meetings that illustrated the four themes in what was said, and exemplified the interaction during meetings. I chose one vignette to present at length as the reference point for my discussion about how meta-organisational meetings are spaces that support representatives from different organisations in shaping meaning about the joint action of meta-organising.

In order to interpret what was going on during the interaction, I turned to the work by John Shotter, Ann Cunliffe and colleagues, as set out in the theoretical framework. The vignette is from a part of a meeting when two guest presenters told the steering group about their experiences trying to join SustainACity. I interpret how the story told by the two guests “relationally engage[d] participants and help[ed] construct meaning” (Cunliffe, 2002:140). I explore how the story struck the participants as an arresting moment (Shotter and Katz, 1999) and how they were moved by the words of other during the subsequent conversation. The choice to present a vignette from a meeting at such length is inspired by the situational focus adopted by Alvesson and Kärreman (1995) when exploring the circumstances of a monthly meeting between managers and editors as an illumination of some cultural aspects of an evening newspaper.

## Arresting moments in a meta-organisational meeting

As a reference point, I describe a conversation during a meeting of the SustainACity steering group. Thelma and Louise, consultants from GreenTime, carefully planned this portion of the meeting with Ian, the Chair of the group. Formally contracted by RegionalGrowthAgency to coordinate activities on behalf of all fifteen member organisations, GreenTime’s fees were shared between four member organisations. Thelma and Louise set the stage for a conversation between the group about how organisations joined SustainACity:

*It’s fifty minutes into the meeting. Ten people are present in the room on TechUni’s campus. Next on the agenda is: **Openness in SustainACity**. Louise, a consultant from GreenTime, clicks on her laptop to change the slide displayed on the wall-mounted screen to one with a screenshot from the SustainACity website. It lists examples of projects connected to the electric bus route launched the previous year with charging infrastructure and an indoor bus stop. The webpage invites: “If you have a product or*

*service that can **contribute to sustainable mobility and more attractive public transport**, then a test within the SustainACity demo arena might be something for you!”* The subsequent text, though, has no precise details on how non-members of SustainACity actually go about starting a project. Instead interested parties are advised to contact one of the SustainACity coordinators.

*Louise tells the group that she has **invited a small company to talk about their experience** trying to join the partnership but who ending up failing to do so. She implies that **their experience makes clear how joining is not as easy as the website portrays**. While Louise provides more background on the issue, her colleague, Thelma, leaves the room to greet two men who have been sitting for a few minutes at a table outside, visible through the glass door. Thelma ushers them in and indicates some vacant seats. Steve and Peter, respectively the CEO and Head of Marketing from TaxiPodCo, seat themselves at the front of the room.*

This meeting followed frequent conversations earlier that year in meetings of the SustainACity coordinator group. The five coordinators, each employed by a partner organisation, met fortnightly during the Spring to talk about project ideas for the coming years. Johnny, representing RegionalGrowthAgency, repeatedly asked about the matching of SustainACity partner organisations with organisations interested in testing products or services. He pushed for greater transparency on the SustainACity website about ongoing projects. The other coordinators resisted this, grumbling about how they had enough to do engaging their colleagues at their home organisations in deciding projects that they would carry out in SustainACity, plus negotiating with other member organisations about those joint projects.

Thelma and Louise told me that they felt trapped in a “depressing loop” of returning again and again to how to be “inviting” to new organisations. They said this was disrupting the group. In the email with the agenda for the meeting, Thelma said envisaged that the senior representatives would talk about “how openness works” in SustainACity. This is an example of how Thelma and Louise, acting as practical authors (Cunliffe, 2002) of the SustainACity organisational landscape, used storytelling in meetings to introduce a topic that they deemed vital (having consulted Ian, the Chair of the group). They tried to stage “a neutral space of dialogue” (Berkowitz, 2018:427) between representatives of the member organisations and in turn to help sustain the relationships that underpinned the SustainACity partnership.

*Thelma talks through three documents that she emailed to the steering group before the meeting: five project ideas by TaxiPodCo; an image of a TaxiPodCo mini-stop alongside a bus stop on the SustainACity test bus route; and an advert for TaxiPodCo’s service. She gestures towards Steve and Peter, inviting them to tell their story. Steve talks about TaxiPodCo’s electric taxi-pods as a complement to existing ways to get around town. **“We want to contribute to a sustainable city,”** he says, then emphasizing that the vehicles are manufactured locally. Peter takes over to describe the pods. Steve mentions the support TaxiPodCo has received from Spencer, the person representing TechUni. “I want to take the chance to tell you how much we appreciated that”, he says to Spencer. Spencer lowers his eyes and nods slightly, as if to say: “You’re welcome”. Steve resumes addressing the whole group: “We need to verify that we can break even.” Caroline asks where they charge the vehicles. In replying, Steve emphasises existing agreements with two of the SustainACity member organisations: “A few places. One is near AcademicPropertyCo’s student apartments, and we have an arrangement with EnergyCo to use their charging stations in the city centre.”*

*Having refreshed everyone’s memories about TaxiPodCo’s service, Peter and Steve start talking about their experience the year before when trying to join*

*SustainACity. Steve describes a seemingly positive initial meeting at WestSciencePark when he was advised to contact Louise. He tells the group about swapping ideas with Louise, getting feedback from the communications group of SustainACity, and then presenting to the steering group. He sums up: "There were signals that it would go forward. But we knew we had to sort out the financing." Steve describes subsequent conversations with Adrian at RegionalAuth, and then working with George at WestSciencePark on a project proposal to seek funding from RegionalAuth: "We got the feedback that rather than just in-kind hours, we needed cash that would match the public funding we were asking for." Steve reminds the steering group that: "At the time, AutomotiveCo was the only private sector organisation in SustainACity."*

*The group begin talking about how regulations for public funding are not compatible with the ideal of openness. Adrian comments: "**We need to use our muscles as partners.**" John and Caroline have been pursing their lips, perhaps feeling as if the way Steve told the story makes it look as if the stumbling block to TaxiPodCo joining the partnership was down to AutomotiveCo not coming forward with money. John now asks: "How much money were we actually talking about?" Steve says it was €30,000. Louise adds: "There were lots of fun ideas", a cue to Peter who elaborates on the ideas, finishing with: "Having TaxiPodCo as a part of the activities in SustainACity would have given more visibility to SustainACity. **It would have been an exciting communications activity. And that's what we understood SustainACity was looking for at the time.**" Steve adds: "It would have kept SustainACity in people's minds."*

The story that the two men from TaxiPodCo tell is a joint story in many ways, since they refer to people at the meeting who were part of shaping their experience. There is an unfolding realisation about the contrast between what is said on the website about joining the partnership and Steve and Peter's experience. The story opened up for the steering group to consider what blocked new organisations from participating in SustainACity, such as the way that meta-organising as SustainACity did not include a central fund to support activities. Steve and Peter from TaxiPodCo seem to suggest they expected that the small sum of money that TaxiPodCo needed could have been part-funded through public money, and the rest matched by one of the partner organisations. Steve refers to how TaxiPodCo wants to contribute to a sustainable city, imagining perhaps that this will resonate with the group. The group hears how TaxiPodCo is already working with two of the partner organisations in SustainACity, and during the process to attempt to link the taxi-pod service to the test electric bus route, received support from several other partner organisations. Steve and Peter emphasise how through TaxiPodCo joining, the SustainACity partner organisations what they wanted – publicity.

Despite sharing the goal, having relationships with partner organisations, and all the publicity TaxiPodCo could have brought to the SustainACity partnership, this company found that participation was barred to them. They were not able to connect their service to the SustainACity test arena, despite doing what the website said and talking to different people from member organisations to garner support for their project idea. Building on Adrian's comments on using "muscles as partners", the interaction that follows shows how different people had been struck by the story. The story acted as an arresting moment (Shotter and Katz, 1999) that slowly ushered in a new way of relating as the conversation unfolded. Participants saw things differently, starting to see new connections, and develop a sense of what they needed to do (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Shotter and Katz, 1999).

*Responding now to the story, Adrian talks for a few minutes on how he remembers the back and forth between TaxiPodCo and him and his colleagues at RegionalAuth. He says that the app that TaxiPodCo wanted to develop was too close to business*

development. “It was good for you as a company”, he says to Steve and Peter. “And for you. And for AutomotiveCo,” retorts Steve. Thelma interjects quickly after this heated comment: “The restrictions make things tough for small companies.” “Yes, we’re a small company, but we would have brought a lot of publicity for SustainACity,” Peter says, echoing his earlier comment. He continues: “It was **sad for all of us that we couldn’t make it happen.**” Robin from CityAuth comments on “the meeting points” between the public and commercial systems, and how to connect different projects and the two systems. Robin asks the others, perhaps rhetorically: **“What can the public sector do? We can’t support particular companies.”** Robin elaborates a little more, with Harry, from RegionalPublicTransport, affirming Robin’s comments in light of the public procurement requirements.

The participants talked about the constraints that are brought into meta-organising by the member organisations, such as the regulatory constraints that the public sector organisations must comply with. These apparently prohibit what all members of the steering group seem to wish for – that TaxiPodCo could connect their taxi-pod service to the arena for a test period. The group is forced to recognise the difficulty in achieving in practice an arena open to SMEs when such companies do not have enough money to fund their own participation within the arena. There seems to be a feeling of a missed opportunity that would have been mutually beneficial. The steering group members appear disappointed in themselves and that even though they are meta-organising as SustainACity, they could not realise this opportunity. When Robin asks: “What can the public sector do?”, he seems to have been struck by Peter and Steve’s story. Robin and the others move into exploring new possibilities, taking the experience of TaxiPodCo as a case to talk through together of what they could and could not have done.

*The group begins talking about developing the app so that customers can book TaxiPodCo’s pod service. Nigel brings up crowdsourcing, suggesting that the app could have been built as part of a university course, creating more engagement. Steve enthusiastically agrees, supporting this approach to involving students, and saying: “There’s development power on campus.” To emphasise just why this would be so attractive to TaxiPodCo, he explains: “We’re doing this for free at the moment. We need to generate an income.” Adrian suggests building a non-profit association and that the app would be open source. John says: “It would be interesting to bring into SustainACity so that our customers can easily get a pod to complete their journey.” He suggests: “It feels like we could contribute to developing an app, but who would own it?” He says that as he sees it, it would need to be SustainACity that approached TaxiPodCo. “Otherwise it would feel like marketing for TaxiPodCo,” he explains.*

*Steve says, somewhat exasperatedly: **“We’re striving for the same things.”** John, resuming his role chairing today’s meeting, asks his fellow steering group members: “Who will work with this?” Thelma comments on her impression of today’s conversation with: “Finding the funding is the key to this.” Adrian reminds them: “There needs to be something to test and demo. It can’t just be product development. There should be something to test so it can come in without tendering.” Nigel is leaning forward on the table, perhaps still excited about how TelCo could work with students to develop an app. John asks him: “Maybe TelCo can come in?” Nigel cautiously replies: “I need to understand more”. Louise smiles at the two men from TaxiPodCo, seemingly happy for them with the way the conversation is going.*

The attempts to work out how TaxiPodCo can develop the app, exemplifies how the members of the steering group worked together on difficulties encountered in forming project activities.

Perhaps they were moved to become unstuck in their previous understanding (Shotter and Katz, 1999) by Steve's comment that "We're striving for the same things." In conversations like these, participants strove to learn about one another's interests that connect to the system-level goal (sustainable mobility and attractive public transport) and looked for ways that organisations could pursue those interests within the partnership. They act as "resourceful conversation partners" (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003: 34), becoming an organised social group for joint action as they coordinate their actions to pursue a shared goal (Shotter, 2008).

Following this meeting, the SustainACity website was re-written. It stated: "Organisations that want to do something within the sphere of SustainACity are responsible for financing tests in the demo arena." Additional text made clearer the necessity to work with a current member organisation on developing project ideas and about which public organisations, including two of the member organisations, RegionalAuth and NationalEnergyCo, that may be able to fund projects through their standard funding applications process. During my study, TaxiPodCo's service was never tested as a part of the SustainACity partnership. About six months later, as I talked with Thelma, she commented on the importance this meeting had for understandings of organising as SustainACity:

*Suddenly the self-image went from being an open setting to a closed setting. That happened in 20 minutes.*

## Discussion and conclusions

I have considered how Thelma and Louise acted as practical authors (Cunliffe, 2002; Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003) by using storytelling to stage "a neutral space of dialogue" (Berkowitz, 2018:427) between representatives of the member organisations and in turn to help sustain the relationships that underpinned the SustainACity partnership. Since "stories may relationally engage participants and help construct meaning and a sense of self" (Cunliffe, 2002:140), Thelma and Louise used storytelling as a way to author the interaction between the participants and to help them construct meaning about their joint action. The meeting was a site where participants created a sense of the challenges in achieving collective action (Berkowitz, 2018) – how they could be open to smaller companies joining the partnership. The unfolding of the conversation showed how different people were struck by the story and then by each other's words in the conversation. There were several arresting moments (Shotter & Katz, 1999) that slowly ushered in a new way of relating as the conversation unfolded. Taking the experience of TaxiPodCo as a case, they talked through what had happened and what they could do.

Participants saw things differently, starting to see new connections and develop a sense of what they needed to do (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Shotter & Katz, 1999). This was about "how [they] might connect, make sense, act in, relate, and negotiate [their] way through [their] organizational lives" (Cunliffe, 2002:132). Unfortunately for TaxiPodCo, the conversation did not mean that funding was found for them. Instead, the representatives of member organisations came to understand how 'openness' worked in the meta-organisation, as Thelma and Louise hoped, and set clearer expectations on the website about the requirements for potential new partners. It meant that the participants reassessed their understanding of membership and participation in SustainACity.

In conversations like these at the steering group, participants strove to learn about one another's interests that connect to the system-level goal (sustainable mobility and attractive public transport) and looked for ways that organisations could pursue those interests within the partnership. They acted as "resourceful conversation partners" (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003: 34) to one another, becoming an organised social group for joint action as they coordinated their actions to pursue a shared goal (Shotter, 2008). Reflective conversations about issues critical



to meta-organising, like member requirements, allowed for recognising the constraints that representatives of other organisations are subject to in their everyday work.

Attempting to foster new relationships and new ways to interact with people from other organisations through meta-organising (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008) implies recognising emerging concerns and working with differences. The meeting vignette provides participants in other meta-organisations with an example to encourage reflection about their own practices. Through relationally-responsive participation in meetings, participants gain sensitising resources (Cunliffe and Locke, 2019) that enable them to co-author the (meta-) organisation's social landscape (Cunliffe, 2002). A relational sensibility is needed more in meta-organising than in other forms of organising since the continuation of joint action is the result of decisions, not institutions, norms or status differences (Berkowitz and Bor, 2018). While it is often the case that there is little visible management in meta-organising, it seems imperative that someone authors moments to encourage conversations on particular topics that need to be talked about as part of sustaining a meta-organisation.

While I have explored a conversation about the expectations placed on new member organisations, there are many other salient topics that recur in meta-organising. Managers, leaders or co-ordinators in meta-organisations can help participants by noticing pressing issues around which conversations need to take place, getting people together from different partner organisations and giving time for that conversation to unfold. Through such conversational moments, participants in meta-organizations become sensitised to the different relationships that they enter into through meta-organising, and to how to work with the constraints and opportunities that emerge over time in meta-organising. They shape meaning for joint action. This is especially important, perhaps, when joint work relates to tackling societal challenges together as organisations from across society, as well as citizen groups. This meaning may become the foundations for the practices of meta-organising that allow people from many organisations to come together despite their diverse objectives.

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