

THE COLLABORATIVE CONDITION: UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE, DYNAMICS, AND FAILURES OF WORKING TOGETHER

Ketika Garg

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, US

kgarg@caltech.edu

A review of the book

The Nature and Dynamics of Collaboration

Edited by Paul F. M. J. Verschure, 2025.

The MIT Press. US. 446 pages.

ISBN 978-0262548144 (Paperback, UK £67.00, US\$ 70.00)

Dobzhansky famously said that nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution. In the same spirit, we can say that nothing in human societies makes sense except in the light of collaboration. Since the beginning of our species' history, collaboration has been fundamental to our survival and thriving (Dong et al. 2017, Tomasello et al. 2012, Boyd & Richerson 2009). It has helped us spread across the world, adapt to different environments, build economies and cities, and achieve scientific advancements. There is a sheer diversity of types of collaboration around us—some succeed, others fail. *The Nature and Dynamics of Collaboration* compiles this diversity, sheds light on shared mechanisms and explores how collaborations arise and why they fail. The book is divided into three broad sections: what is collaboration, how do we collaborate, and the process of collaboration.

It begins by reviewing the evolutionary roots of collaboration through related phenomena in great apes, then moves to modern human history, present-day structured collaborations, and even the future of collaboration with artificial intelligence. After presenting a variety of examples and accounts, the book explores the properties that sustain collaboration such as social and psychological scaffolds such as trust, common ground, goals, shared belief systems,

and social contracts. It also highlights underlying mechanisms like resource sharing, social norms and feedback loops between individuals, their environment and organizational level.

Inquiries into the processes and mechanisms of collaboration further refine its definitions, with an emphasis on multi-scale and dynamic nature of collaboration. One of the most integrative frameworks is introduced in the chapter on Collaborative Architecture, which characterizes different forms of collaboration based on structure and argues that structure shapes process. For example, the architecture of a writing team leads to different norms and decision-making processes than those in a scientific collaboration. Understanding how collaborations work also means understanding how they fail. The chapter on collaboration failure highlights misalignment of values and actions as a driver of collapse and offers a taxonomy of breakdown patterns.

The book demonstrates collaboration in practice. It weaves together diverse examples and perspectives, offering different accounts and definitions. Each chapter presents a new definition of collaboration, and each section is bookended with a discussion titled *Insights from Podcasts*. However, the book acknowledges that there is no consensus on the definition, which calls for further exploration. Investigations should be furthered but the lack of consensus may not necessarily be a bad thing: one size may not fit all.

Relatedly, while the lens of collaboration helps make sense of the various accounts presented, it also raises the question of overgeneralization: what is *not* a collaboration? Or when does “working together” enter the semantic category of “collaboration”? For example, the chapter on colonial history argues that colonialism was a product of collaboration between the colonial European powers and the colonized, which later became exploitative due to mutual codependency. By this logic, if A works with employer B and B becomes toxic or exploitative, should the toxicity be understood as a product of the collaboration rather than the power imbalance? It is unclear where the boundaries lie, and which phenomena can be explained by collaboration or not.

Ultimately, the collaborative condition is a defining aspect of human life. If we pause and observe our surroundings, we see that everything is a product of collaboration, though not necessarily in the same form. It is truly astonishing to consider the heights humans have reached by working together. This book serves as an important step toward establishing “collaboration” as a research topic in its own right. Today, we face one of the most pressing collaboration challenges yet: working together to combat climate change. Many chapters in the book rightly conclude with reflections on this urgent issue. Doing so is especially important in our present times when we are increasingly polarized, our democratic values are slipping, and we can only face the impending crises by *collaborating* with each other.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ketika Garg is a postdoctoral scholar in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at California Institute of Technology. She holds a PhD in Cognitive and Information Sciences from University of California, Merced, and a BS-MS degree in Biological Sciences from Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Mohali. She is interested in understanding how individual behavior and social interactions shape collective outcomes, both adaptive and maladaptive.

REFERENCES

- Tomasello, M., Melis, A. P., Tennie, C., Wyman, E., & Herrmann, E. (2012). Two key steps in the evolution of human cooperation: The interdependence hypothesis. *Current Anthropology*, 53(6), 673-692. <https://doi.org/10.1086/668207>
- Boyd, R., & Richerson, P. J. (2009). Culture and the evolution of human cooperation. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 364(1533), 3281-3288. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2009.0134>
- Dong, Y., Ma, H., Shen, Z., & Wang, K. (2017). A century of science: Globalization of scientific collaborations, citations, and innovations. In *Proceedings of the 23rd ACM SIGKDD international conference on knowledge discovery and data mining* (pp. 1437-1446). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3097983.3098016>