

# Collaboration as Aggregation

Towards a Systems View of Collaboration

or how groups are not merely an addition of individuals

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# 1 Introduction

Books are sometimes inspired by answers that reveal themselves to a writer, but sometimes by questions that refuse to fade. This book belongs to the latter category. It evolved from an earlier Dutch work by the same author, *De aggregatiemens* [10], first published in 2014 and still available online. However, what follows is not merely a translation of that book. Rather, it is a return to the same line of inquiry under new circumstances: rephrased for an English-speaking audience, repositioned within a broader theoretical framework, and refined through insights that have continued to develop since the original publication."

The original Dutch text arose from a practical puzzle that gradually transformed into a theoretical one: Why does an intervention that succeeds in one group fail in another that, at first glance, seems nearly identical? Beneath this question lay a deeper suspicion—that collaboration operates according to principles that cannot be fully captured by the language of individual psychology nor by the abstractions of large-scale institutional theory alone.

The present book remains true to that starting point but pursues it further, with greater deliberation and a broader intellectual horizon. To write this book in English, therefore, is not merely to translate words but to translate an entire field of reference. Ideas rooted in Dutch professional and institutional practice must now find their voice within a different intellectual climate—one where the same phenomena are named differently, approached through distinct traditions, or overlooked entirely. What is attempted here, then, is a dual movement: fidelity to the original line of thought and openness to the demands of a new context.

Yet something else has shifted. Since the original publication, the framework itself has matured. Relationships once implicit have become explicit; the model's internal architecture has grown clearer; its connection to systems thinking has deepened; and its epistemological implications, once latent, now demand direct articulation. What is offered here, then, is neither a simple translation nor a replacement of the original but a revised and expanded rearticulation—continuous with its source yet no longer bound by it.

At its core, however, the book's central intuition remains unchanged: Collaboration is one of the most familiar yet least understood realities of collective life. We recognize its importance, experience its failures, and intervene in it constantly. And yet, the level at which groups actually form, stabilize, distort, or transform their behavior often remains conceptually elusive.

What is needed, then, is not merely a better toolkit for management or a more persuasive rhetoric of leadership but a more coherent way of understanding collaboration itself—one that can move from practical experience to structural explanation, and from structural explanation toward broader questions of systems and knowledge.

## 1.1 A Missing Level of Analysis

Most existing theories approach collaboration from one of two familiar directions, as if the phenomenon could be grasped either from below or from above, but not in the space where it most often unfolds. At the micro level, behaviour is explained through psychological concepts such as motivation, cognition, and interpersonal dynamics. At the macro level, it is interpreted through institutions, norms, systems, and other large-scale formations. Yet many of the collaborations that shape contemporary life—especially those that cross teams, organisations, or stakeholder groups—take place in between these established levels.

However, many real-world collaborations—especially those involving multiple teams, organizations, or stakeholders—operate at a meso level that is not adequately covered by either perspective. At this level, collaboration is neither reducible to individual psychology nor fully explained by large-scale systemic structures.

This book addresses that gap.

It proposes a framework that treats collaboration not as a loose interaction between individuals, but as a distinct mode of organization with its own structure and dynamics.

## 1.2 From Individuals to Groups

The central idea of this book is simple to state, though far-reaching in its implications: a group is not merely a collection of individuals, but a different state in which individuals can exist.

Just as matter can transition between different states—solid, liquid, gas—so too can human behaviour transition between individual and collective forms. When individuals act as part of a group oriented toward a shared task, their outputs—perceptions, ideas, intentions, and actions—do not remain isolated. They interact, reinforce, and transform one another.

Through this process, they give rise to group-level phenomena that cannot be reduced to individual contributions alone.

This process is referred to in this book as aggregation.