CHAPTER 21

Emotional Commitment and the Development of Collaborative Projects

Manfred Holodynski

In this book, Andy Blunden introduces a new concept, the “collaborative project.” This label and concept serve the purpose of conceptualizing the tension between individual actions and their societal context in an interdisciplinary manner. “‘Project’ functions explicitly to theorize the connection between human actions and the societal context in which individual actions are meaningful” (p. 23). In my reflection, I want to focus on two points: (1) Reconstructing the development of collaborative projects can be a tool for figuring out the societal and psychological conditions of how projects can be successfully planned and managed. (2) A successful realization of a project does not only depend on its conceptual and operative conditions, but also on the motivational and emotional conditions of how the participants of a project harmonize the project’s goals with their personal motives and create a personal sense of their collaboration.

Reconstructing the development of collaborative projects. Although not explicitly formulated, the introductory text of Andy Blunden reveals that collaborative projects have their starting point in collectively experienced social evils for which no suitable conceptual and instrumental tools exist which could remedy the evils and shortcomings. These tools still have to be invented and optimized by the cooperative actions of the persons affected often against massive societal resistance. In the course of a project’s development, its goals as well as its tools become fine-tuned. Because of its universality, the concept of collaborative projects can be applied to all domains of the societal life. The projects described in this book with their wide range and heterogeneity, are a convincing illustration of this.

Hence, collaborative projects emerge at those parts of a societal activity at which the already existing tools and norms are not sufficient (any more) for the satisfaction of its societal motive. Collaborative projects are the spearhead of a societal activity as can be inferred from Blunden’s stages of a project (p. 8). The starting point is a problem within a given societal activity, goes on to some failed solutions and finally leads to a construction of new and efficient tools that could solve the problem which in turn can become mainstreamed as part
of the societal practices of the wider community. Insofar, a project is as a rule only an element of a societal activity in which it is embedded.

When a project focusses on a social evil it is probable that some more projects emerge at the same time that initially are not mutually coordinated. For example, a couple of teaching projects might exist within the institutions of school and university that devote themselves to innovative forms of teaching and learning that may improve the process and results of teaching and learning. This creates the important task of connecting the projects and generalizing them so that they can step out of their original marginal existence and begin influencing the societal mainstream of the activity.

For a productive realization of a collaborative project, it is especially important to know how projects develop, by which actions in relation to which social and societal conditions the participants of a project can successfully expand the project or see it marginalized or even break off. Reconstructing the development of successful vs. unsuccessful projects can contribute important insights for a successful managing of projects. Are there early indicators of success? To what extent does a project rely on trial and error? In many cases, one can only evaluate how generalizable a project really has been in retrospect. For example, some projects emerged in the early 1970s in western countries which criticized the authoritarian education of children at that time, and they propagated and practiced an anti-authoritarian education especially in kindergartens. These projects, however, failed miserably and disappeared very soon. Looking back at these projects, their arguments had been very naive and misleading because they neglected the differences between adult caregivers and children.

The reconstruction of motivational and emotional aspects of collaborative projects. The contributions in the book contain a bunch of innovative projects which provide very informative details about their conceptual and organizational development. A collaborative project, however, does not consist only of these conceptual and organizational aspects. People do not carry out only actions that are more or less integrated in a societal activity or project. Looking from a psychological perspective, an individual “only” tries to satisfy his or her individual motives which do not really coincide with the societal motives of the collective activity in which the individual actions are embedded. As Blunden pointed out: “Individual participants may be aware of the motive of the activity in which they are participating, but its meaning for them, and their motive for participation in the activity, is individual” (p. 24).

This leads to two important tasks in managing a project. (1) How can people be convinced to engage in the project and act in line with the project’s goals, up to the point that they devote themselves to the project and adopt the project’s