Meaning-making in the practice of collaboration: how implicit normative structures guide collaborative processes around contested natural resource issues

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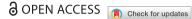
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Although communication is considered crucial for collaboration in natural resource management (NRM), its role has so far been superficially studied. In this paper, we present a way to investigate this communication by focusing on its implicit aspects. We observed and examined communication in three processes that aimed to find solutions to predator-reindeer problems through collaboration between reindeer herders and wildlife authorities in northern Sweden. Despite the three processes sharing the same external and internal conditions, they developed in completely different directions. We explain this by considering each process as a social practice and identifying the character of the normative structures guiding its members' sense-making and action. We show how the structures emerged, were reproduced and affected the course of events and outcomes of each process. We conclude that recognising the significance of the implicit aspects of communication offers novel opportunities to better understand collaboration in NRM.

Keywords: social practice theory; implicit aspects of communication; teleo-affective structures; collaboration; natural resource management

1. Introduction: the implicit meaning-making in collaborative natural resource management

Research from a number of different traditions unanimously concludes that communication is decisive for how collaborative processes within natural resource management (NRM) play out. In particular, communication is understood to be vital for achieving inclusiveness and learning, maintaining transparency, building trust and ensuring the process is perceived as legitimate (e.g. Ansell and Gash 2008; Díez, Etxano, and Garmendia 2015; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2011; Jager *et al.* 2020; Muro and Jeffrey 2008).

Paradoxically, communication carried out when actors representing different interests collaborate to deal with a complex NRM issue is rarely explored in depth. The analyses of observed communication and its consequences that appear in literature generally focus on the content of what is said, how it is said and who it is said by (Beers, van Mierlo, and Hoes 2016; Bentley Brymer, Wulfhorst, and Brunson 2018; Stöhr

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et al. 2014; Levesque *et al.* 2017). These explicit aspects can, indeed, tell us something about the quality of collaboration and explain some of the successes and setbacks collaboration may face. However, communication theory emphasises that communication also includes an implicit side. While the explicit side consists of what is uttered, the implicit refers to the unspoken context in which the utterance is understood and made sense of. The sense-making and context are aspects of the same communicative process and are intersubjectively created in parallel to the utterances of the interlocutors (Linell 1995, 178). To understand the effects of communication on the nature and outcomes of collaboration, there is therefore a need to pay attention to and examine not only the explicit but also the implicit aspects of communication.

In this paper, we aim to develop a better understanding of what happens in collaborative processes by focusing on the implicit aspects, or "implicit meanings" (as we choose to call them) of communication. The empirical material consists of observations of the communication going on during three collaborative processes that sought to solve a highly contested issue in Sweden: the loss of domestic reindeer to predators and the consequences for reindeer husbandry (Åhman *et al.* 2022). The three processes were included in a programme, initiated by the Swedish Government and led by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), for the coordination of reindeer husbandry and predator management in the northern part of Sweden through a democratic, deliberative and participatory approach.

We understand the implicit meanings as the unspoken assumptions that are indispensable for the interlocutors to make sense of what is said and done and participate in the communicative situations. To analyse the implicit meanings we consider the three processes under study as social practices. These social practices comprise the context that the participating actors created intersubjectively: the practices were co-constructed though the communicative activities carried out. We analyse how these activities contributed to creating normative structures that guided the actors' sense-making and thus affected the processes they were involved in. We show that the processes took completely different directions, despite having fundamental conditions in common: they ran in parallel, followed the same process design, involved representatives of the same two interests (reindeer herding and predator management), were concerned with the same issue (to reduce reindeer losses from predators), and were facilitated by the same CAB official. An analysis based solely on explicit aspects of the collaboration, we argue, would not have offered the same consistent explanations as to why the processes developed as they did.

Although our empirical material is drawn from a case of wildlife management, our study should not be seen specifically contributing to this field of research. We chose the three collaborative processes because they shared a range of external and internal conditions and could therefore be compared. Previous research has shown that, despite attempts to deal with the predator problems in northern Sweden through decentralised management including influence from local interests, objections to the predator policy and mistrust of the wildlife authorities remain (Bennett *et al.* 2022; Hansson-Forman *et al.* 2018). This strengthens our impression that our theoretical focus is relevant to a broad field of research, as the challenges to the collaborative programme tackled are not specific to wildlife management. Rather they characterize collaborative initiatives around many different natural resources, such as management of river basins (Giebels, van Buuren, and Edelenbos 2015; Waylen *et al.* 2015) and conservation of endangered habitats and species (Brummel *et al.* 2010; Coleman and Stern 2018; O'Riordan, Mahon, and McDonagh 2015). We therefore consider the

understanding we develop in this paper as a widely applicable complement to the explicit aspects of communication carried out in collaboration that have so far engaged research.

Our approach contributes to this special issue on environmental communication in planning and natural resource management and to furthering the understanding of collaboration and its outcomes, by showing the value of considering the implicit aspect of communication rather than viewing communication solely as transmission of explicit information. The insights generated explain why instructions and mandates given to a collaborative process are not automatically understood and acted upon as intended by the initiators. The insights can also inform discussions about ways to be more attentive and sensitive to aspects of communication that are not obvious, but nevertheless affect situations where different interests meet around complex and contested issues. This implicit aspect cannot be predicted, but more flexible designs, allowing space for acknowledgement and joint exploration of what is occurring between the lines of communication, can inspire the involved actors to reflect upon the process in which they are involved. Put into practice, facilitation of such awareness can serve as an important step to further improve collaborative approaches in NRM.

2.   Theory: collaborative processes as social practices

To explore how implicit meanings are intersubjectively created when actors interact to collaborate, and the significance of the creation of these meanings for the direction and outcomes of collaborative processes, we apply an analytical framework based on social practice theories. These theories constitute a family of theories grounded in the idea of *practice* as central to social life. Individuals belong to a number of different but overlapping and nested social practices, between which they move without reflecting.

The analytical framework we developed for this study revolves around three interconnected concepts: teleo-affective structures, practical understanding, and situated identities. Our framework is mainly based on Schatzki's (1996, 2002) work. However, like many other researchers applying "practice based approaches" (Nicolini 2012), we have been inspired by ideas from several different branches within this family of theories.

A social practice is held together by normative assumptions shared by its members about what their practice is to accomplish, how what is said and done ought to be understood, how things ought to be dealt with, and what ought to be treated as "right", "true" and "desired". This normativity is different from explicit rules or procedures that members of an organisation or community may be expected to follow, and is also different from explicit goals members may be expected to fulfil. Rather, the assumptions constitute implicit normative structures or obviousities, which the members of a practice rarely speak about, or are even conscious of, but that nevertheless guide what to focus on and neglect, say and do, or avoid saying and doing. Schatzki (1996) suggests the concept *teleo-affective structures* to encompass this implicit guidance that directs practice members' attention, rationalisations and actions. These structures include shared assumptions about how things are causally linked together with actions (teleology) and emotions (affection) and are reproduced through the interaction between the members in their routinely repeated activities. The teleo-affective structures are decisive for the character of a practice. If the structures change for any reason, the practice, as its members have come to know it, also changes.

We find the concept of *teleo-affective structures* valuable because it explains that the shared assumptions characterising a practice are created intersubjectively by its members, and that these assumptions are normative (in the sense that they point to what is regarded as "right", what the practice ought to achieve, and how), include perceptions of causality (how to understand cause and effect) and are connected to emotions (how to feel). However, in this paper, we choose to replace "teleo-affective structures" with "normative guiding structures" because we believe the latter facilitates a more immediate understanding of what these structures imply.

The *normative guiding structures* of a social practice are tightly connected with *practical understanding* (Schatzki 2002). Without being given any explicit instructions, full members of a social practice have the ability to understand, be attentive to, and follow its normative guiding structures. Practical understanding implies that members of a practice understand how they ought to act, ask and respond to questions and gestures, in a way that makes sense in that particular practice.

When people become members of a practice, they not only learn to contribute to maintaining its normativity, they also develop *situated identities*: roles appropriate to and socially recognised in that practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). The different roles held within a practice, may all fulfil important functions in contributing to the maintenance of its guiding structures.

Even if a social practice is considered as jointly constructed by its members, this interplay can hardly be seen as symmetric (Contu and Willmott 2003). Social practice theories admit that inequalities and asymmetries may characterise the relationships between members of social practices and affect which actions, values, knowledge, etc., are regarded as important and relevant. Certain members of a social practice can, therefore, by virtue of the position co-constructed for them, have more influence over how a situation should be made sense of, than others (Huzzard 2004). These asymmetries are taken into account in our analysis and enable understanding of how power relationships affect the ongoing sense-making by the members of the social practices.

Our practice-based approach described above, implies an ethnographic method (e.g. Bueger 2014; Carlile 2002) enabling generation of empirical material through real time observations of what members of the studied social practices say and do and how they respond to what others say and do. The analysis started out from Schatzki's (2002) idea that people do what makes sense for them to do, and this sense-making is guided by the normative structures of the social practice in which they are involved. Even if these structures, including the practical understanding and situated identities are subtle, they are noticeable since the members orient towards them in their actions, albeit without articulating them.

3. Empirical context: collaboration around reindeer and predator management

Our starting point is that external conditions (such as the legal and political context, mandates and resources given to a collaborative process) and internal conditions including the explicit aspects of communication (such as, process design, facilitation and opportunities for the parties involved to understand what is going on and express themselves) of a collaborative process, cannot alone explain why it develops the way it does. We also need to examine and understand the implicit aspects of communication taking place in such processes. In this paper we have chosen to examine these implicit aspects in three collaborative processes. These three processes are suitable for our analytical focus, as they were included in the same national programme, and thus

share some external and internal conditions. Below we briefly describe the background to the programme, as well as what the three processes had in common.

As a result of national and international political ambitions and decisions to re-establish and maintain viable populations of five large predators (lynx, wolverine, bear, golden eagle and wolf), their numbers have increased significantly in recent decades in northern Sweden. This area, Sápmi, is where the Sámi have, since the eighteenth century, lived as nomadic reindeer herders, moving with their reindeer between winter and summer pastures. Hence, the growing predator presence has particularly affected reindeer herders, resulting not only in reindeer loss, but also in increased workload needed to protect herds and move or keep them away from pastures with many predators (Åhman *et al.* 2022). This situation has led to escalated tensions and mistrust between herders and environmental authorities (Bennett *et al.* 2022).

To maintain sustainable reindeer husbandary, the Swedish Parliament decided, in 2013, that Sámi districts[1] should have to tolerate a maximum of 10% loss of reindeer per year to the five large predators. These losses varied between 20% and 50% at the time the decision was made (Regeringens proposition 2012/13:191). The decision resulted in the County Administrative Boards (CABs) in Sápmi being given the task to carry out collaborative processes with all reindeer herding districts in each county. The knowledge gained through these processes was to serve as a basis for discussions and jointly-agreed measures for how the 10% goal would be achieved and maintained without endangering the viability of the five predator species (SEPA 2013). The actors involved in our study were not to collaboratively manage a natural resource. The collaboration concerned the responsibility to collaboratively coordinate measures to reduce and keep losses of reindeer to predators to 10% in the long term.

The collaborative processes we observed and analysed took place in a legal and political context characterised by a history of colonialism and economic and cultural oppression by Swedish society against Sápmi (e.g. Kløcker Larsen *et al.* 2022). This background is indeed important for the establishment of the programme and structuring of the processes, but since it is common to all three processes, we do not believe it caused the differences in the directions the processes took. It is therefore not necessary for the purpose of the paper to describe the context further. Here we draw upon Schegloff (1997), who claims that the analytically and ethically correct way to include context when analysing communicative situations, is to only take into account the context that the interlocutors orient towards and make relevant. There are situations in our corpus in which the process members refer to the Sápmi-Swedish relationship; when relevant for our analysis, we include these.

3.1. *The general set-up of the collaborative processes*

The collaborative programme was drawn up and prepared together with the Sámi Parliament[2]. It was discussed at information meetings held in each county and launched on the Parliament website. Participation in the programme was voluntary and the herding districts that chose to take part were financially compensated for time devoted to the collaboration. The programme instructions stated that each process should include a series of four meetings between the responsible staff at the County Administrative Boards (CABs), and representatives of the respective reindeer herding district. Each meeting had a pre-given agenda that, according to the official at the CAB responsible for leading the three processes we observed, was to be carried out as follows:

Meeting 1 was about familiarising the herders with the background to, conditions for and purpose of the forthcoming process.

Meeting 2 was devoted to the reindeer herders' descriptions of their everyday work, how they dealt with problems related to predators and other activities that restricted opportunities to move the herds between grazing areas, such as intrusion of roads, forestry and wind farms.

Meeting 3 had two parts. In the first, the official was to present the CAB's responsibilities and decision-making mandate in relation to predator management regulations at EU and national levels. In the second part, the participants were to agree on the presence and distribution of predators in the herding district, based on data from the CAB's routine inventories and the herders' observations of predators and lost reindeer.

Based on the joint fact-finding and shared understanding developed through the process, in meeting 4, the participants were to agree about preventive measures against predators and to prioritise and distribute responsibilities for these measures.

In parallel with these meetings, those involved were to write a report reflecting the process and describing the reindeer herding situation in the district in question, including how losses to, and threats from, predators were handled. The report should also include a list of long- and short-term measures that the herders and the CAB, respectively, had committed to take to meet the 10% target. The report and measures were to be updated annually until the 10% target was achieved. However, six months after we completed our fieldwork, the initiative was discontinued due to factors beyond this study.

4.   Methods for data generation and analysis

According to our theoretical approach, the implicit meanings of communication carried out in the three collaborative processes can be explored by viewing processes A, B, and C as three separate social practices whose respective character is determined by its normative guiding structures. These structures can be identified and analysed based on observations of how members of the practices act and interact. In this way, insights about why the processes unfolded the way they did can be gained.

To generate the empirical material needed for the analysis, we followed the three collaborative processes held from April 2014 to November 2015 through recurrent observations of what was said and done in the meetings. It is of ethical importance that those involved in a research project understand how they can be affected by the research and its results. Before the research design was determined, we therefore contacted the Swedish Sámi Association[3] (SSR), which confirmed that the principle questions of the study were valuable. The CAB likewise confirmed that they were interested in the results of the study. When the three processes were identified, following suggestions from the CAB and SSR, we contacted everyone involved with a description of the research project and its aims and were subsequently granted access to the meetings. At the first meetings, we repeated the description orally and asked for permission to record the conversation and use it for research. The participants' consents were recorded.

We attended three out of four meetings held within two of the processes and all four meetings in the third, comprising 10 meetings in total. One of the meetings in each process lasted for a full day, and the others for half a day. Either before or after

the meetings, we conducted group interviews with the participating reindeer herders. Their attendance at the meetings varied, because occasionally they could not take time off from their herding enterprises. However, three representatives from the respective district usually took part, and it was on these occasions we arranged the group interviews (three groups in total). These lasted for just over an hour and were supplemented with shorter telephone interviews with individual reindeer herders. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with the CAB official, one interview in connection with each process, for a duration of half to one hour; these were complemented with two short phone interviews.

The interviews focused on the participants' experiences (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015) and helped us to understand how they perceived the value of, and their role in, the collaborative process in which they were involved. All meetings and face-to-face interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a research assistant. Thus, the material includes transcripts of audio-recorded meetings (26 h), and interviews (around 5 h), field notes and notes taken during phone interviews.

In our analysis, we viewed each of the three processes as a distinct social practice. We worked with one social practice at a time, and to get a sense of its characteristics we jointly read through the transcripts and field notes. Thereafter, we divided the meeting transcripts into sequences based on topics discussed, and examined them one by one in more detail. According to our theoretical framework, there is a connection between normative guiding structures, sense-making and action. Hence, we started by seeking to identify the normative guiding structures by focusing on actions (in the form of statements, clarifications, questions, avoidances, reflections, etc.) and interpreted how they were made sense of in the social practice, by looking at how they were responded to. We asked ourselves what the normative structure could reasonably look like, to guide the interlocutors to make sense of, and react to what was said and done in the way they did. We read through each conversation sequence several times to see whether reactions to actions and reactions to these reactions etc., really contributed to reproduce the normative guiding structures we had tentatively identified.

Once we thought we had a plausible idea of the character of the normative guiding structures, we continued with identifying *practical understanding*. We asked ourselves what abilities are needed in order to make sense of, and respond to, what was said and done in a way that conformed to how things "ought to" be understood according to the normative structures. In parallel, we focused on what each participant in the conversation sequence said and did. We asked ourselves what characterized his/her action and reaction and in what way it contributed to maintaining the normative guiding structures. This gave us an idea of the different *identities* included in the conversation sequence.

We went through all the conversation sequences in this way, while returning to, and comparing them with each other. As the word "structures" indicates, a practice is rarely guided by only one, but rather by several normative structures. This became evident as the structures we identified in a few sequences within each process, were inconsistent with those we identified as occurring in most of the conversation sequences. We regarded the most commonly occurring normative structure in each process as the dominant one and limited our analysis to these sequences. Finally, when we felt confident we had a reasonable interpretation of the normative guiding structures, practical understanding and situated identities of all the analysed sequences, we zoomed out by considering the analyses of all the individual conversation sequences as a

whole. We checked what was said and done in the meetings, the way the process unfolded, and determined that it could be logically explained through our theoretical lens and analytical concepts.

5. Findings: the social practices of the collaborative processes

In this section, we present the results of our analysis. Since the CAB official leading the processes started them all similarly, using the same phrasing, we begin by describing our interpetation of what this introduction meant for the social practices being created. We then describe our findings about how respective processes (here called A, B and C), seen as social practices, evolved, and by depicting what was said and done. We start by presenting in detail how, at the first meeting, the herders responded to the official's presentation and how the official, in turn, responded to the herders' response. By translating what was said and done into our analytical concepts, we show how crucial these initial acts were for the normative guiding structures and situated identities, as well as the practical understanding that those present at the meetings co-created in order to act "correctly" as members of their respective practice. We then highlight individual events in the subsequent meetings to show how the implicit meaning-making creating the social practices affected the collaborative processes and their outcomes. For reasons of anonymity, all participants are referred to as "they", and specific predator species as "P1" or "P2". Table 1, at the end of this section, summarises the characterising differences between the three processes, seen as social practices.

5.1. The CAB official's advantageous position sets the frames of the processes

The social practices we studied began to take shape at the first meeting of each process at the moment the CAB official welcomed the herders and introduced the programme and the forthcoming collaboration. The introduction was done in an enthusiastic tone; the official stated that they trusted the step-by-step process outlined by the programme. By following given instructions, the collaboration would enable the participants to identify appropriate preventive measures against predators. Jointly, they would also identify areas where suggested measures would prove fruitless, and adopt other solutions, such as culling or redistribution of predators, into areas of the county where they were likely to do less harm. This would make it achievable to meet both the 10% target and comply with parliamentary decisions on predator conservation.

We regard the official's introduction of the process at the first meeting, not only as an initiation of the collaborative process, but also of the social practices created. In line with Huzzard (2004), we identify this introduction as an act of "sense giving", similar to what project managers ("the dominant" according to Huzzard) may undertake to mobilise the subordinate at organizational change processes. Since it was the CAB, not the reindeer herders, who was commissioned by the government to implement the programme, the presentation of what was to be done, how and why, was based on the meaning of the programme created in the official's bureaucratic authority practice. From this perspective, the proposed approach constituted a reasonable and correct one, without the official necessarily being aware of its normative underpinnings. Also, by introducing the process in the way they did, the official implicitly took the role of leader, who knew how to implement the government mission and with the

Table 1. The characterising differences between the three processes seen as social practices.

Collaborative process	Shared normative assumptions guiding the social practice (teleo-affective structures)	Practical understanding	Situated identities, roles and skills
A: Extension of the CAB practice	The "right" way to meet the target of reducing the loss of reindeer to predators is to follow the pre-given instructions.	Think and act like officials in a CAB practice.	Official: the one with knowledge and skills to lead the process. Herders: a group of co-workers with skills to understand and follow given instructions.
B: Extension of the herding practice	The "right" way to meet the target of reducing the loss of reindeer to predators is to not let the herders down.	Think and act like the herders in a herding practice.	Official: the one with skills and responsibility to not let the herders down. Herders: the ones entitled to be not disappointed, with skills to maintain doubting the process would be successful from their point of view.
C: Competition between two different ideas	The "right" way to meet the target of reducing the loss of reindeer to predators is to maintain competition over whose view is "right".	Avoid understanding the other party.	Official and herders: competitors with intentions to ignore and dismiss each other's statements and questions and with the skills to not disclose these intentions.

capacity to take the process further, suggesting that the herders were designated the role as followers.

As we show below, the representatives of the herding districts responded very differently to the introduction and the meaning of the process "given" by the official through the introduction. The herders' ways of responding affected the nature of the emerging social practices, which had consequences for how the collaborative processes developed.

5.2. Collaboration process A – an extension of the CAB practice

The first meeting – how the herders' responses affected the character of the social practice:

Representatives of the herding district involved in process A responded to the official's introduction in a way that indicated they were well acquainted with the purpose and content of the programme. They confirmed the official's description with nods and comments. Their questions were about details, or concerned aspects stated in the programme. For example, a herder asked: "From what I can understand, the report we [are to] develop is not static, but a living document that we can reformulate when it turns out necessary? "They supplemented and prompted descriptions by the official in a way that indicated they recognised the language and way of reasoning as characterised by the CAB and were both prepared and willing to contribute to the business at hand. For instance, when the official explained that, as a result of the written report, "… a culling application from you will be a mere formality. It will just be for us to sign… we will no longer receive applications that do not contain the appropriate… appropriate… [searching for words]", one herder filled in "criteria!", while the official continued: "… criteria. And then everything is clear. Because we've had this process we all know what's applicable."

Below the surface of what was said and done at the first meeting, a social practice was created which, to us, strongly resembled a well-functioning and united workgroup taking on a new assignment. This practice was *guided by normative structures,* according to which the official's sense-giving, that is, the suggested ideas of what was to be achieved, in what way and why, were normatively "right". This practice can therefore be seen as an extension of the CAB practice, normatively guided by the idea that by taking on the systematic step-by-step workflow outlined by the programme, they would provide the CAB with enough understanding of the reindeer herding conditions to be able to take relevant measures against threatening predators. This would increase their potential to eventually reach the 10% target.

The initial actions by the official, and the reactions to these actions by the herders, also implicitly created *situated identities* appropriate to the guiding structures of the practice: the official, who presented the agenda and was responsible for the PowerPoint presentation (an artefact that reinforced the impression of who was in control), served as informal chair of the meeting. Implicitly, this proposed a division of roles where the official was the leader of the "workgroup", while the herders were subordinate "co-workers". However, this distribution of roles should not be seen as created by the official's sense-giving alone. The herders could have responded to the initiative of the official in a number of ways. By responding the way they did – i.e. nodding, asking confirming questions and complementing the official's reasoning – they showed they understood and accepted the meaning the official proposed, thus contributing to the creation of both their and the official's situated identities.

The *shared practical understanding* maintaining these normative guiding structures was evident from the way the members of the practice acted and responded to actions. For example, when the official asked the herders where in their district they had the greatest losses of reindeer (a question asked at the first meeting with every herding district), a herder responded directly by describing the relevant geographical locations. From the rationale of the CAB, whose bureaucratic structures were appropriated by this social practice, it made sense to start identifying the presence of predators by investigating reindeer losses. The crucial thing here was not whether the herder gave the factually "correct" answer or not, but that the answer was normatively "right" because it made sense in relation to the guiding structures of the social practice in which it was asked.

The following meetings – how the social practice affected the collaborative process:

In accordance with the agenda and instructions for the second meeting, the herders presented the herding conditions. In their situated identities as subordinate "co-workers" they proved reliable. They followed the pre-given instructions and described the reindeer herding year as a cycle of seasonal work adapted to the natural movements of reindeer. They pointed out valuable grazing areas that were difficult to access due to the presence of certain predator species and explained, in detail, how they tried to handle these difficulties. The herders' way of taking on the task may seem obvious, but is mentioned because it deviates from how herders involved in the other processes chose to respond to this instruction. Hence, this interaction clearly shows that the meaning of what the process, seen as a social practice, should achieve was created and maintained through the way the members jointly made sense of what was happening.

At the fourth meeting, the written report, reflecting the tentative agreements and results of the process, would be finalised. The herders' skills as "co-workers" appeared even more clearly as they stepped up and took more responsibility than requested for ensuring the content of the report. The participants went through a draft with predetermined headings (included in the programme instructions) under which pieces of text written by, respectively, the official and the herders, were inserted. They focused on the document on the big screen while the official scrolled down and read out the text, as they discussed the wordings and what remained to be written. One herder then said that, in addition to the text, the herders had been assigned to write, they intended to include a section specifying how the herding was affected by each predator species. After a short silence, the official enthusiastically replied: "That would be great! "and suggested where in the report the new piece of text could be placed. Because of shared practical understanding, the official did not have to question why the herder wanted to include a piece of text which, according to the instructions, was not required. The initiative supported the idea of how cause and effect were linked, inherent in the normative guiding structures characterising the practice, implying that the more relevant the information about the herding situation included in the report, the better this would serve as a tool for achieving the 10% target. Furthermore, we interpret the official's displayed enthusiasm for the herders' initiative as an emotional reaction in line with these structures.

5.3. Collaborative process B – an extension of the reindeer herding practice

The first meeting – how the herders' responses affected the character of the social practice:

In collaborative process B, the representatives of the concerned herding district responded with what we interpret as mistrust to the official's enthusiastic introduction to the process. In indignant tones, they described how they lost hundreds of reindeer to predator P1 every year. They repeatedly asked how the programme could solve the fact that their reports of P1's attacks were never taken seriously by the CAB. They referred to previous failed attempts from wildlife authorities to help them overcome predator problems, and requested guarantees that this collaborative process would be successful: "If the CAB does not trust our observations, our efforts to collaborate will be in vain again!"

The official responded in calm tone to the herders' doubts: by jointly and carefully comparing the herders' predator observations with the inventories made by the CAB, they would together be able to describe the predator situation in a way that would eliminate the authority's doubts. The meeting went on along these lines. Again and again, the herders described in an accusatory tone how exposed their district was, both to predator attacks and to the authority's "half-hearted attempts" to help them. The official responded by returning to expaining why there were good reasons to hope for a better outcome this time.

Through the herders' despairing questioning, and the official's efforts to provide reasons to trust the collaborative approach, their respective *identities* in the emerging social practice were carved out. The official became the one with both the skills and responsibility for ensuring that the doubts expressed by the herders would not be realised. The herders became unjust victims of authority decisions, who were not only seeking help to dare to trust the success of the process, but also the ones entitled to this help. The creation of these identities was *guided by normative structures* pointing at the importance of ensuring that the collaborative process would not lead to yet another failure to solve the herding district's problems with predator P1. The meaning of what the collaborative process was to achieve, how and why, initially given by the official, seen as the dominant "sense giver" (Huzzard 2004) was overthrown, as it did not fit the situated identities and the normative guiding structures co-created in parallel to them. The ability to maintain these structures (*practical understanding*) implied that members of this practice were to assume a view on the problems and solutions to predator P1 that resembled the one expressed by the herders, rather than the one initially expressed by the official. In the official's identity as the one with the responsibility and capacity to not let the herders down this time, it therefore made sense to deviate from the prescribed step-by-step process and report writing, to prioritise identifying measures to protect the district's reindeer herds by finding ways to eliminate P1. Instead of following the original agenda, according to which the herders were to describe their herding situation as a whole, the official urged them to focus on preparing a description of difficulties they experienced with utilising grazing areas populated by P1, for the next meeting.

The following meetings – how the social practice affected the collaborative process:

In meeting three, when the participants compared predator observations by the herders with inventories by the CAB, they focused on the area in the terrain that, according to the herders, was densely populated by predator P1. The official admitted the area had been insufficiently inventoried by the CAB due to impenetrable terrain: "We have reasons to get rid of predator P1 in this area despite CAB's unsatisfactory documentation. If we are to reduce the reindeer losses, this is where we need to take our measures."

However, the herders' description of their difficulties in protecting their herds from P1 in this area was unsatisfactory according to the official. In preparation for meeting four, the herders were therefore again given the task to, in detail, describe difficulties they experienced with utilising the grazing area because of predator P1. The herders responded to the suggested task with counter-questions, expressing what we interpet as lack of interest in cooperating with the official's request. In their role of being entitled to help, their attitude indicated that they handed over responsibility for ensuring the process would succeed to the official. The official motivated the request by explaining that an outsider could not understand why they did not just move their herd when they encountered the predator, as the grazing area of the district looked enormous on the map: "Thanks to this process I have understood why, but no one else at the CAB has. "A detailed description from the herders, the official explained: "[…] will make it easier for us [the authorities] to deal with a culling application."

At the fourth meeting, the herders' description finally seemed to satisfy the official, and the number of individual predator P1s to include in the culling application was discussed. The herders argued for an unusually high number. The official hesitated about their suggestion, but accepted after a period of reasoning: the CAB inventories together with the herders' justification of their problems would comprise acceptable reasons. None of the herders showed any sign of relief or excitement about the extra-ordinary nature of the official's acceptance (such emotions would likely have violated the normative structures that guided this practice). They reacted in the way they "ought to" according to the normative guiding structures by showing they maintained their roles as doubters, not of the official's intentions to help them, but of the official's cap-acity to do so. This was expressed, with a wry smile, by one of the herders: "Yes, that is the way it has to be done. That will be something for you to fabricate [to the author-ities]". The character of the social practice created was maintained throughout process B, with the herders consistently expressing doubt that they could rely upon receiving the help they were entitled to.

As a side note, we would like to add that the culling application was turned down by a higher level authority, with the argument that the application did not demonstrate that all alternatives to culling for tackling the the predator problem had been tested. The culling application may have looked reasonable from the perspective of the offi-cial's identity in this social practice, while being judged insufficient from the perspec-tive of the CAB practice.

5.4. Collaboration process C – a competition between two different ideas

The first meeting – how the herders' responses affected the character of the social practice:

A long period of attacks by predator P2 on the reindeer herds of the district involved in process C had just ended, when the first meeting took place. As a response to the official's usual introduction to the programme, a herder explained that they could easily implement the collaboration, since the district and the CAB had, for some time, been in a dialogue that according to them "felt good". Instead, their joint work needed to focus on the recurring immigration of predator P2 to their district. The herder described their extensive work in trying to track and scare P2 predators during the past months: "Predator P2 is a threat against everything really! "The official agreed that predator P2 was a major problem, but continued by objecting to something the herder did not explicitly propose, namely to eliminate the local P2 population by

shooting: "[…] because even though we shoot one predator P2 we don't solve the problem since new individuals will keep coming. "The idea of eliminating predator P2 was a political issue, the official explained, and there was no room for politics in the collaborative process. Their (non-political) collaboration should focus on systematically documenting the presence of P2, describing the losses and the district's efforts to protect its herds. The official went on to explain the step-by-step process, but was regularly interrupted by the herders. Their comments were not related to the official's description but were, instead, about the challenges they faced in making their living due to the increased presence of predators, and the impossibility of reaching the 10% target with preserved predator populations.

In the social practice created, two different and disconnected conversations were going on, *guided by normative structures* characterising competition about whose meaning of the process would lead to the 10% target being reached. The herders stressed the importance of immediately addressing the most urgent predator problem (a reasonable desire from the logic of the herding practice, we assume), while the official stressed the importance of following the government's directive. All members of this practice maintained *identities as competitors*, while their *practical understanding* included the ability to ignore and misinterpret each other's arguments (without being explicit, or perhaps even aware of, the intention to ignore and misinterpret), and to dismiss and express resistance to the other's suggestions (without being explicit, or aware of the intention to dismiss and resist).

When the official, just as in the first meetings with every herding district, asked in which area herders experienced the greatest reindeer losses, the response showed that the question was misunderstood (or ignored), as it did not make sense in relation to the bureaucratic logic from which the question was asked (compare with collaboration process A). Instead, a herder responded with a counter question, which did make sense in this social practice: "Do you know which herding district has the biggest problem with predators? "and immediately answered the question: "We are in the lead! The last seven, eight years we have been in the lead! "Once again, the official contradicted by stressing the need for systematic work: "The important thing is not to count who has the most number of losses, but to begin charting the losses and their causes." The herder replied: "The important thing is to reduce the losses to 10% in a few years, what a paradise!", showing they followed the normative structures by dismissing the official's idea of work conduct, by suggesting a different idea of what needed to be prioritized.

At the end of the first meeting, the official repeated that the next meeting would build on the herders' description of their reindeer husbandry. A herder checked: "You want us to describe the herding district?" This question can be interpreted as the herder confirming they accepted who was in charge of giving instructions. However, by: "You want", the herder also, according to our interpretation, highlighted how little this instruction engaged them. This was the kind of resistance that a skilled member of this practice could be expected to exercise.

The following meetings – how the social practice affected the collaborative process:

At the next meeting it soon became apparent that the herders had not prepared according to instructions. The official coaxed them into giving the information needed for the report, while the competitive atmosphere was maintained. When the official repeated the question about where the district had its greatest reindeer losses, one

herder responded by explaining which predator species caused the greatest losses. This response suggests the herder continued to follow the normative structures, guiding them to dismiss the prescribed agenda of the meeting, which was to reach conclusions about what was causing the reindeer losses by *first* identifying the area of the major losses and *thereafter* exploring their causes.

The tension between the members escalated, and expressions of frustration became more and more tangible as the shared practical understanding, according to which it made sense to avoid making sense of each other's arguments, was maintained, while also concealing these intentions. In a dispute at the third meeting about what to prioritise, one herder exclaimed in an angry but also resigned tone: "It does not feel like one is exactly exhilarated about the 10% target any longer. In fact, one was in the beginning, until one realized that this is yet another protracted process!" In this social practice, guided by normative structures of competition, this expression of affection (teleo-affectivity) was meaningful, as was the reaction of the official, who responded by showing that to maintain these structures, there was no space for the competing members to express empathy for each other: "You are allowed to be as angry as you want, but it will not improve the report".

At the fourth meeting, the herders, without informing the official in advance, had invited reinforcement in the form of additional herders from their district, as well as two experts in Sami matters. The local herders sat quietly, while some of the invited participants questioned the intentions and ability of the official to lead the collaboration. The official responded to the criticism by referring to the mandate and to how the collaborative work was laid out. The meeting's original agenda received little attention. Instead, the meeting was controlled by the new arrivals. The structures of this social practice ceased to guide the members at the fourth meeting, implying that the practice itself also ended.

3. Concluding discussion

We have described and analysed three collaborative processes, all part of the same national programme aimed at reducing the losses of domestic reindeer to predators, while maintaining viable predator populations. By focusing on the unfolding communication and considering the processes as social practices, we identified the implicit meanings the actors involved created about what to achieve, and how and why, in their social practices. We show how these implicit meanings affected the directions and outcomes of the collaborative processes. More common research traditions engaged in understanding collaboration focusing on aspects such as participants' sense of involvement and legitimacy (e.g. Fudge and Leith 2021); personalities of the participants (e.g. Leach *et al.* 2014; van der Wal *et al.* 2014) and/or the competence of the facilitator (e.g. Reed 2008), would probably have searched for other explanations for why the three processes developed differently. We do not deny that any of these reasons may be relevant. Our point is, research that focuses on the implicit aspects of communication is important because it contributes with additional understanding of the challenges involved in collaboration. Below, we discuss what we view as being valuable in our approach in more depth, by comparing the results of our analysis with previous research. In so doing we also highlight the difficulties in collaboration that our analysis revealed.

Even though process A and B started differently, they can both be considered relatively successful with regard to what was explicitly said, and how it was said. According to Ansell and Gash (2008), a history of antagonism among the actors

involved in collaboration may reduce the potential for a successful process. Since our analysis is limited to the occasions when the actors met and interacted, we can only assume, from the way they responded to the CAB official's introduction, that the CAB and herding community B had less pleasant experiences of previous encounters than the CAB and community A. However, after the first meeting, the herders in process B gradually began to express some interest, and the tone of the conversation became more constructive. Analysis focusing on what is said, or how it is said, considers that such positive conversation tone may indicate good conditions for collaboration and learning (e.g. Díez, Etxano, and Garmendia 2015; Stöhr *et al.* 2014), which in turn may change (doubtful) actors' expectations about what they might gain from taking part and thereby increase their motivation (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2011; Jager *et al.* 2020; Thomson and Perry 2006). Other observable activities that participants in both process A and B engaged in were joint fact finding, which is regarded as contributing to trust and legitimacy of the process (Dressel 2020; Giebels van Buuren, and Edelenbos 2015; Pahl-Wostl 2009). In addition, in both processes, the decisions were influenced by the herders and made by consensus (within the explicit mandate given by the programme). Many studies highlight consensus and shared decision-making in communication, as seen during processes A and B, as signs of successful collaboration (Chaffin, Gosnell, and Cosens 2014; Coleman and Stern 2018; Diduck *et al.* 2012; Ernst 2019).

The apperent success of collaborative process A can, however, be questioned if we examine what our analysis reveals. Considered as a social practice, the implicit meaning given by the official about what was to be achieved and in what way, was appropriated by the social practice co-created by its members. As competent co-workers, the reindeer herders "translated" their knowledge into a language and logic that was consistent with the CAB's. Knowledge that did not fit to the norms guiding what to regard as relevant was not included. Hence, there is the risk that important information about the conditions of the herding practice was excluded. When the norms of what to express prevent potentially significant knowledge from being incorporated into the information expected to form the basis of joint decisions, collaboration can hardly be called successful. Our assumption is supported by Sjölander-Lindqvist *et al.* (2020), who found that the entire national programme of which process A (and also B and C) was part, was characterised by a knowledge hierarchy that prioritised scientific rationality, leading to the reindeer herders' perspective being marginalised.

The power relationships seen in process A were reversed in process B, due to the herders' different response to the introduction. In the social practice created, it made sense to regard it normatively "better" to aim for an idea of what to achieve and how, influenced by the perspective of the herders' practice, rather than to adopt the implicit meaning given by the official. In the light of the normative structures that guided the practice, it seemed logical to apply for culling of an unusual large number of predator P1. However, when the arguments brought forward in the culling application were assessed by the legal provisions prevailing outside this social practice, they were judged insufficient. The Swedish wildlife governance system is poorly adapted to embrace agreements made in local collaboration, creating a loyalty problem for the officials involved (Bennett *et al.* 2022).

Research focusing on the explicit aspects of communication during collaboration, could have shown that the participants in process C did not listen to each other and had different expectations, leading to the breakdown of the process. Our analysis

complements these explanations by showing how the normative structures that guided the social practice made it difficult (if not impossible) for the members to unravel their disagreements. The herders resisted the meaning of the process given by the official by putting forward another idea about what the collaboration should focus on in order to fulfill the goal of reducing reindeer predation. The herders' way of resisting, led the official to resist the herders' idea, which meant that the social practice they jointly created was characterized by competition. The members became locked in their positions (situated identities), guided as they were by normative structures according to which it made sense to maintain the disagreement. The herders' decision to end the process by bringing in reinforcements, was made outside this social practice, where they had a different role and perceived a different scope for action. Our analysis shows that the members did not accept each other's arguments, but their locked positions prevented them from jointly and openly investigating this. Previous research has shown that the consensus norm can be so strong in collaborative processes, that disagreements are hidden and thereby become impossible to resolve or even explore (Hallgren, Bergeå, and Westberg 2018). Our analysis of the social practice created in process C shows it was not the norm of maintaining agreement, but the norm of maintaining disagreement that prevented learning and collaboration.

Recognising the implicit aspects of communication provides novel opportunities to learn more about, and develop tools to improve, collaboration. In a similar way to Kanarp and Westberg (2023) in this special issue, we suggest development of methods making the normative guiding structures visible to those who create and maintain them. In contrast to explicit aspects of communication, the creation of these structures cannot be controlled. However, once they are made visible and put into words, they can serve as a basis for reflection. By opening up the black box of communication carried out in collaborative processes in this way, space could also be created for those involved to critically explore the impacts of hierarchical structures, given time frames, legal requirements, given mandates, etc. on the collaborations they are to carry out. Such learning can form an exciting basis for continued research into how communication affects collaboration in NRM.

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Notes

1. Reindeer herding in Sweden is organised into Sámi districts, which are both geographic areas where the reindeer graze and economic associations comprising one or more herding enterprises.
2. The Sámi Parliament is both a publically elected parliament and a Swedish State agency https://www.sametinget.se/om-sametinget.
3. Swedish Sámi Association (Swedish: Svenska Samernas riksförbund, SSR), is an association of Swedish Sámi districts and associations with the aim of promoting the economic, social, legal, administrative and cultural interests of the Swedish Sámi (https://www.sapmi.se/om-ssr/).

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