

Generative Collectives

Wietske van Osch
University of Amsterdam
W.vanOsch@uva.nl

Introduction

Analyzing generative group activities against the backdrop of an increasingly connected world, this *paper* introduces the concept of "generative collectives" as a novel theoretical lens for describing why some internet-based collectives are more generative than others. Generative collectives are groups of people with shared interests or goals who mutually engage in rejuvenating, reconfiguring, reframing and revolutionizing acts. We submit that any type of collective has the capacity to be generative; however, some collectives are more generative than others.

In order to understand why some collectives are more generative than others, we introduce seven dimensions of structure, cognition and technology to describe and explain how varying levels of collective generative capacity come about. Based on these seven dimensions we can analyze generative collectives of all sorts and model their respective levels of collective generative capacity.

First, when studying generative collectives, two structural dimensions of collectives are essential for understanding the relation to collective generative capacity, namely a temporal span and a hierarchical span. A deeper analysis of these two structural dimensions—temporal span and hierarchical span—can help us to understand the diverse dynamics of structure that we witness in generative collectives as well as account for their varying levels of collective generative capacity. We suggest that collectives that are more stable and more hierarchical will display relatively lower collective generative capacity.

Second, three cognitive processes of generative collectives lie at the basis of generative acts, namely reflection, interaction (or dialogue) and representation. Given that cognition in a collective is not an individual process, but rather a process involving the collective as a whole, we draw upon the concept of distributed cognition in order to distinguish three cognitive dimensions in generative collectives. We suggest that collectives with lower abilities for reflection, interaction, and representation will display relatively lower collective generative capacity.

Third, two technical dimension of internet-based collectives are particularly essential for understanding the relation to collective generative capacity, namely level adaptability and level of reconfigurability of a supportive technology. We suggest that collectives with lower levels of adaptability and lower levels of reconfigurability will display relatively lower collective generative capacity.

Jointly, these seven dimensions can be used for analyzing collectives of all sorts in order to model their respective levels of collective generative capacity. Based on these insights, this study provides two important contributions. First, by conceptualizing generative collectives, we provide a more general framework for analyzing, understanding, and modeling internet-based group activities of all sorts occurring in a wide range of collectives. Second, by identifying seven dimensions for juxtaposing generative collectives of all sorts, we provide a framework for predicting their levels of collective generative capacity.

These insights are relevant to those who wish to study internet-based generative collectives of all sorts as well as to those who engage in the design of positive environments and tools that are conducive to collective generative capacity. Given the proliferation of internet-based generative acts, a thorough understanding of generative collectives and collective generative capacity can provide useful insights into many relevant, but as yet unknown, issues of group-based, bottom-up problem solving, innovation and change occurring through internet-based platforms.