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Recognising Ecological Reflexivity: An Alternative Approach to Partnership Capabilities for Collaborative Governance

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Abstract: Ecological reflexivity provides a key lever for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but is underexplored in one prominent context: collaborative governance particularly associated with SDG 17. Using an exploratory study and novel approach to Q methodology, we investigate capabilities needed for advancing collaborative governance and cross-sector partnering through an exploratory study. Rather than treating these capacities as universal standards or aims for collaboration between varied stakeholders, they were offered as options that actors may value and choose to advance (or not). Local sustainability-focused actors in North West England sorted capabilities as statements, which discursively reframe multi-stakeholder partnership (MSP) building blocks. The first analysis reveals three viewpoints that we name: The Convener, The Connector, and The Chair. The themes of communicative coordination, reflexivity, and power emerged in the three viewpoints, expressing distinct discourses. A separate, second analysis explores a viewpoint encompassing capabilities needed for ecological reflexivity. Our findings demonstrate possible barriers to some approaches valued in the MSP literature such as systems thinking. Finally, in our action research setting, it is possible that the methodology itself facilitated ecological reflexivity and offered entry points to enable agency in the context of SDG 17 and collaboration of diverse actors towards SDG implementation.

Keywords: sustainable development goals; multi-stakeholder partnerships; ecological reflexivity; Q methodology; action research; capabilities; collaborative governance



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1. Introduction

In implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs), specifically, and collaborative governance, broadly, are regarded as important levers to improve inclusive wellbeing across scales, sectors, and generations [1–3]. They are envisioned as tools to challenge and reshape power in transitions from incumbent structures to transformations needed for more sustainable futures [4,5]. MSPs emerged as a way to draw attention to the urgency and complexity of sustainable development by offering collective responses to the perceived failure of international and regional policy processes and traditional multilateral agreements, and by developing alternative collaborative governance arrangements [2,6].

These challenges highlight the heterogeneous and complex context for MSPs and the need for reflexivity at the individual, group, and organisational levels. Reflexive governance describes the processes that an institution, hybrid organisation, or partnership pursue to consider diverse worldviews and parlay that participation to shape the structure of the formalised entity [7,8]. In particular, Anthropocene geologic conditions demonstrate the embeddedness of human activity in Earth System processes, which are now unstable and unpredictable, and thus require rethinking everything, even core ideas such as democracy

and sustainability. Dryzek and Pickering [9] capture this idea as ecological reflexivity: “the capacity of structures, systems, and sets of ideas to question their own core commitments, and if necessary, change themselves, while listening and responding effectively to signals from the Earth System” (p. 17). In a seminal review of sustainability science, Clark and Harley [10] claim that in the face of uncertainty, this rethinking is the “ultimate requirement” (p. 368). Stanberry and Balda [1] develop a conceptual review of SDG 17, and find that “ecological reflexivity, as developed and advanced by deliberative democracy and the Earth System Governance Project, belongs at the apex of those capacities needed for implementing the 2030 Agenda” (p. 1). It is a navigational compass for heterogeneous collaborations to navigate tensions between what to retain (or make resilient) and what to transform.

However, the application of ecological reflexivity to the context of MSPs exists as a critical gap in the scholarly literature and in the professionalisation of coordinating MSPs in practice. Given its importance, scholars, practitioners, and policy makers need a clearer idea of how inner, group-level, and governance processes contribute to or impair understanding of the Earth System and responses to its most urgent changes and system tipping points. Designing a research roadmap is not as simple as redefining terms from the environmental governance, political theory, and sustainability science literatures across to management and organisation studies where much of the MSP literature sits. Ecological reflexivity centres are ecological knowledge systems, and the ways in which path dependencies in complex socio-ecological systems perpetuate unsustainable trajectories therefore determine how incumbent structures must be disrupted. In the context of SDG 17, this thus raises issues of politics (and power), especially through resources represented by MSP actors, locating the needs of vulnerable people and places in processes and interventions, as well as the ways in which results in MSPs are understood and measured [1]. Within these dimensions, such a roadmap should give a narrative account of the tensions between the underlying (substantive) values and the actual reflexive procedures themselves, a constructive tension “in that it opens up space for contestation and rethinking within broad ecological parameters” p. 57 [9].

This study raises two key challenges constituted by this broad agenda, especially in the work of relating these ideas across disciplines and supporting frameworks for practitioners. First, the capabilities needed for ecological reflexivity—a “new hybrid concept” according to Pickering p. 1149 [11]—are not simply about applying reflexivity to environmental contexts, or in our sub-context, to collaborations for SDG implementation. Rather, ecological reflexivity is about “listening more effectively to an active Earth system, capacity to reconsider core values such as justice in this light, and ability to seek, receive and respond to early warnings about potential ecological state shifts” [12]. Second, while the origins of ecological reflexivity interweave intrinsic, critical and epistemic concerns dating back to Dryzek’s [13] development of ‘rational ecology’, there is a normative undertone in its current application [14], with Dryzek and Pickering allowing that “an ecologically reflexive kind of formative agency is necessary to overcome the pathological path dependencies of Holocene institutions” p. 136 [14]. These normative aspects of ecological reflexivity hold various loyalties to critical and emancipatory epistemologies and therefore suggest particular ways or processes for developing these capacities, ones that enhance human agency in democratic contexts. Thus, from the first challenge, our inquiry begins with capabilities (and their more visible and ‘measurable’ counterpart: competencies) to explore how local MSP actors valued them. Taking account of the second challenge of the substantive procedural tension in ecological reflexivity, we were also interested in capturing this aspect in the capabilities that we studied, as well as similarly supporting our research context with these normative aims, which are also embedded in SDG implementation [1].

As an exploratory entry point, we seek to contribute to recognising—that is, establishing the validity of—ecological reflexivity for MSPs, by also developing and giving greater colour to the concept. We provide a Q methodological study conducted in a participatory action research setting that explores the intersection of ecological reflexivity and capabilities broadly towards collaborative governance applications, both theoretically and

practically. We will briefly describe how the process of Q methodology itself supports ecological reflexivity through the reframing of capabilities, thus enhancing human agency and social learning. This study underscores the application of the SDGs in place-based contexts as a key consideration for their implementation. Our two data analyses locate three viewpoints that we name The Convener, The Connector, and The Chair, and also explore the capabilities needed for ecological reflexivity to locate two distinct perspectives, the Reflexive Viewpoint and the Responsive Viewpoint.

2. Literature Review

2.1. MSPs as Sites for Process-Based Governance

Many attempts have been made to describe reforms to global governance that could respond to state shifts in the Earth System and include advocates of strengthened multi-lateralism [15] as well as polycentric [16], and pluralistic or experimental governance [17]. It is clear that dominant institutions have failed to agree on solutions in the highly contested spaces for changing wicked problems such as biodiversity loss [18]. Consensus from polycentric and experimental governance demonstrate how processes, not governance models, are modes for locating reflexivity, also demonstrating that it is simpler to begin with “governance initiatives at some distance from these established centres of power (and their associated pathological path dependencies)” p. 53 [9]. MSPs represent both governance models, as well as sites for deliberative and reflexive processes.

With the growing attention paid to the SDGs in both the public and private sectors, partnerships across sectors have become a common mechanism for attaining them [19], and participation by non-governmental organisations and business actors has become stronger [20]. However, the state level move to voluntary governance through goal setting, as exemplified through the SDGs, has presented unique challenges [21]. Simultaneously, agreement on SDG implementation proceeded with a focus on collaboration among business, civil society, and inter-sector state actors towards galvanising resources such as technology, knowledge sharing, and funding as ‘Partnerships for the Goals’ (SDG 17). However, addressing the type of grand challenges presented by the SDGs requires the same level of commitment from the private sector to the public interest, as is manifested by state actors. To achieve this engagement, therefore, requires “a recalibration and a new understanding of what roles public and private actors play in their collaboration, and specifically how actors from each sector organise to deliver outcomes” p. 11 [22].

Since SDG enactment, the resulting challenge of contextualising the Global Goals for local implementation faces structural, institutional, as well as social learning roadblocks on the journey to becoming “fit for purpose” p. 169 [23]. Social learning refers to “a change in understanding that goes beyond the individual to become situated within wider social units or communities of practice through social interactions between actors within social networks” p. 6 [24]. It is not necessarily positive—“just as people can learn to consume less, they can also learn to consume more” p. 1158 [11]—and does not always bring with it the capacity to respond in the same way reflexivity does.

Processes of contextualising the Goals locally also requires orchestrated deliberation and action on multilevel processes, within overlapping spheres of authority, and with a plurality of actors [25]. Within this context, the types of coordinated activity required from MSPs varies widely. For example, to more quickly scale transformative change, it may be that local partnerships pilot social, technological, and policy innovations under a variety of conditions, while global actors focus on regime change and the implementation of proven solutions, altering public opinion and shifting large-scale governance [26]. From the perspective of civil society, often seen as the key actor for disruption and advocate for ecological systems, it may be that particular groups or organisations participate in “radical critique of existing institutions while others engage in partnerships with those institutions” p. 5 [27].

In any case there is a need for “flexible approaches that encourage the crafting of local solutions to local problems” p. 127 [28]. In this context, collaborative governance encom-

passes “processes that seek to share power in decision making with stakeholders in order to develop shared recommendations for effective, lasting solutions to public problems” p. 409 [29]. Examples could include dispute resolution processes, community conversations, advisory councils, citizens juries, and deliberative democratic forums, such as those which have supported the post-2015 development agenda—encompassing the 17 SDGs [29–31]. While some differences will be indicated between formalised and resourced MSPs and collaborative governance more broadly, here we use the terms interchangeably to capture the ways that formal and informal interactions contain embedded potential for ecological reflexivity.

Some criticisms of MSPs include their low level of success [32], that they continue to exclude marginalised actors [19,33], and the prevalence of significant power imbalances [19,34]. Critics also point out that, as extensions of neoliberalism with multinational corporations and other non-state actors reconfiguring governance alongside state actors, partnership formation and funding is often skewed toward the Global North [23]. In the process-based view of MSPs, it becomes clear that scripted roles or homogenous approaches for various individual actors, whether organisations, groups, or sectors, should come under greater scrutiny to locate reflexive possibilities.

2.2. Competencies and Capabilities in MSPs

Actors, or alternatively, agents, represent both individuals and constellations of individuals at the group, organisational, and institutional level. Contextualised ability as capabilities, and their measurement through competencies, is similarly viewed at the level of actors (our use of capabilities is not to be confused with the capabilities approach to development ethics advanced by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum). An agent could even be an “organisational tendency”, and a competence is an agent’s ability to generate results around a specific task or problem in context p. 256 [35]. In these circumstances, reflexivity is a capability that emphasises the deliberative function of individuals and institutions as self-critical agents of change in social–ecological systems with the ability to listen to and interpret indicators occurring in the non-human world [7]. As instruments for governance towards the SDGs, MSPs operate as a collective space encompassing norms, rules, institutions, and practices [36].

The development of capabilities, competencies, and skills is seen as a key pathway for effective collaboration and governance in MSPs and is widely explored in both the academic and practitioner literature. The academic research on MSP capabilities covers a broad spectrum of responses to, inter alia, critical competency gaps [37], governance failure [38], stakeholder engagement opportunities [39,40], environmental capability development [41], partnership implementation challenges [32,42], and other organisational development dynamics [43]. In contrast, the practitioner literature places greater emphasis on the skills and competencies needed to strengthen both interpersonal and institutional relationships in MSPs, including the pivotal roles of partnership brokers and process facilitators [44–47].

The conditions for MSP success encompass the development of both organisational capacity and individual competence [32]. While formal arrangements for strategic partnering and related collaborative governance are important, MSPs create their own “organisation” and as such have designs even when no designer explicitly formulates and implements them p. 22 [22]. A study by Gazley [48] highlights the significance of informal and interpersonal factors such as the discovery of shared interests and trust built on prior experience. This research suggests that the intensity of mutuality between partners and the level of investment in the partnership have the strongest association with real performance improvement.

Working effectively in MSPs also requires a specific practitioner skill set, which Tenenyon [47] describes as “the art and craft of partnering” (p. 36). As well as solid technical and project management skills, the importance of a range of soft skills such as interpersonal communication and relationship building have increasingly been highlighted in the academic literature as being crucial for working in partnership arrangements [49–52].

Communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution are also key, alongside qualities such as empathy, patience, and pragmatism [53]. Navigating the tensions of inclusivity, sharing of resources, and co-determining results benefits from a “relational lens” framing [51]. Academics and practitioners alike recognise that strengthening both the organisational and interpersonal dimensions of MSPs is needed for them to respond to societal grand challenges [54] and realise meaningful change.

2.3. Formative Agency and MSP ‘Leadership’ Competencies

MSPs are a collective space that is inhabited by change agents and the “networks of agents” in them represent new systemic change models [55] that challenge dominant paradigms; for example, by connecting traditional and local sources of knowledge to governance as well as to action [56,57]. Dryzek and Pickering develop formative agency as an analytical category that can be deployed for sustainable or destructive ends [13]. Pointing away from powerful actors such as national governments and markets, Dryzek and Pickering [9] highlight formative agents and discourse entrepreneurs (which can include social movements). They employ reason, rhetoric, and deliberation through protests, leading by example, and even sometimes violence.

Governance processes in MSPs addressing global problems have been conceptualised as dynamic capabilities including deliberation, decision making, and enforcement, and each creates particular challenges for a partnership [58]. Each of the three processes requires specific approaches in response, and both the different governance processes and the harnessing of wicked problems in MSP governance are inherently iterative [58]. Even where formalised arrangements are established, there will be power plays and dominance of a partner or coalition that frustrates the process, or negotiation and bargaining will occur outside the boundaries through informal practices and continue over rights and responsibilities. In this context, deliberative democracy [59] is seen as a way to neutralise power imbalances.

At the social scale, it is becoming recognised in management studies that MSPs themselves act as agents or “entities that interact with the social and/or environmental facets of SGCs” (Societal Grand Challenges such as the SDGs) [54]. Governance, trust, conflicts, and leadership all emerge as pivot points where MSPs are pointed as levers for societal change towards sustainability. There is rising interest in leadership in MSPs, which is often construed as leader-centric, instead of creating the conditions for leadership to emerge (as a more collective or distributed phenomenon). Various leadership styles are needed depending on the life cycle of partnerships and act as catalysts for inertia, but what creates effective leadership or how to develop it remains unclear [32]. This convening role works to facilitate the contestation necessary for ecological reflexivity. Mainstream approaches to leadership in MSPs echo conventional approaches to leadership more broadly; for example, putting forth competency models that could apply in any collaborative setting, and that are unmindful of Earth system dynamics [43].

Critical leadership approaches embrace widespread scepticism of competency models as helpful frameworks for more responsible leadership [35,60,61]. Critical leadership scholars focused on the SDGs critique competency models for their exceptionalist and managerialist orientations [62], and they endeavour to retell hero-centric narratives [1], offering generative frameworks for SDG implementation that shift “powerful narratives of ‘ships’ such as partnership and leadership”, p. 13 [1]. Five criticisms of competency approaches include the ways they can (1) fragment and reduce the role; (2) universalise practice with common lists regardless of role; (3) buttress hegemonic and unsustainable practices; (4) favour measurable over more subtle qualities; and (5) mechanise developmental spaces [63].

The approach provided here with regard to competencies provides a substantive alternative, as it is sourced from the bottom-up and is offered to our participants to value or not as indicated in our discussion below.

2.4. Methodology as an Enabler of Reflexivity

Q methodology is a mixed method for studying subjective viewpoints pioneered by the psychologist William Stephenson in the 1930s [64–66]. It is “a set of procedures, theory, and philosophy supporting the study of the same kind of subjectivity that is the focal point of much qualitative research” p. 96 [67]. Sneegas et al. [68] suggest that Q is relatively well-known in socio-environmental research and has been used for many decades to understand environmental discourses [69]. The Q researcher locates statements representative of the ways in which participants may respond to the subjective question at hand, termed the ‘conditions of instruction’. The participant(s) rank, or sort, the statements into a forced grid and responses are factor-analysed to develop viewpoints that are archetypal expressions of distinct perspectives which can reflect shared worldviews and attitudes.

The emancipatory potential for Q methodology as a critical theory approach was first identified by [70], who piloted its uses in understanding stakeholder perspectives about natural resource governance [68,71]. Dryzek [70] employs it as a tool that can bring to light alternatives to a problematic status quo [72]. Our approach also aligns with calls for qualitative and participatory methodologies [73,74], for advances in using software in research and for rigour in MSP methodological approaches [75], as well as for discourse analysis of sensemaking that takes into account power and tensions in micro and macro scales [76]. Hardy et al. [77] call for “alternative constructions and styles of talk...developing a wider array of methods that can highlight primary patterns of interaction without submerging less dominant threads” (p. 73).

Exploration of ecological reflexivity requires what Amartya Sen calls “informed agitation”, meaning agitation which seeks to upset powerful entrenched interests: informed, so that the best science can help point scarce resources towards results with a positive impact p. 334 [77]. Sen argues that processes must increasingly treat people not as patients or consumers who have interventions “done to them,” but “as agents of change who can—given the opportunity—think, assess, evaluate, resolve, inspire, agitate, and, through these means, reshape the world”, p. 7 [78]. Q methodology and participatory action research approaches are mutually reinforcing if applied appropriately, likewise supporting the agentic process described by Sen [79,80].

The motive force for change should be found, for example, in localised sites such as cities and sub-national governments [9]. This includes open-ended, bottom-up mobilising (as in our research context), which accounts for more vibrant provocations; as [81] explains:

Like other great progressive struggles of history, radical shifts in grassroots culture and anarchically-choreographed flocking behaviours in nature, the most effective modes for radical change often lie in spontaneous collective bottom-up ‘culturings’ of knowing and doing. (p. iii)

Stirling finds the basis for hope of radically progressive social transformation in “emancipating ‘transformation’ itself” p. iii [81]. We explore perspectives on partnering as ‘culturings’ of knowing and doing as relational processes [51] in unbounded systems [82]. In this context, our approach through capabilities is understood as MSP ‘building blocks’ which are also discourses to be understood in context [40,83]. The Partnering Initiative, the convener of the United Nations 2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator [84], groups capabilities into four such building blocks, (1) fundamentals; (2) partnering relationship; (3) structuring and set-up; and (4) management and leadership [84].

By using Q methodology to disassemble these building blocks, we were able to offer them to participants to reconstruct as discourses with distinctive meaning. We wanted to explore the ways in which reconstituting them through action research enabled critique of the competencies. By looking at these perspectives, we sought to better understand where capabilities for ecological reflexivity might be located.

3. Research Context

This study emerged from a localised and broad multi-year research agenda of policy support and knowledge exchange projects around contextualising the SDGs, and in

particular, SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals, in North West England, UK. As a rural and urban-periphery area facing multiple overlapping crises including acute poverty and high income inequality, across the region post-deindustrialisation gaps in productivity are exacerbated by poor connectivity between small cities, towns and villages [85]. The Lancaster District, a microcosm of these issues, is working through a vibrant collection of voluntary community, faith, and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector groups and organisations in ad hoc ways along with businesses, local National Health Service (NHS) trusts, and local authorities and universities towards joined-up approaches [86]. Despite a UK trend of SDG implementation marked by “devolution of responsibility without resource” p. 12 [87] and calls for top-down policy coherence [88], various local organisations are pursuing collaborative approaches in the face of complex human–environment problems.

With funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the first of these projects began in late 2020, when an original team of researchers led by the University of Cumbria explored three place-based examples of multi-stakeholder collaboration. We noticed several diverse actors across sectors and scales, representing local, regional, national, and international organisations, and how they were collaborating on various projects and within formal and informal partnerships to advance shared goals relating to the SDGs.

In 2022, a follow-up project (the focus of this paper), was developed for research and knowledge exchange activities to encompass public events, localised online content (SDGActionCumbria.com), a web directory of local organisations mapped to the SDGs, and a partnering skills course. Our Q methodological study for this paper explored local actor perspectives on partnering, encompassing the public, private, and voluntary sectors and connections to key initiatives of the Lancaster City Council Plan 2030.

Participants in our study came from local government, health professionals, micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), business networks, voluntary organisations, and informal community groups working across a range of place-based organisational, professional, and community contexts. Those attending the Continuing and Professional Development (CPD) short course on partnerships and collaboration were also invited to participate. This approach was aligned with our inclusive transdisciplinary collaborative research design [89]. We used the seven action research choice points suggested for researchers by Bradbury et al. [90] towards Action Research for Transformations (ART) as a lens for our study, and here explicitly engage in three that are important to our research, using the SDGs as guardrails for our study to: (1) point at collective thriving, (2) make our findings actionable and focused on practitioner communities, and (3) build and maintain links through our ongoing research so that the findings do not end with the project. Our ongoing research and knowledge exchange work builds on this 2022 study.

Critical approaches to Q methodology highlight the importance of researcher positionality [91]. It is meaningful then to note that a key study participant and colleague who inspired this research was the late Michael Hallam, founder of the Lancaster Ethical Small Traders Association (ESTA). Several participants were ESTA members who lead micro and small enterprises pointed at social good. Though largely unknown, Hallam was the central figure in the Transition Towns movement, highlighted by Dryzek and Pickering [9] as an important example of reflexive and critical networks (p. 54) that lead by example (p. 114).

Our research generates novel methodological approaches to discover and enable ecological reflexivity at the individual and group level, which are necessary precursors to institutional analysis. Given that ecological reflexivity is difficult to apply in a collaborative governance context, Pickering [11] questions, “how can the scope and normative content of the concept be clarified to render it more applicable for political analysis?” (p. 1146). We seek to extend this analysis to organisational and intra-actor contexts. Towards this aim, we employed a Q methodological study [64,65] to understand how local actors who are participating in sustainability efforts value the skills and abilities (‘capabilities’) identified as necessary for collaboration. By providing our research participants with statements that express MSP capabilities, referred to by Stibbe and Prescott as “Building Blocks” p. 6 [45], we offered them an opportunity to describe their viewpoint about working with

others to help the community. We then analyzed and interpreted the viewpoints both qualitatively and quantitatively to understand (1) how local actors approached partnering, and (2) where there might be openings for the capabilities constituting ecological reflexivity and (3) exploring possibilities for ecological reflexivity to create space for confrontive potential in MSPs. We located three distinct viewpoints, which we name: *The Convener*, *The Connector*, and *The Chair*. Our thematic analysis suggests that interweaving capabilities with themes of communicative coordination, reflexivity, and power could assist practitioners and academics to co-create novel collaborative approaches.

Previous studies on implementing the SDGs in the UK so that they are translatable and adaptable in practice concluded that they must be made real, relevant, relatable, and relational [87]. However, without a statutory framework for localising the SDGs, no clear responsibilities or resources devolved to local authorities, making multi-level governance opaque and stalling SDG implementation [88]. Though some see solutions in top-down approaches, our research reveals linkages among actors at all levels, networks of relationships locally and beyond, and collective action, all of which are often obscured.

Global sustainability governance is also highly disjointed, with a fragmented system of distinct clusters of international organisations and interested states. Contrary to what many would expect, network fragmentation and silos around the 17 SDGs as well as around the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development actually increased after the SDGs came into effect [92]. Our study supports the efforts of context-based approaches that see individual, organisational, and institutional actors as agents with diverse values and aspirations fundamental for collective action [93].

4. Methods

4.1. Q Methodological Study

We followed the ‘best practice’ steps of doing a Q method study [68,94] which included (1) assembling a diversity of relevant ideas (concourse) and winnowing this to roughly 35–60 statements representative of the range of viewpoints present (Q-sample or Q-population); (2) guiding participant selection such that the theoretical questions in the study are approached by a variety of sorters (N is described as the P-set = 20/40 is a common range, though Q studies can be conducted suitably with less) [95]; (3) providing a condition of instruction, which is a key question to sharpen the participants thinking towards sorting the statements into a predefined grid; (4) following up with a survey and/or interview to locate any missing sample statements, clarifies the perspective of the participant so that self-reference is preserved, and to test theoretical assumptions [65]; and finally, (5) instead of factor analysing the data by person (R statistical methods), the research uses exploratory factor analysis to examine the complete sorts of each participant (by-person factor analysis) to understand the relationships between statements (Q statistical method). The researcher then interprets the Q-factors, which often includes a process of graphical hand rotation, also called theoretical rotation, that uses qualitative abductive reasoning [94]. The resulting Q-factors are groupings of similar Q-sorts seeking theoretical significance; each grouping represents a unique viewpoint.

For the purposes of our Q method study, we were interested in offering a novel approach to reimagining multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs). Typical interventions to understand and develop capacity in MSPs (and within organisations) include the application of conceptual typologies and the design of developmental initiatives based on capabilities, for example as “must-have partnership competencies”, p. 66 [45]. Our application of competencies as MSP building blocks allowed participants to engage with capabilities as an expression of their viewpoint. Our study sought to understand how local actors valued the capabilities needed for partnerships in contexts such as SDG implementation. After the initial analysis to understand those viewpoints, we also wanted to see whether our data set could be approached a second time, to locate whether a viewpoint representing the capabilities for ecological reflexivity might be accounted for as a factor. These were gathered from the reviews that Clark and Harley [10] highlight as most needed

for ecologically reflexive governance (Table A1 in the Appendix A; which statements were associated with which theoretical construct).

The statements in the concourse were drawn from a wide range of sources relevant to how people think about and describe the skills and abilities needed to work with others more collaboratively for sustainability. Although explaining the breadth of sources drawn on for the Q-sample is not typical in reporting a study, it nonetheless is helpful to note how we identified the partnership competencies to develop the statements. The following resources are a representative sample: academic literature on MSPs and collaborative governance [3,51,96,97], a practitioner handbook for SDG partnering [45]; *Business Schools for Climate Leadership Toolkit* [98]; *Handbook of Sustainability Science and Research* [99], sustainable business [100], sustainability education [101]; and public policy and civic engagement [31,102–104]. Several other practitioner-oriented spaces were also explored, including webinars on YouTube, Twitter searches, and the authors' own experiences of working in and researching MSPs.

The conditions of instruction and grid shape used in the study are pictured in Figure 1, and were written as:

*When collaborating with others to help your community,
What capabilities do you think are most important?*

Consider all statements to begin with the phrase: *The ability to ...*

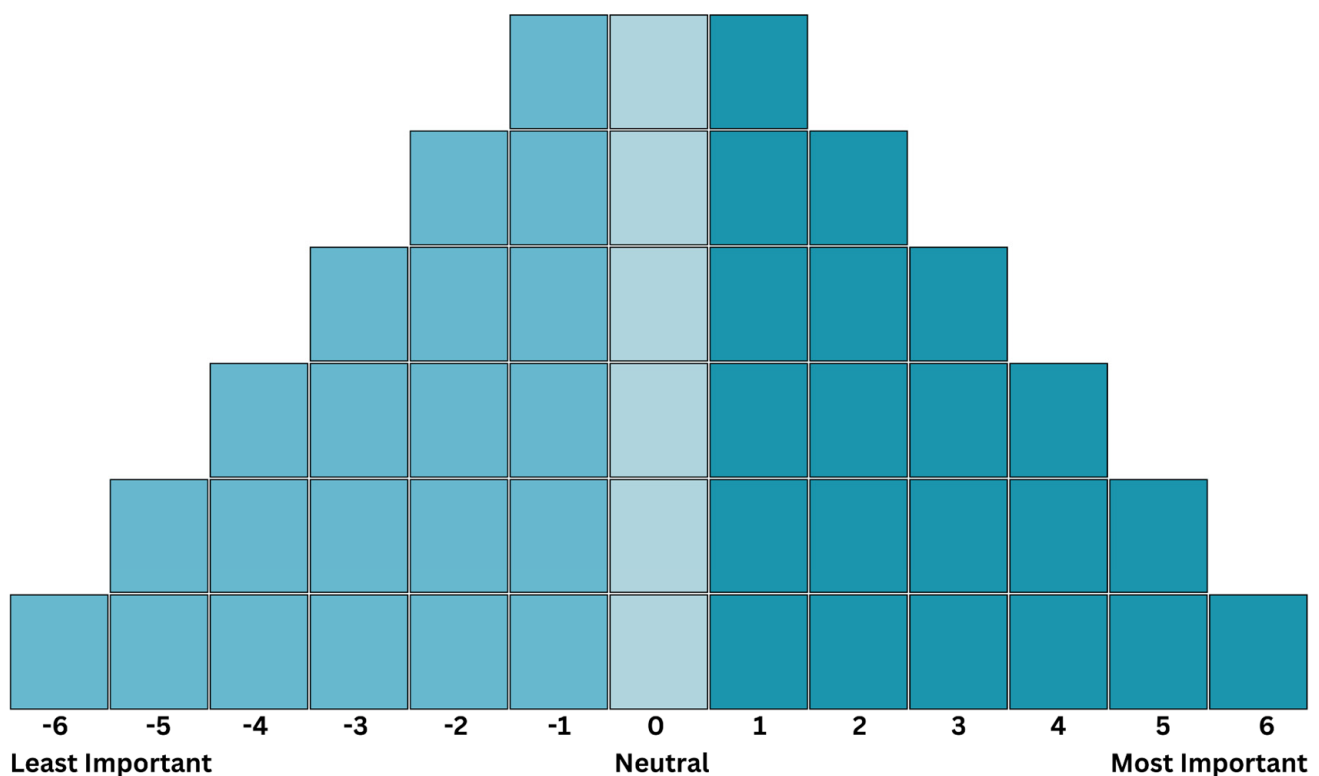


Figure 1. This figure shows the grid shape that participants were given to sort statements within.

To develop the Q-sample, the language of the statements was reworked to remove the term leadership in recognition of the ways in which it can become an empty signifier [103] and to allow perspectives to include notions of leadership as and if participants wished to bring it into their view. Participants offered these ideas in the survey portion of the study. Brown [68] describes how the statements should flow in a natural language that the sorter can easily parse: “ideally, we would prefer to affect our subject as little as a thermometer affects a hot day” (p. 190). For example, concepts connected with systems thinking were included in statements (Appendix A, Table A1), though the term was not

explicitly mentioned. This approach allowed non-experts to find familiarity with a wide range of collaboration-related capabilities.

The first Q-sample included 85 statements covering a broad array of concepts and themes that made sense as a response to the conditions of instruction. Several colleagues made edits and suggestions, and the remaining 48 statements were sorted in a $-6/+6$ approximate normal distribution [71]. The study was designed and delivered using Q Method Software (<https://qmethodsoftware.com>) [105]. Five individuals from different fields tested the online user experience and suggested adjustments. In addition to the statement sorting process, as noted above the study included a survey with questions which were also addressed in follow-up interviews with selected participants who were most representative of the viewpoints.

Our primary theoretical saturation in structuring the P-set was twofold: (1) to have a mix of all three organisational sectors, and (2) to include people with a range of sustainable development experience and understanding, including those broadly interested in improving community wellbeing. As previously mentioned, the participants were all engaged in various kinds of cross-sector collaborations locally and were identified via project partners and wider networks. From May to August 2022, 38 participants completed the study. Participants were invited via direct emails and through snowball sampling, which allowed for anonymous sorters through the online portal. Thirteen participants were named in the survey feedback and the remaining 25 were anonymous, though they offered details about their professional roles and knowledge of their awareness of the SDGs through their survey responses. Feedback from our research partners suggested that this would increase response rates and enabled us to assess that a majority of sorters were engaged in local multi-stakeholder initiatives. As an interpretative method, our aim is to generate emerging theory, not to establish verifications with the facts [106].

4.2. Data Analysis

The data analysis process included two procedures. One located general viewpoints or discourses (Tables 1–6). It used centroid factor analysis and varimax rotation to retain and extract three factors for interpretation. A second analysis involved creating a new sort that represented the capabilities needed for ecological reflexivity (Table 7). In Q methodology, analysis includes a factor matrix where participants are flagged when connected with a specific factor. The combined data set was factor analysed to see if other sorts by participants would load with it to create a two-factor solution. Loading on a factor denotes a statistically reliable correlation for those sorts; for this study, autoflagging was set to $p < 0.05$ and a majority of common variance was required. Three extracted factors through Varimax allowed the most number of viewpoints to load significantly on a factor. Highly reliable factor scores usually require the presence of at least five sorts [68], which was met.

Table 1. The Convener: Factor 1’s Most-Like Statements.

Number	Statement	Status
45 +6	Identify and engage external stakeholders.	+6
44	Demonstrate the value of shared decision making.	+5
40	Identify roles and expectations for those with specialist knowledge.	+5
41	Negotiate agreement about the allocation and distribution of shared financial resources.	+4
42	Respond effectively to questions from partners, public, and media.	+4
18	Communicate effectively so that others understand.	+4

Table 2. The Convener: Factor 1’s Most-Unlike Statements.

Number	Statement	Status
9	Recognise the interrelationship between the issue being addressed and wider concerns.	−6
10	Respond to relevant problems that are beyond the immediate context.	−5
13	Understand and convey how one’s work or sector relates to others.	−5
12	Acknowledge the legal or regulatory requirements facing other sectors.	−4
11	Appreciate the capacity limitations of other organisations.	−4
14	Connect people with related interests.	−4

Table 3. The Connector: Factor 2’s Most-Like Statements.

Number	Statement	Status
1	Engage with others.	+6
18	Communicate effectively so that others understand.	+5
17	Build trust by being open and relatable.	+5
4	Work for the collective good before responding to individual interests.	+4
8	Identify and value the capabilities of others.	+4
35	Support the development of a shared vision.	+4

Table 4. The Connector: Factor 2’s Most-Unlike Statements.

Number	Statement	Status
48	Commit to a bigger project despite personal misgivings.	−6
12	Acknowledge the legal or regulatory requirements facing other sectors.	−5
10	Respond to relevant problems that are beyond the immediate context.	−5
6	Understand the drivers within other fields or sectors.	−4
32	Use social media and public relations to effectively share insights about the collaboration.	−4
13	Understand and convey how one’s work or sector relates to others.	−4

Table 5. The Chair: Factor 3’s Most-Like Statements.

Number	Statement	Status
35	Support the development of a shared vision.	+6
46	Coordinate multiple participants to organise meetings.	+5
18	Communicate effectively so that others understand.	+5
47	Act as chair to facilitate participation and inclusion in meetings.	+4
16	Demonstrate enthusiasm for new ideas.	+4
3	Demonstrate innovative thinking and creative problem solving.	+4

Table 6. The Chair: Factor 3’s Most-Unlike Statements.

Number	Statement	Status
34	Bring together apparently mutually distrustful groups to align their efforts.	−6
19	Respectively question knowledge claims.	−5
20	Identify and include viewpoints not represented in the collaboration.	−5
39	Illustrate what you are not willing to sacrifice to achieve the desired goal.	−4
43	Navigate power differences within the group.	−4
21	Analyse and explain power dynamics.	−4

Table 7. Responsive Viewpoint, Reflexive Viewpoint, and Ecological Reflexivity Sort Compared. *Italicised statements were more strongly favoured by the Ecological Reflexivity Viewpoint. Bold statements were more strongly favoured by the Responsive Viewpoint.* This table reports the Q-statements included in the study. It also describes the findings of the second data analysis. In Column E, the Ecological Reflexivity Sort created by the research team demonstrates how we constructed the MSP capabilities needed for ecological reflexivity. We then factor analysed the new sort in the original data set to see if that sort would generate a factor. The results are shown in Column B, C, and D. Column B shows the composite sort for the factor that the Ecological Reflexivity Sort landed on, named the ‘Reflexive Viewpoint’. Column C shows the composite sort for the ‘Responsive Viewpoint’ with those sorts that load on a second factor. Column D ranks the statements by those with the greatest difference between the Reflexive Viewpoint and the Responsive Viewpoint.

	Column A	Column B	Column C	Column D	Column E
	Statement	Reflexive Viewpoint Values	Responsive Viewpoint Values	Difference	Ecological Reflexivity Sort Rankings
9	<i>Recognise the interrelationship between the issue being addressed and wider concerns.</i>	6	−4	10	4
44	Demonstrate the value of shared decision-making.	−5	4	9	0
42	Respond effectively to questions from partners, public, and media.	−6	3	9	−5
12	<i>Acknowledge the legal or regulatory requirements facing other sectors.</i>	3	−6	9	−2
21	<i>Analyse and explain power dynamics.</i>	4	−4	8	1
45	Identify and engage external stakeholders.	−2	5	7	5
41	Negotiate agreement about the allocation and distribution of shared financial resources.	−4	3	7	−1
35	Support the development of a shared vision.	−3	4	7	−2
46	Coordinate multiple participants to organise meetings.	−5	1	6	−3
18	Communicate effectively so that others understand.	0	6	6	−1
10	<i>Respond to relevant problems that are beyond the immediate context.</i>	1	−5	6	5
40	Identify roles and expectations for those with specialist knowledge.	−1	4	5	4
36	<i>Facilitate an experimental collaborative approach.</i>	3	−2	5	6

Table 7. Cont.

Column A		Column B	Column C	Column D	Column E
Statement		Reflexive Viewpoint Values	Responsive Viewpoint Values	Difference	Ecological Reflexivity Sort Rankings
17	Build trust by being open and relatable.	0	5	5	−1
11	<i>Appreciate the capacity limitations of other organisations.</i>	2	−3	5	−2
31	Manage conflicts of interest.	−2	2	4	1
4	<i>Work for the collective good before responding to individual interests.</i>	5	1	4	2
3	<i>Demonstrate innovative thinking and creative problem-solving.</i>	4	0	4	3
37	Attract funding for community-wide sustainability initiatives from others.	−2	1	3	−4
34	Bring together apparently mutually-distrustful groups to align their efforts.	2	−1	3	0
26	Assess when to partner and when not to partner.	−3	0	3	−1
25	Propose and agree on ground rules for group/community meetings.	−1	2	3	0
19	Respectively question knowledge claims.	1	−2	3	3
15	Approach and engage potential partners.	2	−1	3	−1
2	Recognize and take considered risks.	0	−3	3	1
39	Illustrate what you are not willing to sacrifice to achieve the desired goal.	1	−1	2	−3
38	Create space for conflicting opinions to be expressed.	0	2	2	4
32	Use social media and public relations to effectively share insights about the collaboration.	−4	−2	2	−4
24	Provide opportunities for others to participate in local decision-making.	4	2	2	2
20	Identify and include viewpoints not represented in the collaboration.	2	0	2	2
14	Connect people with related interests.	0	−2	2	−4
13	Understand and convey how one's work or sector relates to others.	−3	−5	2	−2
6	Understand the drivers within other fields or sectors.	1	−3	2	−3
1	Engage with others.	5	3	2	−1
48	Commit to a bigger project despite personal misgivings.	−3	−4	1	0
47	Act as chair to facilitate participation and inclusion in meetings.	−2	−1	1	−6
43	Navigate power differences within the group.	2	1	1	2
33	Appreciate that there may be trade-offs to be negotiated when addressing social or environmental problems.	1	0	1	3
28	Review partnerships and evaluate their effectiveness.	0	1	1	1

Table 7. Cont.

	Column A	Column B	Column C	Column D	Column E
	Statement	Reflexive Viewpoint Values	Responsive Viewpoint Values	Difference	Ecological Reflexivity Sort Rankings
27	Negotiate the development of partnership agreements.	−2	−1	1	−2
23	Initiate difficult conversations internally with colleagues & externally with partners and other stakeholders.	−1	0	1	2
22	Remain committed to solving problems even when certain approaches don't work.	−1	0	1	1
16	Demonstrate enthusiasm for new ideas.	−1	−2	1	1
7	Be aware of the various resources of others (financial, information, physical, etc.).	−4	−3	1	−3
5	Be sensitive to cultural differences.	3	2	1	0
30	Learn from reflections about collaborative processes and activities.	1	1	0	3
29	Develop a plan for ending formal partnership arrangements (exit strategy).	−1	−1	0	−5
8	Identify and value the capabilities of others.	3	3	0	0

Factor 1: *The Convener* loaded with 16 participants, Factor 2: *The Connector* with 15, and Factor 3: *The Chair* with 5. Two sorts did not flag at the $p < 0.05$ threshold. Their sorts were not included; however, based on their factor loadings and qualitative responses, they informed the qualitative viewpoint interpretation: one on Factor 2 and one on Factor 3. A majority of participants agreed that the Q-set could adequately describe their view. The survey invited them to provide and rank statements not included in the Q-set and these were incorporated into the factor interpretation.

The second data analysis added a new sort to the data set that represented capabilities needed for ecological reflexivity and were chosen based on their connection to the theoretical concepts discussed in the literature. These were gathered from the reviews that Clark and Harley [10] highlight as most needed for reflexive governance (Table A1 in the Appendix A, addressing which statements were associated with which theoretical construct). These included systems thinking, reflexivity, deliberative democracy, resilience thinking, and attention to issues of power, with overlaps between related concepts. After Centroid extraction as described by Brown [64], two factors were hand rotated graphically to see if the new sort would load significantly onto its own factor. More specifically, we wanted to check if a minority perspective present in the data set would support the MSP capabilities that constitute ecological reflexivity as a viewpoint. In this separate second analysis, five additional sorts loaded and produced a reliable factor, resulting in Factor 1: Reflexive Viewpoint (6 sorts including our “ideal” Ecological Reflexivity Sort (viewable in Table 7) and Factor 2: Responsive Viewpoint.

The following section describes the factor interpretation for Data Analysis 1: Perspectives on Partnering and Data Analysis 2: Locating Ecological Reflexivity in Partnering Capabilities.

5. Findings

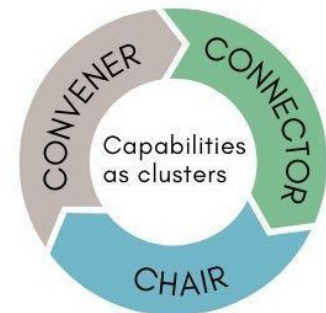
Three perspectives on partnering emerged from the first data analysis, which we identified as *The Convener*, *The Connector*, and *The Chair*. Through our interpretation of the composite sort for each factor, the surveys, and the interviews, the data suggested three themes relevant to our theoretical approach: communicative coordination, power, and

reflexivity. Sample participant survey and interview responses are found in the italicised statements below. Figure 2 describes a brief overview of how these clusters of capabilities group into the three perspectives.

Roles for collaborating

This Q methodological study repurposes capabilities as raw materials for role-based understandings of collaboration.

By exploring the skills and abilities needed for local change towards sustainability and SDG implementation, human agency is catalysed as actors inhabit and move between distinct roles that each express clusters of capabilities. These can become levers for enhancing ecological reflexivity.



The Convener



- Demonstrate the value of shared decision-making
- Identify and engage external stakeholders
- Identify roles and expectations for those with specialist knowledge

The Connector



- Communicate effectively so that others understand
- Engage with others
- Build trust by being open and relatable

The Chair



- Coordinate multiple participants to organise meetings
- Support the development of a shared vision
- Act as chair to facilitate participation and inclusion in meetings

Figure 2. This figure summarises the key findings for the first data analysis.

In the factor interpretation of the first analysis, the backgrounds of participants (who were not anonymous) were coded to determine any relationship between their professional role in partnering, gender, and geographic location. All viewpoints included small business owners who were members of the Lancaster Ethical Small Traders Association (ESTA), representatives from civil society and various sustainability concerns, and an even mix of men and women, and no discernible pattern in geographic affiliation. Additionally, both elected city council members and local council officers loaded on all three viewpoints as well.

In the second data analysis, we identified a two-factor solution that included a Reflexive Viewpoint and a Responsive Viewpoint. The salience of this finding relates to the question of how collaborating takes into account the skills particularly needed in the unpredictable and potentially hazardous context of the Anthropocene. In this viewpoint, we recognised the individual and group-level capabilities needed for ecological reflexivity. We interpreted the two viewpoints to locate how the differences between the perspectives could help conceptualise entry points for MSPs to use capabilities in developmental spaces to demonstrate reflexive governance. The findings are discussed and their generalizability to those with similar viewpoints is considered.

6. Discussion

6.1. Discussion of Data Analysis 1 Findings: Three Perspectives on Partnering

6.1.1. Viewpoint 1: The Convener

The Convener viewpoint, as highlighted in Tables 1 and 2, emphasises the ‘practical’ side of collaboration. This perspective prioritises more structured and formal approaches to organising partnerships. It focuses on the processes involved in partnering and the immediate context within which these collaborations occur, rather than addressing broader systemic challenges. This approach underscores the importance of practical, actionable steps and the formal mechanisms necessary to facilitate effective cooperation in the short term. By concentrating on the practicalities of working together, *The Convener* viewpoint aims to ensure that partnerships are well-organised, efficient, and contextually relevant.

Communicative Coordination

For example, in *The Convener’s* most-like statements (Table 2), participants identified ‘Statement 44: Demonstrate the value of shared decision making’. *The Convener* is focused on ‘demonstrating the value’ of two-way instrumental communication that leads to agreement:

Building trust—it is key to social capital that is built during this process.

Opening pathways of communication is a mechanism of relationship, both of which *The Convener* sees as steered strategically by the leader(s):

It is the role of those forming the partnership to make sure everyone can contribute—and understand the potential value of their input.

Power

While this viewpoint notices issues of power and (in)equity, relating is the solution to addressing these and explicit mention is unnecessary:

You must be aware of invisible barriers to progress, and these are often socio-cultural, you can only overcome such barriers with respect and good communication.

The Convener sees partnership organising as a vehicle for addressing power imbalances.

There has been no meaningful engagement that allows the socially excluded communities of the West End and central areas to articulate what they want. There is total ignorance of the basic needs of these communities in the engagement that has taken place (e.g., access to digital, access to food, access to education, access to good work, access to power), and so none of these are discussed with the people who really matter.

Several key statements for systems thinking appear as Most-Unlike Statements (Table 3). Our factor interpretation reveals that typically *The Convener* sees systems thinking as a potential distraction from the work of the partnership. However, some aspects of systemic issues can be viewed through the work of the partnership itself.

The main capability would be empowerment of people beyond the ‘usual suspects’ to meaningfully engage. The UN SDGs include food security etc. and these need to be addressed alongside collaboration.

Reflexivity

The Convener’s approach to learning and adapting to changing circumstances is similarly determined by its demonstration and not just processes engineered to produce learning. There is a sense of reflexivity around *The Convener’s* approach to collaborative organising:

Success is not guaranteed by formulas. It requires perseverance and a degree of grit . . .

Similarly, when asked what other statements should be included, participants within this viewpoint suggested other ideas such as:

Where are statements related to, for example . . . What level of disruption would you be willing to engage with in order to see a successful outcome to the project.

Learning is integral to the process of partnering, and formalisation offers opportunities for validation and personal development:

[People need] a chance to learn and develop skills for collaboration. For example, communities of disadvantage lack confidence. They are continually knocked back, unheard, and have no belief things can change.

6.1.2. Viewpoint 2: The Connector

The Connector viewpoint, as outlined in Tables 3 and 4, emphasises the role of power dynamics and the potential of collaboration as a means of empowerment. This perspective views partnering as fundamentally a relational process, where the leaders or coordinators of the partnership actively create space for all participants. This approach facilitates a shared experience of meaning-making and collective decision making. By focusing on inclusivity and the distribution of power, *The Connector* viewpoint aims to foster an environment where all partners feel empowered and engaged, contributing equally to the partnership's goals and outcomes.

Communicative Coordination

The Connector sees the work of building relationships within partnerships as the precursor to other more formal partnership building blocks. Similar to *The Convener*, *The Connector* emphasises the shared nature of decision making. However, whereas *The Convener* offered more instrumentalist aims for communication, *The Connector* attends to communication processes in order to build trust and meaningful engagement for excluded people. *The Connector* values communication that is transparent, so that useful connections can be made. Such relationship foundations offer a platform for motivating others and generating interest in achieving mutual goals:

This kind of solidarity and shared values builds trust and resilience. It allows for faster decision-making and concerted action. It reduces conflict. However shared values need to be expressed and action reviewed in order to ensure all members feel involved and empowered and support is not taken for granted.

For *The Connector*, the various ways of structuring collaborations provide opportunities to enact a vision of mutual understanding. This viewpoint values collective leadership that emerges and specifically identifies the leader role as a supportive one, bringing the language of leadership into their discussion:

Establishing a set of ground rules will also help to facilitate discussion and collaboration through creating a 'safe space' in which all members can freely share ideas and are given an equal platform to do so.

Insofar as ideas and creative thinking are concerned, it is important that I do not impose ideas, i.e., the ideas come from the group

Power

The Connector describes power in almost anthropomorphic terms, and in a largely negative light. Power is something to be explicitly acknowledged and addressed, in order to avoid its destructive tendencies:

Recognising and dealing with power dynamics is important to any sort of partnership, and not doing so is often their downfall. I think something about being aware of the real agendas, the ones that are not spoken about but nevertheless influence the proceedings.

There is a sense that empowerment rests on action that is discernibly and collectively chosen, and expresses the shared values of the community:

If a community has all decisions ordered from the top, from a power hierarchy, then it is not a community, it is a herd. To build a true community involves respect and trust for all members of that community and decision making that is participative.

Reflexivity

Compared to other viewpoints, *The Connector* demonstrates capacity for ecological reflexivity, especially in relation to sustainability goals. This viewpoint values learning and adjusting as essential components, connecting global challenges with local action:

An awareness of climate change, biodiversity loss and all the other key factors identified in Doughnut Economics. This should be placed at the top of any community building because without awareness of these our targets will not be achievable.

To solve global challenges, it is vital to collaborate. A variety of skills are required to define problems and find solutions, no one can do it alone.

The Connector is the only viewpoint that included a systems thinking perspective, namely via ‘Statement 4: Work for the collective good before responding to individual interests’ (Table 4). However, four statements related to systems-thinking appeared in their ‘Most-unlike Statements’ (Table 5), mainly connected to sector knowledge. The Connector’s approach to systems thinking as an ecologically reflexive skill is closely associated with their relational approach to partnering.

Remain committed to solving problems even when certain approaches don’t work. We face so many challenges, it is important to pivot if a solution doesn’t work.

Considering the ideas and values of others, especially when they are conflicting with one’s own, will help to widen perspective and allow individuals to collaborate more effectively. Listening to others with an open mind can also help to break down prejudices and tension that may exist between individuals from different groups.

6.1.3. Viewpoint 3: The Chair

The capabilities for partnering most important to *The Chair*, as described in Tables 5 and 6, reflect a leader-centric perspective on collaboration. This viewpoint emphasises a positive, upbeat, and motivating approach, steering clear of discussions about power differences or contentious issues. *The Chair* prefers to share confident views on effective partnering, aiming to inspire and energise others. This perspective aligns with what is often referred to in the literature as ‘messiah leadership discourse’ or the heroic view of leadership, as discussed by Western [107]. In this approach, leadership is portrayed in a highly positive light, focusing on the leader’s ability to guide and motivate the group towards successful collaboration.

Communicative Coordination

The Chair views communication as a tool for improving (and making use of) relationships. They see communication as a pathway towards achieving their goal of developing a shared vision, and as a conduit for avoiding negativity:

Communicate effectively so that others understand. The number one quality in any leadership position is communication. Bad communication can damage things that weren’t broken. Good communication can fix most things on a project, build relationships, mend relationships, stop misunderstandings.

While The Chair is not necessarily utilitarian in their view of relationships, they tend to view the components of building relationships in these terms, and people as actors in need of incentivisation to help their community:

Some of the capabilities that have to do with the mechanics of running a partnership, e.g., exit strategy, partnership agreements, reviews, etc. are less important because once the interpersonal relationships towards a shared goal are in place and constantly monitored/improved, many other issues are resolved far more easily.

We need to apply a creative mix of personal relationships, finding early adopters, and using creative ice-breaking activities to attract people to our teams.

The Chair viewpoint has consensus most strongly around ‘Statement 35: Support the development of a shared vision’. This idea takes a leader-centric approach, and the

emphasis is not on working towards agreement on a shared vision, but on ‘revealing’ that everyone already agrees on this shared vision:

Support the development of a shared vision: For me this is the north star that guides the overall direction of travel. It also serves as a way to reveal shared agendas. This is what we all agree we want to achieve; this is why and the rest is the how we are going to get there.

When we have a shared vision, many smaller and practical problems that affect collaborations disappear or are much easier to manage.

If they don't understand, you're not communicating. A good rule of thumb is: 'The higher cannot stand without the lower.'

Power

The Chair represents a viewpoint least likely to appreciate the language of power and power differences (Table 1), with every statement representing that idea being most-unlike. The language of power is seen as a hindrance to the partnership advancing its goals. *The Chair* appreciates that conflict is something to be addressed, but does not see power as a source of the conflict:

Generally [sic] regard all social interaction in as positive a light as possible. i.e., try to see the perspective of the other social agents and where they are coming from. (this does not mean being vacuous and airbrushing over problems and issues).

This approach is likely connected to *The Chair's* view that organising in a methodical way is the key to successful collaboration, thereby negating the need to address power differences:

Work on the principle that we have all the tools and resources we need, if only we could identify them all and assemble them in the right order.

Reflexivity

The Chair sees some learning as valuable to partnering, though this learning is confined more to accessing information than exploring the unknowns that are characteristic of ecological reflexivity. For example, data collection or helping others identify their capabilities is valued:

Far more resources and time should be put into auditing what people and orgs [sic] are already doing before deciding where best to commit precious resources.

Identify and value the capabilities of others: This is another key component because when people feel valued, they are motivated to contribute. ... Many people are unaware of their capabilities and become aware of and building on them via a collaboration with others is a powerful motivator.

This viewpoint may be less likely to embrace reflexive thinking, as the need to question core commitments stands in conflict with the confident, planned action that *The Chair* prefers:

Shared vision means involving all human capabilities other than the intellect, e.g., imagination, creativity, will to act, and therefore a vision is more powerful than an intellectual analysis. At the same time, a positive vision of what we want for the future is too often poorly articulated.

This is not to say that reflexive thinking is absent from the perspective, but that processes focused on deliberation can sometimes be perceived as ‘intellectual analysis’ at odds with action.

6.2. Discussion of Data Analysis 2 Findings: Locating Ecological Reflexivity in Partnering Capabilities

In our second data analysis we sought to locate among our participants the skills and capabilities needed for ecological reflexivity. These are the top MSP capabilities chosen to support ecological reflexivity in the theory-based sort we created (see also Table 7).

The highest ranked statements in our Ecological Reflexivity Sort are in Figure 3.



Figure 3. A snapshot of the Q sort created for Ecological Reflexivity showing the highest-ranking statements. The full sort is listed in Table 7, Column E.

The full list of how the statements were ranked to support ecological reflexivity is found in Table 7: Column E. Using the first data set, we then included the new Ecological Reflexivity Sort and theoretically (or graphically) hand rotated to a two-factor solution that included five participant sorts with the new sort on its own viewpoint, or factor. In this two-factor solution, we were able to interpret the Responsive Viewpoint as a broad MSP discourse which contrasts with the second Reflexive Viewpoint (see Table 7 for the composite sorts of the factors). This data analysis reports the statements with the greatest difference numerically between the two views (not the viewpoint ‘as stated’ in terms of ‘Most-like Statements’ as in Data Analysis 1). The Reflexive Viewpoint represented ideas connected to systems thinking, legal, regulatory, and capacity differences between sectors, power dynamics, and reflexivity (Table A1 in the Appendix A addresses which statements were associated with which theoretical construct).

The rankings also report how the Ecological Reflexivity (ER) Sort (our newly created sort) compares to the resulting Reflexive Viewpoint after the second data analysis. The differences provide insights into which concepts resonate with the Reflexive Viewpoint. For example, key ecological reflexivity concepts in the ER Sort moved markedly down in the Reflexive Viewpoint.

- ‘Statement 45: Identify and engage external stakeholders’: +5 (moved down 7).
- ‘Statement 30: Identify roles and expectations for those with specialist knowledge’: +4 (moved down 5).
- ‘Statement 38: Create space for conflicting opinions to be expressed’: +4 (moved down 4).

The inclusion and contribution of external stakeholders improve the likelihood that alternative views and sources of knowledge will be heard within a partnership. Key subject-based knowledge and expertise contributed by actors representing scientific or Indigenous knowledge that describes Earth System responses is central. Identifying key roles and contributions in partnerships appears to be critical to embedding ecological reflexivity into MSPs. Yet in the composite sort, these statements were less important, suggesting such ideas should receive special capacity building attention in MSPs. We found that it can be a case of ‘you don’t know what you don’t know’, and that actors with sector-specific knowledge are often unaware of the constraints that might inhibit certain reasoning or actions on the part of other partners from different sectors or areas of expertise.

However, proxies for some of these ideas can be found in highly ranked statements where there was agreement with the Ecological Reflexivity Sort and the composite Reflexive Viewpoint. Statements higher in agreement and higher in importance were: ‘Statement 3: Demonstrate innovative thinking and creative problem-solving’; ‘Statement 24: Provide opportunities for others to participate in local decision-making’; ‘Statement 9: Recognise the interrelationship between the issue being addressed and wider concerns’; and ‘Statement 43: Navigate power differences within the group’. In Q methodology, generalisations are validated through factor analysis and based on the theoretical implications of the viewpoints identified, which are generalised to those with the same viewpoint [102]. These ideas in the statements above could be considered more acceptable (or understandable) language for those working in partnership to translate the Reflexive Viewpoint into a pathway that introduces capabilities for ecological reflexivity into local partnerships and other collaborative arrangements.

Understood as two competing discourses, this analysis demonstrates key concepts relevant to guiding diverse actors towards greater receptivity and consideration of Earth System changes. The Responsive Viewpoint compared to the composite Reflexive Viewpoint (Table 7) shows the ideas with the most difference between the views. It is possible that the Responsive Viewpoint could be introduced to the Reflexive Viewpoint through the ideas where they are most apart. For example, ‘Statement 44: Demonstrate the value of shared decision-making’ can be used to explore common and individualised interpretations of this idea, and to introduce notions of power, systems thinking, and deliberation into the processes by which the decision (governance) becomes shared, and the processes by which stakeholders come to see the value of the collaboration process itself. The presence of the Reflexive Viewpoint demonstrates the way capabilities valued in environmental governance have percolated into wider discourses through sustainability and the SDGs, more specifically.

When we explored the Reflexive Viewpoint, we became curious about what predisposed these participants to ideas foundational to ecological reflexivity. We noted that four of the five sorters all have significant international experience in the Global South, a key focus of the sustainable development agenda. We followed up with an interview for the participant without international experience to explore what might be underneath their perspective in this viewpoint. The individual shared that their involvement with disenfranchised members of the community, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic,

was a key learning moment that, they believe, supports their inclusion in the Reflexive Viewpoint.

Finally, using the statements of capabilities to develop a new understanding of what could constitute ecological reflexivity in collaborative governance settings offered an opportunity to enact ecological reflexivity through the second analysis itself. By composing the statements into a theoretically informed perspective, we reached deeper reflection on the possible pathways, and the many barriers, to developing capacities for ecological reflexivity in MSPs. The study opens those statements up to greater scrutiny, to develop understanding of the ways in which their use or application can work together towards ecological reflexivity. It also positions access to knowledge of the Earth System as a required orientation for leaders, managers, partnership brokers, and others with influence in MSPs. The devaluation of environmental concerns can just as easily miss the ecologically reflexive moments.

6.3. Limitations

The study revealed many strengths of an online survey instrument and some drawbacks. We found the recommendations for building post-sorting surveys in Watts and Stenner [95] helpful in gathering qualitative responses that could avoid common pitfalls in Q study surveys and also systematically inform factor interpretation. However, three participants found the wording of a statement unclear, which could be mitigated by more extensive piloting. Some participants had difficulty navigating the survey instrument software, which could be aided by a PDF guide with screenshots or a YouTube video guide. Various software difficulties required communication with the software team. The follow-up interviews after factor interpretation were positive experiences for participants, with one stating “*I don’t often get to reflect on my work in this way*”. Studies, especially in participatory action research contexts [79], could build time and budget for more extensive dialogues with participants post-interpretation.

7. Conclusions

Across civil society, as well as public and private sectors, multi-stakeholder collaboration strengthened by ecological reflexivity is increasingly used as a critical tool for addressing complex challenges such as sustainable development, climate action, and other ‘wicked problems’. MSPs bring together diverse perspectives, capabilities, and resources, fostering social innovation and collective action for contesting the status quo. Attending to both context and relationships contributes to bottom-up actions to achieve the SDGs (in particular SDG 17) and to the coproduction of usable knowledge for sustainable development [108–110].

7.1. Q Methodology

Q methodology is commonly employed to understand contested, diverse and especially marginalised viewpoints [111]. This study considers how a Q study can proceed not only to understand the viewpoints (in this case how local actors approach partnering for sustainable development) and support deliberation, but also to cultivate fertile conditions for ecological reflexivity. This was achieved by reframing capabilities described as necessary for developing partnerships as statements that participants could rank in importance. Participants interpreted these capabilities in unique framings that were captured as themes of communicative coordination, power, and reflexivity. In a separate second analysis, we factor analysed the data with the addition of a new sort that captures the capabilities constituted by ecological reflexivity. From these two analyses, reflecting a novel methodological approach, we describe possibilities for and barriers in collaborative governance.

The three viewpoints revealed in our first interpretation each conceive of these themes in diverse ways. Two of the concepts, reflexivity and power, are contested notions—the viewpoints express different interpretations of these themes. The theme of “communicative coordination” is an emergent idea showing that the collective grappling with the con-

cepts held in the Q-statements produced a way of navigating communication tensions. This term describes communication processes that support deliberation and describes the tensions among drivers for reflexivity [7]. It is a function of what we conceive of as micro-emancipatory [112] responses to the operant subjectivity of communications in collaborating; it locates the process of sorting in Q methodology as deliberation. Borrowing from critical social theory, the term communicative coordination represents what Bruno Latour [113] calls “a few islands of calibrated and stabilised forms” (p. 245) in the vast ocean of social uncertainties. yet At the same time communicative coordination can support the forming of collaborative governance. Extrapolating from the dissonance between institutionalised, normative claims and everyday practical reality and applying critical social theory, communicative coordination reflects a broad idea that echoes the early emancipatory ideas of Max Horkheimer by taking “subject and object, theory and practice together” and “presupposing the idea of freedom” p. 216 [114]. ‘Communication’ may be relaying information, but communicative coordination identifies subjective understandings of communication in collaborative governance and highlights its underlying values, aims, and modes. The distinct forms of communicative coordination that actors employ is then the highway on which ecological reflexivity travels.

Generalising from our findings, we suggest that the Q methodological process could be engaged as an alternative tool and emancipatory approach to developing capabilities, coterminous for our purposes with competencies, in collaborative governance. ‘Competencies’ are often seen as de facto pathways to improved outcomes in problem-centric contexts of wicked challenges such as climate change and ending poverty [115,116]. Developing competencies or capabilities is a core strategy for creating transformational change in sustainability leadership development programmes [117], in collaborative interventions for sustainability [55], and in strategic partnering capacity-building [118,119]. However, criticisms have been levied against competencies as a form of collective leadership development [61,120,121], as it is not clear when subjective understandings of the competencies can be useful as developmental intervention.

7.2. Formative Agency and Leader–Leadership Conceptions

Interestingly, while the methodology was purposely enacted without using the term “leader” or “leadership”, those terms were used by various participants. In considering this phenomenon, we note that it reinforces the substantive role assigned to leadership-related concepts in MSPs and the need to apply more collective, shared, and distributive understandings of how change occurs [82,122,123]. Among the responsibilities of leading in this context is to supply “democratic correctives”, p. 364 [124] that can help reshape the system in which we operate. Defining and determining the values underlying transformations is the task of formative agents p. 105 [9]. In contextualising the SDGs and processes for their implementation, it is formative agents who move across boundaries and therefore across contested discourses, offering “wayfinding for a sustainable future [that] is possible from all coordinates” p. 905 [125].

For scholars in management and organisation studies and practice, especially those working with MSPs, we provide a Q methodological approach with powerful possibilities for tackling the wicked challenges of the Anthropocene. MSPs are often high-stakes discursive spaces where contested and subjective notions are thoughtfully deliberated. By reimagining partnerships as interpreted by the three viewpoints, we demonstrate how to shift the view of a system (an MSP) from an organisational framing to a formative capacity-building orientation. Participatory contexts for Q studies open up additional theoretical and applied levers for the coproduction of usable knowledge, including alternative framings of capabilities. Additionally, we enact ecological reflexivity within management and organisational research itself by reframing capabilities for partnering as contestations and pathways for transformative praxis. Politicising MSPs in this manner is necessary to “support [the] emergence of regenerative and equitable futures” p. 10 [126]. Finally, we demonstrate how the core capacity of ecological reflexivity links knowledge to action

through governance. We offer a provocation to design collaborative approaches that challenge the dominance of models over processes and assumptions of those existing models, and to build capacity in additional collaborative governance settings. In this way, we contribute an important direction to consider in future designs of a research roadmap for ecological reflexivity in MSPs and collaborative governance in general, especially in those endeavours focused on the complexity of SDG implementation.

Investigating MSPs through the lens of ecological reflexivity provides an access point for business management researchers and practitioners, as well as MSP organisers and facilitators. By applying these methods they enact informed agitation, that is, challenging powerful entrenched interests by using the best science to move scarce resources towards positive impact for the many, through collaborative governance processes [10]. As the norms and values embedded in MSPs complicate the rendering of ecological reflexivity for analysis and for building capacity, the processes of building that capacity can themselves become spaces for deliberating ecological reflexivity as a precursor for action.

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Appendix A

Table A1. This table notes which statements were considered to be related to capabilities needed for ecological reflexivity as reflected in the sustainability science literature.

	Statement	Systems Thinking	Reflexivity	Deliberative Democracy	Attention to Power
1	Engage with others.			X	
2	Recognise and take considered risks.		X		
3	Demonstrate innovative thinking and creative problem-solving.	X	X		
4	Work for the collective good before responding to individual interests.	X		X	X
5	Be sensitive to cultural differences.			X	X
6	Understand the drivers within other fields or sectors.		X		

Table A1. Cont.

	Statement	Systems Thinking	Reflexivity	Deliberative Democracy	Attention to Power
7	Be aware of the various resources of others (financial, information, physical, etc.).	X			X
8	Identify and value the capabilities of others.		X		
9	Recognise the interrelationship between the issue being addressed and wider concerns.	X			
10	Respond to relevant problems that are beyond the immediate context.	X		X	
11	Appreciate the capacity limitations of other organisations.	X	X		X
12	Acknowledge the legal or regulatory requirements facing other sectors.	X	X		
13	Understand and convey how one's work or sector relates to others.		X		
14	Connect people with related interests.				
15	Approach and engage potential partners.				X
16	Demonstrate enthusiasm for new ideas.		X		
17	Build trust by being open and relatable.				
18	Communicate effectively so that others understand.			X	X
19	Respectively question knowledge claims.		X		X
20	Identify and include viewpoints not represented in the collaboration.			X	X
21	Analyse and explain power dynamics.				X
22	Remain committed to solving problems even when certain approaches don't work.	X	X		
23	Initiate difficult conversations internally with colleagues & externally with partners and other stakeholders.		X		X
24	Provide opportunities for others to participate in local decision making.			X	X
25	Propose and agree on ground rules for group/community meetings.			X	
26	Assess when to partner and when not to partner.				X
27	Negotiate the development of partnership agreements.				X
28	Review partnerships and evaluate their effectiveness.				X
29	Develop a plan for ending formal partnership arrangements (exit strategy).				X
30	Learn from reflections about collaborative processes and activities.	X	X		
31	Manage conflicts of interest.		X		
32	Use social media and public relations to effectively share insights about the collaboration.				
33	Appreciate that there may be trade-offs to be negotiated when addressing social or environmental problems.	X	X		
34	Bring together apparently mutually distrustful groups to align their efforts.			X	

Table A1. Cont.

	Statement	Systems Thinking	Reflexivity	Deliberative Democracy	Attention to Power
35	Support the development of a shared vision.				X
36	Facilitate an experimental collaborative approach.		X		
37	Attract funding for community-wide sustainability initiatives from others.				X
38	Create space for conflicting opinions to be expressed.		X	X	
39	Illustrate what you are not willing to sacrifice to achieve the desired goal.			X	
40	Identify roles and expectations for those with specialist knowledge.				X
41	Negotiate agreement about the allocation and distribution of shared financial resources.				X
42	Respond effectively to questions from partners, public, and media.				X
43	Navigate power differences within the group.				X
44	Demonstrate the value of shared decision-making.			X	X
45	Identify and engage external stakeholders.				X
46	Coordinate multiple participants to organise meetings.				
47	Act as chair to facilitate participation and inclusion in meetings.				
48	Commit to a bigger project despite personal misgivings.				

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