Collaboration Interviewer: Paul Verschure (Convergent Science Network)
Bhavani Rao (Amrita Labs)

Welcome to the Ernst Strüngmann Forum podcasts—a series of discussions designed to explore how people collaborate under real-life settings. Joining us in the series are high-profile experts from diverse areas in society, whose experiences will lend insight to what collaboration is, what it requires, and why it might break down. This series is produced in collaboration with the Convergent Science Network.

P. Verschure	Today I'm here with Deepa Narayan and my colleague, Bhavani Rao. Welcome, Deepa, to our discussion. To begin, could you please give us a sense of your background and the different roles that you have assumed and how this has shaped who you are today, with respect to collaboration.
D. Narayan	Let me begin with my professional life. For the last 35 years, I have worked on poverty issues. I've lived in villages for about 10 years, working with women's groups and small NGOs. For almost 20 years, I worked with the UN and for the last five years, I have worked as a senior advisor with the World Bank. Throughout, my interest has been on value-based change.
	On a personal level, I come from a family of five children, and when there are five kids fighting for attention and resources, you either compete or collaborate. In my family, collaboration was the rule: mostly passive, sometimes active, always intentional (e.g., when we would band together to get something out of our parents or grandparents). I've also studied collaboration, particularly in settings involving poverty and women's groups, and looked critically at what makes large-scale programs and projects work. Over the last two years, during the COVID pandemic, my research has focused on the meaning of masculinity. I am interviewing men in India—highly educated men and boys, young boys going to school as young as seven years old—to try and understand what it means to be a man.
P. Verschure	Before we go into the specifics of this research, could you tell us what collaboration means to you: what is it good for?
D. Narayan	There are many definitions, but intuitively, I think it means the following: two or more individuals or groups of communities or countries come together to achieve a shared goal with some degree of volunteerism. In other words, collaboration is not based on coercion.
P. Verschure	You emphasize shared goal and volition. Are these the two defining features of collaboration? Are there others?
D. Narayan	Based on my work on masculinity as well as on community-led development, where I have analyzed hundreds of groups that succeeded at the local level, I would say that two things are critical for sustained collaboration over time. That is power and love. Most of the development and most of the work on collaboration focuses on power and rules. The missing ingredient is love. That's what I've learned from the hundreds of interviews I've done with men, and before that with women.
P. Verschure	So, we have goals, intention or volition, or absence of coercion as well as love and power. What exactly do these things mean? They can apply to individuals, to groups, to institutions as well as countries. Now that we have some sort of matrix structure, how can we apply your definitions?
D. Narayan	Codification is important to achieve large-scale success. But in everything that I see, there's been one missing ingredient, and the missing ingredients are things that we can't see. So, what's been missing and needs to be spelled out in collaboration is the underlying values and human passions. That's hard to put into boxes. Let me talk about the framework of power and love, which is what I'm going to refer to as "feminism X" – a concept that resulted from the 250 interviews with men and, before that, 600 interviews with educated women.
	When thinking about collaboration, one assumes that there is shared power, yet there are different types of power. First, there is "*power over people*," which leads to coercion even though that may not be the intent. Second, there is "*power with*" (shared power), which is

the way I am talking about collaboration. Third, there is "*power within*" or internal power. It is not useful to separate out these different kinds of power. Most of what we see, especially in large organizations, but also at community and family levels, is the first type: *power over*.

Let us start with an example involving the family or couples, and then apply the same framework to organizations. Why is it today that one in three women around the world are still experiencing physical and sexual violence? One in three, and no country is spared. This is prevalent in the West, in India, in Africa, in Sweden, etc. That is *power over*, and what's been totally lacking in feminism and in organization development is the aspect of love. What do I mean by love? Love to me is kindness, caring, compassion, and collaboration. Without love, you might achieve collaboration, but when there are difficulties, it's going to fall apart or be sabotaged. The internal honoring of people and tapping into love is difficult, primarily because we've ignored its power.

On an individual level, in terms of my discussions with men, masculinity and power are completely intertwined. When you ask them what it means to be a man, they respond that it's all about power: being muscular, being strong. There's nothing wrong with that, but if that's the only song you can sing, it's rather limited. No cisgender man talked about love as a core attribute of masculinity, but they were very comfortable talking about power. When I asked women what the three words come to your mind when they think about being a woman, many of them talked about love, nurturing, kindness, mother; only one woman talked about power. The problem is that power without love is abusive, and love without power invites abuse.

We can apply this at the organizational level—how a large company is organized and manages its workers—or you can think about it in terms of global collaboration or negotiation. Collaboration happens when rules of boundaries are clear. If the focus is only on formal rules and not informal rules based on trust, love, and dignity, collaboration falls apart. The indicator that it's all about power is when there's lots of litigation, like in the U.S.

P. Verschure	You seem to see collaboration as a dialectic between power and love, and you also match it to the sexes.
D. Narayan	Each individual has both power and love within themselves. But the way society defines masculinity, or defines male and female roles, has caused divisions. It has outsourced power to men and love to women. The problem is: How can both men and women integrate power and love within themselves and be valued for it?
P. Verschure	One could also argue that love implies power.
D. Narayan	How can you argue that?
P. Verschure	Since love is something that can be withheld, a person can exert power over someone who needs that love. Similarly, the power of a caregiver over a person who needs care is often construed as an expression of love. I have a sense of what you're saying, but if we dig deeper, these boundaries may not be so clear cut. Is that something that should concern us? Is this more of an academic issue and not practically relevant?
D. Narayan	I think the question you're raising is important. My point, however, involves love in the sense of caring and kindness. Love does not mean anything goes. Love has boundaries. When there's abuse, you must have a boundary and be able to say, "no, it's not all right." In that sense, love and power go together in a kind of infinity circle. What I'm arguing is that something has happened to separate the two. That's the problem.
	Let me draw parallels between my work in communities where we looked at literally hundreds of cases of community action involving, e.g., irrigation, sanitation, childcare, and large-scale projects. What distinguished successful projects from not-so-successful ones was a clarity in rules of how to solve conflict, which comes back again to how you manage power and love. If only legal rules exist and goodwill is lacking, then it still doesn't work.

P. Verschure	That seems to hint at an underlying universe of trades and issues that go beyond the surface expression of power and love. You mentioned trust but perhaps we also need to consider reciprocity. We need to assess the risk involved. In the case of love, it's risky. But if that risk is reciprocated, then there is some sort of balance. Isn't that underlying force one of reciprocity?
D. Narayan	What is love? Love is really about trust. Trusting that the other person is there for you. The expression "someone has my back" was prevalent in these interviews. The foundation of love is trust. Without trust and attachment, nothing is possible. It gets into abuse and isolation, violations, etc. Love is relational. The moment it is relational, there is reciprocity, and that reciprocity has to be consistent. Once you get into power and love imbuing each other, there are other ways of enforcing collaboration or ensuring collaboration rather than being totally dependent on litigation and formal rules—agreements that you've already made.
P. Verschure	Can you give examples of how you came to that insight?
D. Narayan	Actually, this happened quite recently. My background is in policy, and in the policy world you don't talk about love. There is a lot of talk about power itself, which is really from political science and sociology, and then psychology contributes to individuals. As I was looking and relooking at patterns during the coding of the men's interviews, I realized that the men were very open on many issues (e.g., their sexual life, work lives, problems) but love (e.g., a father's love or love as a husband) was difficult to discuss. One particular case involved a very successful man (a CEO of a large international company), who is very competitive, very proud, a good negotiator, and quite assertive or even verbally aggressive. This person stated that in his personal life he could not be aggressive. With his wife, he needs a different approach and often struggles to stop aggressive behavior. When I asked about his friends, he said, "There's never a time when I can drop my guard. When we get together as friends, we're always competing in terms of who has more, who has a better wife, who has more money." So, I asked him if there's ever a time when he feels that he can let down his guard. His response, "when we're drunk," and he expressed remorse as reflected on this. When I started to think about what is really happening here, I saw that his inability to let go of competition was rooted in a deep insecurity; namely, if you're not constantly competing, you're not a man. That's the problem in male–female relationships: when relationships focus on power, love gets squeezed out. How can love be brought back? In the power and love framework, that's the challenge.
P. Verschure	Does that imply that we have to look at two realms of collaboration: One based on power and competition and another based on love? Are the two segregated?
D. Narayan	No. It's this infinity circle that has to go around. Inspired by Martin Luther King, my version is: Power without love is abusive, and love without power is anemic. Power without love is abusive, and love without power invites abuse.
P. Verschure	Can your work in water management provide an example here? Can you reanalyze that example in these terms? How does that work along these dimensions of power and love?
D. Narayan	In my work on domestic water supplies in villages and urban areas as well as irrigation, there are rules that govern tail-enders and people near the source of water. The conflict is always between those who are close to the water and those who are further away. Since those close to the source can use and control the water flow, rules alone do not suffice. You can have all the rules you want, but if there's ill will, if there are no other social connections, social capital, or trust between these two groups, then they will be in perpetual conflict. Goodwill comes through mutual relations in some other realm to provide a basis for reciprocity and trust. If the only relationship is through water, trust is very difficult to maintain when water becomes scarce. As resources get scarce, the fight gets harsher, and collaboration becomes a distant dream. Whoever is the strongest, whoever has the most money, whoever is going to use the

most muscle and power wins. Then you have a winner and loser framework. Collaboration is a horizontal framework or needs to be for it to last.

P. Verschure You're saying that to build collaboration, you must first define a neutral "playground" where there are no resources at stake; trust is then built within this space, which is subsequently crucial when there is something at stake.

D. Narayan Exactly. The easiest way to think about this is to look at a family or a couple. Every family goes through ups and downs. What is it that helps it survive? Reciprocity, trust, and respect help resolve problems that arise, and problems are always going to arise.

P. Verschure In the case of the water management, did you look at certain interventions to see whether they contributed to trust-building? Are there examples where it worked or did not work? How did you come to that insight?

D. Narayan There are different examples and a vast published literature on irrigation. Let's talk about four villages where I worked in Timor, which experienced severe drought and clean drinking water was a huge problem. I spent about three years visiting these communities with the research team, and interventions were made. Where did things work best? Efforts worked best in settings where men started supporting the women. (Carrying or fetching water is primarily a women's job all around the world.) In places where male leaders and male spouses supported this work, the interventions worked. By contrast, if the men were not supportive, the interventions did not work, even though the same actions, the same processes, the same meetings were employed (e.g., men's groups were created as well as women's groups, talks were held with the village leader, a facilitator was engaged).

P. Verschure Was that because individuals disrupted the process, or was there a social factor involved in terms of how the group was organized?

D. Narayan The groups were organized very similarly. There was an underlying animosity or lethargy that led to systems not working. Given the limited time, attention, and money, we found that the water problem faced by women needs to be resolved. When men perceived this as a priority and were willing to invest resources and work with women—that's what made a difference.

B. Rao Now we understand a little bit about the personal level of collaboration and the dimensions of power and love. Earlier, you said that this can be applied to different levels of organizations, institutions, or even two countries. We can imagine power at the level of countries, but how would love generalize in that sense?

D. Narayan Let's talk a minute about power, because power is not a unitary phenomenon; it takes many different forms and shapes. The one that we're most familiar with is *power over*, even though it's supposed to be collaborative. Countries have unequal power. Take for example the United Nations, where select members can exercise veto power. Power at the UN is not equally distributed, yet love can still be present, if it's based on values of mutuality, respect, dignity, kindness, and caring. What I have observed is that when love is not present, at the first sign of trouble, a conflict will take a long time to resolve because people get suppressed and are not treated with respect. To take an obvious, recent example, most companies have wonderful slogans about mutuality, respect, worth, human potential, etc. The #MeToo movement emerged out of these companies are more continue to emerge (e.g., sports organizations where little girls were abused). That's not mutuality or love or reciprocity. Such a social movement may appear to be a *power with* collaborative process, but it usually involves *power over*. Where there is *power over*, there is very little scope for kindness, dignity, respect and caring, compassion, which together is the package of love.

P. Verschure Which country in the world do you believe right now gets the closest to that ideal?

D. Narayan That's very difficult. In terms of human satisfaction, happiness, etc., the Nordic countries emerge on top. But if you just look at that indicator of violence against women, even these

	countries don't do well. The level of violence against women is almost the same in India as it is in Sweden.
P. Verschure	That's not very encouraging. On the other hand, decisions at the country level are made by individuals; these individuals act in groups; and although these groups are not necessarily large, they still yield power. Looking at the case described earlier for water management, where the social structure was the same, could individual disruptors be involved? Does interacting and collaborating at the country level depend on individuals from these groups to exert power that will make a difference?
D. Narayan	This depends on the individuals as well as underlying motives. The reality is that the world is dominated by male leaders. The COVID pandemic, however, shows that a lot of the countries led by female leaders did better than those led by male leaders. That doesn't mean that men or male leadership cannot change. I believe that it can. However, it needs to change by integrating the core values of respect and dignity for all, rather than being obsessed by achieving an egotistical goal at the expense of others. That's the problem, which is why large organizations, like the World Trade Association or others, get paralyzed because it's hard to decide to collaborate when interests and sizes are so different.
P. Verschure	In some sense, these gender or sex-related dimensions of power and love represent a tragedy. Using your analogy of an infinity circle, power and love are linked but perhaps they are not compatible. Take for example the man who discovered that he was always competing: for that person to survive in the competitive environment, he will have been conditioned his entire career to hide his internal state, to reveal nothing personal; otherwise, he will never succeed. In other words, you must deny a part of yourself to survive in a specific environment, which precludes you from returning to the other side of love. The same might hold if you start at the end of love. Is it possible to bring these together in some balanced form? Or would you say that men and women have to work together because they bring different perspectives to the table?
D. Narayan	Unless we, as societies and as a world community, bring power and love together, we're going to become extinct. We already see that in the excesses of climate change, in the excesses of billionaires versus mass poverty around the world, including the U.S. I don't think we can survive without power and love coming together. The operative word that you used is *conditioning*. No baby is born grabbing for power. Children are conditioned, which is why I interviewed seven-year-old boys as well as eight-year-old boys and girls. Gender training starts very, very early. As long as boys are taught not to be emotional, we are going to get unidimensional men, and when men don't change, women may leave and choose to live on their own. I don't think these are recipes for a happy, fulfilling, or thriving world in which the environment is cared for and we care for each other. I don't think we have a choice: it's an absolute necessity for survival. We, as human beings, have to change. Women have to be given more opportunity and space to come together with men in decision making. Both men and women, but particularly men, have to be given space to integrate love and power. Love and power are basically the masculine and feminine archetypes that every human being has, whether you're trans, gender fluid, or LGBTQ+. Socialization and cultural conditioning and expectations have created this bifurcation, and this is harming both women and men.
P. Verschure	As a challenge, you could argue that there's a trade-off. To reach our full potential precludes any form of large-scale collaboration because collaboration always implies a compromise or trade-off. For example, I cannot pursue all my immediate hedonistic drives and instincts because there's a little time constant at play. Other drives also come into play, thus forcing me to compromise or make a trade-off. How can you be sure that is there no trade-off?
D. Narayan	I don't think there's a trade-off in terms of human happiness and survival because I think we will make different choices. What's being called for—both for men and women—is more "feminine" leadership, more caring leadership, a more caring person for whom you don't get hurt and others don't get hurt. It's a different lens through which to view the world. As long

as we use the lens of "more, more, more," we're going to be back to the same manipulation without changing outcomes.

P. Verschure   To face our massive challenges, humans have to come together and act. You are proposing that we have to bring love and power together as well as parity in how power and love are distributed. From an operational perspective, this would suggest that we have to redesign, e.g., the United Nations, for we need an international body that structures collaboration more evenly on a global level based on these values of love and power. Is that what you would be advocating?

D. Narayan   Having worked at the World Bank and seen the cost of constant reorganizations, I would say, yes: It is important to have large organizations reflecting these values, which they currently do not. But that's not the only way to bring about change. New organizations are needed that are more like networks to provide pressure to change from the bottom up so that the top doesn't function in a way that is disconnected from the populations. We're beginning to see this structural change. A lot of change can happen within organizations, and where it's not possible, you need counter forces to make that happen, to push for that. The Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S. is a wonderful example of how change is happening, not because the government thought of it or some large organization thought about it, but through endless grassroot organization, endless networking, coordinated actions and collaboration, across time and place in the U.S., but without clear leadership. Leadership is diffuse, which is a completely different way of thinking of a hierarchical organization with one person, usually a man, at the top.

P. Verschure   Such a bottom-up, grassroot movement will require a lot of communication and education. Indeed, by respecting the volition and agency of every individual in that movement, this creates the groundswell for change. Is this what I hear you saying?

D. Narayan   That's one effective way because existing organizations, including governments, are not listening; for historical reasons they are ignoring these voices. A redesign is needed, so that individuals don't have to fight for their lives or basic rights or access to education, employment, or housing.

P. Verschure   Does humanity have enough time to implement a bottom-up approach to the crises that we're facing?

D. Narayan   It's not either-or. People are needed in such movements, and large organizations which sit on the power and money, have to respond and have to change. The most important way of bringing about change involves structural changes, combined with changing people's hearts and minds. Having observed some of the environmental movements in Canada and the U.S., a lot of the activists have come to a similar conclusion. You can fight for years and demonstrate to create pressure. In the end, though, you must deal with the CEOs of organizations, who are also human beings. If you approach them with mutual respect while holding firm to goals, miracles can happen. This might not be realistic on a large scale because of the massive resources that sit in large organizations. Unless large organizations change, endless struggles will ensue.

P. Verschure   Isn't "power" the elephant in the room? Bottom-up organizations try to exert power over the big organizations to get them to the table. Is that not the dynamic here?

D. Narayan   Absolutely. It's a struggle for *shared power*, and it all comes back to power and love. Love without power invites abuse. A person needs to have power, otherwise, they won't be heard. The world is structured hierarchically with individuals at the bottom not having power. Yet by banding together, a unified voice creates a power through numbers. From time immemorial, people's movements have overthrown governments and kings and changed the course of the world. Does it have to be that way? If large organizations and governments were really for people, which they're supposed to be, then they would be more reflective and permit easier access to voices that are different from the direction that they're going.

P. Verschure

I could imagine that the flood of disinformation is a massive threat to building a movement and trust among all these individual agents. Do you see this as a liability, as a risk for this approach?

D. Narayan

I don't understand what you mean by a flood of information.

P. Verschure

*Dis*information acts against love and favors fragmented power. This to me, would appear one of your biggest threats right now.

D. Narayan

Exactly. Disinformation is an instrument of control and asymmetrical power. The only way to deal with this is by utilizing every source of power that you have: through laws, the courts, through coming together and having alternative sources of information. This is what we're witnessing throughout the world right now. The attempt to retain, contain, and deny people power through huge information and disinformation battles. And throughout it all, there is no love. It's all about power, power, power, *power over*.

P. Verschure

In that cacophony of voices, who is your ambassador right now for this philosophy, for this proposal? On Facebook, on Twitter.

D. Narayan

I think it's all the people who believe in a better world and action to make it a more equitable, fairer world in which the planet survives.

P. Verschure

We have discussed the framework that you're proposing and how it's grounded in examples. But we are also living through a unique and devastating time, which is currently affecting India in particular: the COVID-19 crisis. Has this taught us anything fundamental or new about how humans collaborate or fail to collaborate?

D. Narayan

One new insight is that the desire for total control destroys. Unaccountable governments, governments and leaders that behave like bullies—the furthest from anything that could be called feminine leadership—are the most dangerous creatures in the world. An unadulterated grab for power against citizens is deadly in a very literal sense; it utilizes all the fascist techniques of disinformation: turning people against each other, lying, controlling the media, jailing people, threatening to jail people, misuse of the judicial system. We've seen this play out around the world.

P. Verschure

Despite that, are you still hopeful that humanity will be able to realize sustainable, large-scale collaboration?

D. Narayan

I think it will happen when we perceive ourselves to be on the brink of extinction. Take flooding (as recently happened in Germany), mudslides, hurricanes, or 120°F temperatures in the western U.S. Seattle recently had the highest temperature ever recorded in over a century. Too often, such tragedies have to hit us close to home before we wake up. Even then we may not if leaders continue to lie and deny that human actions and greed are involved in causing the melting of the ice cap, etc.

P. Verschure

The approach that you're advocating requires time to build a counter-movement in order to recover what can still be recovered. In terms of the current climate threats, how much time is needed to regain at least a sense of stability in this world?

D. Narayan

Are you asking me about how to save the planet?

P. Verschure

Yes. How much time would be needed to implement your program? If you say that we need 100 years to mobilize enough people, then it is not going to be operational, and we need to look for alternatives. If you tell me 10 years, then I'd say, where do we start? This is not purely an academic question; it's a relevant operational issue.

D. Narayan

There are lots of pockets of resistance and hope, and it will take billions of dollars to connect and amplify these voices. Currently we are facing multiple crises: an ongoing pandemic; a gender, racial, and income inequity crisis; a climate crisis. The underlying factors of how we address each are similar: human excess, human overconsumption, and governments that try to hide the truth from their citizens, be it China, the U.S., India, Turkey, Brazil, or elsewhere.

	The imbalance in power needs to change. Money resources play a huge role in shifting power and grassroots movements shift the message. It'll take ca. 20 years before we see a major shift. This shift can be facilitated by providing resources to amplify the voices of research, of science, of community building, of reaching across differences, whether it's gender or race or political ideology. But change is possible.
P. Verschure	If we are looking at a 20-yr time frame, then we will have to deploy a massive educational effort because these dictators, the power mongers of the world, will increase their efforts to grab power. They know that people are influenced by simple messages and simple conspiracy theories. The uncertainty of reality and the future is very complex and thus threatening to comprehend. To manage this, education is needed. How can we educate future generations in your philosophy of power and love to enable effective collaboration?
D. Narayan	This requires a massive shift in the policies and content of education. For example, in the U.S., there is currently a fight raging over race theory. Critical race theory is being banned. Why is it banned? Because, in most places, people who feel their position to be threatened have bought into the lies and misinformation being spread. In the case of gender and how boys learn how to be men, we have looked critically at education in schools and found that schools are deepening the stereotypes of what it means to be a boy and a girl. You're right: it will take a massive reeducation of people everywhere in the world so that they will be able to make different choices and think differently. There's been quite a bit of research showing that when children receive different messages in schools, their interests and approaches impact the decisions that their parents make because these decisions come from love; parents care about the children. It's very interesting. For those men who won't listen to their wives, they (in some cases) listen to their daughters. We need to use every channel to change minds and hearts.
P. Verschure	You could also argue that our ability to operate collaboratively, along the lines of love and power, is innate—something provided to us by biology, but that culture and education distorts the process.
D. Narayan	I agree completely. Evidence from evolutionary biology, etc., shows that we are wired to collaborate, to be altruistic, and not just to compete.
P. Verschure	Maybe education efforts should focus on less education?
D. Narayan	The underlying premises of education are pretty messed up. The most important role of formal education is to perpetuate the culture of a society, to reproduce society. Each generation perpetuates false notions of who we are as human beings.
P. Verschure	Don't forget that the basic model of the classroom goes back to Ferdinand the Great and is anchored in authority: the authority of the teacher who controls the class. It's an upfront definition of an asymmetric power relationship in which education is defined. It begins there, but that is an easy one to change. What you're proposing is an ideological agenda which up until a few decades ago would have been captured within a religious context or political-ideological context. Now, in our increasingly secular society, there are voids. Do you see what you're proposing as filling a void—a gap that 50 years ago might have been filled by religious commitment? Do we need to refill that space?
D. Narayan	I hadn't thought about it in that way. In terms of religious commitment, there's a big difference between, e.g., the Western world, Asia, or Africa. If you look at the numbers from surveys on religiosity, it's about 85% in India as well as in the U.S. but there is great variance. Europe, for sure, has seen a huge decline in church attendance. So, what void do we need to fill, and how do we do this?
	I see that void as being this huge human longing for connection. We are wired to connect with other human beings. This human longing is to be appreciated; it matters and is part of what it means to be valued as a human being. When that is violated, problems are created

for children and adults of all genders. So, it comes back to a very simple human longing to belong, to be appreciated, to matter.

P. Verschure   Classic literature, philosophers, and all major religions search for the answer to what constitutes a good life. And since this is what you're referring to, I will end with a final question: If you, by magical means, could change one thing in humans to help us achieve sustainable collaboration, what would that one thing be?

D. Narayan   I would fill every human being with love. Love for themselves, so they feel that they are loved and supported by a hundred people. Then I would let them go to do their own thing in the world.

It is the lack of love, the lack of feeling appreciated and valued, that destroys us as individuals and as a society.

P. Verschure   Very good, Deepa Narayan. Thank you very much for this conversation.

D. Narayan   My pleasure. Thank you.