Achieving Collaborative Aims through Multiple Identity Construction: Managing a public inter-organizational collaboration

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Abstract

Although public inter-organizational collaborations can offer better public services, their management is a complex endeavour and they often fail. This paper explores identity construction as a key aspect that assists in managing successfully these collaborations. The study draws upon a longitudinal ethnographic study with a Greek public inter-organizational collaboration. The research illustrates that managers should encourage partners to construct collaborative and non-collaborative identities in order to achieve the collaboration aims. It also suggests that managers should seek both stability and change in the collaborative process and offers four collaborative patterns for the effective management of public inter-organizational collaborations.

Keywords: Identity construction; boundary strategies; separation and integration; collaboration management; public inter-organizational collaborations.

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Introduction

Inter-organizational collaborations have started to be a very important feature of public services. Through collaborative work, governments aim 'to secure the delivery of benefits or added value which could not have been provided by any single agency acting alone or through the employment of others' (Dickinson and Glasby 2010, 815). Even if inter-organizational collaborations are perceived by governments as very important, they usually face many challenges and require careful design, development and management (Sullivan, Williams and Jeffares 2012). It is therefore common for many public inter-organizational collaborations to fail. Many studies focus on the failure of these collaborations and try to identify the frustrations related to collaborative working (i.e. Almog-Bar and Zychlinski 2012; Rigg and O'Mahony 2013). Some other studies explore the factors that can support collaborative efforts (i.e. Huxham and Vangen 2005; Gray 2008).

Among the success factors identified, a few studies explore the role of identity construction (i.e. Rao, Davis and Ward 2000; Palma, Cunha and Lopes 2010). These studies focus on the formation of a single collaborative identity that helps partners act in accordance with the interests of the collaboration. However, identity is a complex process (Ybema et al. 2009) and its relative standing is subject to change (Ellemers and Barreto 2000) based on the specific collaborative context that partners experience. In this context partners will consider past and current experiences and interactions in order to form an identity which is situationally suitable. Therefore, seeking the construction of a single and stable collaborative identity contradicts the dynamic and changing nature of identities and of public inter-organizational collaborations, which are by definition built around temporary and dynamic organizational arrangements that evolve over time and are subject to transformations. In contrast with these studies, this research illustrates how partners form multiple (collaborative and non-collaborative) identities in order to achieve the collaborative aims. Challenging managers' common approach to seek from the partners the development of a single collaborative identity, this paper illustrates that managers should encourage partners to construct both collaborative and personal, organizational, professional etc. identities for the successful operation of the collaboration.

This research advances the literature on the management of public inter-organizational collaborations in three ways. Firstly, it demonstrates that managers should acknowledge that the formation of both collaborative and non-collaborative (i.e. professional, personal, organizational) identities assist collaborations in being more successful. Secondly, this paper suggests four collaborative patterns that managers should take into consideration for the achievement of the collaboration aims. Finally, this research recommends that for the effective management of public inter-organizational collaborations, managers should maintain, rather than resolve, the tension between stability and change of the collaborative process so as to ensure that the collaboration can adapt and innovate to the changing needs of the environment while ensuring continuity and continuation.

This paper also contributes to the studies on identity construction in the collaboration literature. Firstly, it demonstrates that partners form both collaborative and non-collaborative identities while engaging with the collaboration. The study also reveals that partners' multiple identities are developed through boundary strategies of separation and integration that allow them to examine similarities and differences from others, constructing their identities as a result of their embeddedness in a temporary collaborative context.

In order to explore identity formation through boundary strategies in public inter-organizational collaborations, a longitudinal ethnographic study was conducted with the KEDDY Aitoloakarnanias Educational Collaboration (KAEP) in Greece. KAEP was established by the government in 2000 in order to improve the education of students with disabilities. The research was conducted in four phases over a period of sixteen months and forty-three in-depth interviews, forty-eight documents, observations of thirteen partners' meetings and numerous field notes were collected. The data corpus was analyzed qualitatively using thematic and narrative analysis.

The article proceeds in the following way. First, the importance of exploring identity in public inter-organizational collaborations is highlighted and identity construction through the boundary strategies of separation and integration is outlined. Secondly, the methodological approach of the paper is introduced. Next, four narratives are presented in order to illustrate how partners in dynamic collaborative contexts construct collaborative and non-collaborative identities with boundary strategies. The article closes presenting how this research enhances our understanding of the management of public inter-organizational collaborations and contributes to the literature on identity formation in collaborations.

Encouraging multiple identity construction in public inter-organizational collaborations

Public inter-organizational collaborations are designed by governments to meet citizens' service needs that a single provider cannot cover (Rigg and O'Mahony 2013). Even though there is a growing interest and request for these collaborations, only a few studies have examined this type of collaboration in the field of services for children (Glisson and Hemmelgarn 1998). Moreover, despite the fact that joint work between inter-organizational groups tends to have a powerful vision and rationale to provide better services for citizens, there is insufficient evidence to support that these collaborations achieve their aims (Gardner 2003; Kourti and Garcia-Lorenzo 2012). It therefore appears that the governments responsible for the delivery of adequate services need to find ways to improve collaboration among service providers in order to ensure that the services are successful. This research contributes towards this aim by offering ways for a more effective management of public inter-organizational collaborations.

Public inter-organizational collaborations are the result of many possible outcomes (Hernes 2008) since partners can engage with the collaboration in many possible ways. On every occasion, partners try to capture the dynamic and temporary nature of the collaboration, and treat collaborative phenomena as enactments and unfolding processes that involve their everyday local circumstances, choices, experiences, relationships and actions (Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Gherardi 2012). Inter-organizational collaborations are therefore not permanently constructed with easy routes to success and management. In contrast, they are ongoing transformations emerging 'through continuously ongoing interactions among the parties involved' (Bouwen 2003, 343) which makes their management a complex endeavour.

Nevertheless, public inter-organizational collaborations have become very common since through collaborative arrangements governments attempt to respond variously on a demanding and changing environment, achieve their aims, accomplish interdisciplinary work and offer better services to citizens (Hibbert and Huxham 2010; Prins 2010). Given their prominence, a big part of the collaboration research has explored how these collaborations can be facilitated and managed more effectively. For example, alignment with the collaboration aims, clarity of roles and responsibilities, direct communication, distributed decision making, adaptability and flexibility of the partners, and constant nurture of the relationships can help collaborations to succeed (Huxham and Vangen 2005; Gray 2008).

Recent research has started looking closer at the impact that identity processes have in enabling collaborative work (i.e. Gardner 2003; Zhang and Huxham 2009). A part of this research focuses on identity construction. The majority of these studies suggest that managers should encourage the development of a collaborative identity that will help partners act in accordance with the interest of the collaboration (Zhang and Huxham 2009). Focusing only on the collaborative identity that partners (should) form implies that partners develop a single stable identity when engaging with the collaboration. However, the construction of identity is a complex, multifaceted process (Ybema et al. 2009) that involves an ongoing interaction between the self and the social since individuals are 'incomplete or unfinished' beings and they will only be able to complete themselves through their engagement with the social (Geertz 1993). Identity is therefore developed through interactions, activities and experiences with others that take place in a specific social context (Mead 1934). As a joint accomplishment that arises out of social interaction (Goffman 1959) identity is never completely stable or achieved. It is constantly transformed based on a 'radical historization' (Hall 1996) since in a given social context, individuals take into account previous and current experiences and interactions in order to form an identity which is situationally suitable. Identity is therefore 'mobile, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being' (Frith 1996, 109) and the focus is not on who partners are but on who they might become (Hogg and Vaughan 2010). As such, it is not possible to refer to a single stable identity since identity is in a constant process of becoming (Hall 1996) and its relative standing is subject to change (Ellemers and Barreto 2000). In contrast, partners will form multiple identities in order to respond to the changing needs of the current collaborative context they experience.

When managers seek ways for the partners to engage with the collaboration effectively, they may not only come across the development of a collaborative identity. Partners form multiple identities, such as personal, organizational or professional, through which they try to achieve the collaboration aims. In contrast with most of the studies that explore the formation of a collaborative identity, this research examines the development of collaborative and non-collaborative identities, and illustrates that managers should encourage the construction of multiple identities for the successful accomplishment of the collaboration goals. Exploring the development of different identity types, this paper moves forward the collaboration literature on identity construction while it also advances management practices in public inter-organizational collaborations.

This research goes a step further suggesting that identity construction in collaborations takes place through boundary processes. 'Identity is constituted in the act of drawing boundaries' (Mørk et al. 2012, 265) that help partners separate themselves from other groups as well as connect themselves with their partners projecting an identity and performing in a way that follows the collaboration norms and expectations (Haslam 2001). Therefore, identity is generated through the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Marshall 2003), and through identity construction partners both connect and separate themselves from others. This is achieved through boundary strategies that help partners make distinctions and exclude out-group members (Hernes and Maitlis 2010). However, apart from the separation aspect that is commonly emphasized in studies that examine identity development (Vaara, Tienari, and Santti 2003; Watson 2009), partners also use boundary strategies to relate with others, to bring them together and help them organise their (inter)actions, and identify themselves in a joint accomplishment through their interaction with the social context of the collaboration.

Boundary strategies of separation and integration are sustained and (re)produced through partners' constant actions, interactions and relationships in the social context. They allow partners making sense of the changing collaborative social context while bounding ideas that are important to their membership, developing norms of behaviour that help them regulate their behaviour and position themselves in relation to different groups. Identity construction therefore takes place though boundary strategies of separation and integration that allow partners to form different identities responding to the changing social context and needs of the collaboration. This research develops the literature of identity formation in collaborations by demonstrating that the construction of identities takes place through boundary strategies of separation and integration

Methodology

In 2000 the European Union urged the Greek government to improve the public education for disabled students. This resulted in the establishment of KEDDY Aitoloakarnanias Educational Collaboration (KAEP). KAEP now forms the main public body responsible for assessing intellectual disability, determining students' placement in the appropriate school and offering educational support to disabled students. KAEP Centers opened in every prefecture in Greece to ensure that disabled students receive support at local level. The paper is based on a research conducted with KAEP Aitoloakarnanias that was established in Messologi in 2000.

Following the government's protocol, the collaboration has four partners: KEDDY Aitoloakarnanias, parents of disabled children, local state schools and local governmental services. KEDDY consists of a multidisciplinary team: psychologists, teachers, physiotherapists, social workers, occupational therapists and speech therapists. Its main role is the identification of the type and degree of children' disability and the development of individualised educational plans to help children overcome their disabilities. KEDDY has to collaborate with local governmental services (school consultants of special and mainstream education; Aitoloakarnanias central departmental council of primary education; and Aitoloakarnanias central departmental council of secondary education) in order to ensure that a child with disabilities is referred to KEDDY for support and that the schools receive the necessary financial assistance for the implementation of the KEDDY's educational plan. Local state schools ensure that a government representative is informed when a child faces a disability and they are also responsible for the implementation of the KEDDY's educational plan. However, the process of the support of a child cannot be initiated if the parents do not agree with a child's referral to KEDDY for examination. Moreover, the support process cannot progress unless the parents accept the disclosure of KEDDY's diagnosis and educational plan to the local governmental service and the child's school.

Every student that engages with the collaboration has different needs and is a unique case for the partners. It is therefore very difficult to manage the collaborative process since partners find themselves often having to walk a thin line between following the collaboration's protocol and regulations while having to improvise and remain flexible to accommodate the needs of the different students. In this dynamic and changing collaborative context, constructing collaborative and non-collaborative identities became a strategy that helped partners respond to emergent contextual and relational needs while attempting to achieve the aims of the collaboration.

Data collection

For the exploration of identity formation in KAEP a longitudinal ethnographic study was conducted at four stages over a period of sixteen months. The data corpus consists of interviews, observations, documents and field notes.

The researcher observed KAEP and thirteen partners' meetings at four different time periods in order to detect developments or changes (Bryman and Bell 2011) in the social context, identities and management processes over time. Observations allowed the researcher to come 'in contact with the evolution of the different voices as they develop and emerge in a living social context, expressing the construction and deconstruction of shared meaning' (Steyaert and Bouwen 2004, 143). By observing the partners' everyday life it was possible to explore the partners' identities, working lives, (inter)actions and experiences throughout different emergent social contexts. The development and the management of the collaboration at different periods were also captured. Numerous field notes were produced from the observations.

Observations of the collaboration were interwoven with interviews in order to familiarise further with the subject matter and ensure the collection of valid data (Flick 2007). Semi-structured in-depth interviews provided an initial framework for areas of discussion whilst allowing the respondents to set the agenda of the interview (Bryman and Bell 2011) and offered a space for negotiation of meanings and surprise elements (Flick 2007). In total, forty-three semi-structured interviews were collected from all the four partner-categories of the collaboration. The length of the interviews ranged from eighteen to eighty minutes, with a medium duration of fifty-five minutes. Interviews were conducted with all the KEDDY employees and the three government representatives working for the partnership. From a list of the public schools of the prefecture, four teachers and four head teachers from four schools that had collaborated with KAEP were randomly selected. Moreover, three parents of disabled children were randomly selected from a list that KAEP provided.

Finally, data was collected through informal and formal documents of the collaboration. These documents allowed information gathering on issues that could not have been readily addressed through other methods (Bryman and Bell 2011). Forty-eight documents that appeared relevant to the research purposes and were fully understood within the broader context of the inter-organizational collaboration were selected for analysis (Steyaert and Bouwen 2004).

Data analysis

The data was analyzed in two stages. Firstly, a thematic analysis of the data was conducted with all the interviews, field notes and documents gathered. The aim of the initial analysis was the identification of the different social contexts that the partners experienced. This contextual knowledge allowed the observation of the changes and similarities in the collaborative process, and of the development of different identities and management processes over time in different contexts of interaction. The analysis also offered four phases that described the collaborative process that partners should ideally follow in order to achieve the collaboration aims. Despite variations based on each case/student, partners would follow these phases to ensure continuity in the collaboration process.

Using this contextual knowledge, at the second stage of the analysis the researcher conducted a narrative analysis to the stories found in the forty-three interviews. The stories were analyzed using the poetic structural narrative approach that allowed the analysis of the structure and meaning of the text in relation to its context (Gee 1991; Riessman 2002, 2008). The text was analyzed in stanzas, scenes and parts. Stanzas were used to incorporate non-narrative parts of the interviews in the analysis. They were organised into scenes that described the (inter)actions and identities that were developed in different contexts and helped achieve coherence in the story. Finally, the scenes fell into parts, larger units that built the story as a whole. At the next stage of the analysis, the turning points (parts where the participants indicated a fundamental change in the expected interactions and course of life) in the stories were identified.

The emergent narratives that described how partners constructed multiple identities over time were placed on the four stages that the first analysis revealed in order to be 'located in particular times and places and (be presented as) works of history, as much as they (were) about individuals, the social spaces they inhabit, and the societies they live(d) in' (Riessman 2002, 697). The narratives were further enriched with data from documents and observations that allowed the illustration of how these narratives were placed in a specific social context and were affected by this context.

At the end of the process of analysis several narratives demonstrated how partners engage in a dynamic and situational development of multiple identities through boundary strategies in order to achieve the collaboration aims. However, in order to be able to provide a complete picture of the different social contexts, identities and (inter)actions developed over time, and understand how partners form multiple identities in order to respond to the changing collaborative contexts they experienced, four narratives are presented in this paper; the narratives of George (parent of a disabled child), Maria (KEDDY psychologist), Christine (school teacher) and Rob (government representative).

Achieving effective collaboration in KAEP

This section presents the four emergent identity narratives of Maria, George, Rob and Christine. Their stories present how the partners of a public inter-organizational collaboration constructed different identities through boundary strategies of separation and integration in order to achieve the collaborative aims.

1. Conflict is part of the collaborative process

Maria is a KEDDY psychologist and according to her job responsibilities she has to work together with the teachers in order to diagnose students' disabilities. When she first engaged with the collaboration, Maria used the boundary strategy of inclusion to form a collaborative identity that allowed her to work together with the partners for the support of the students. She therefore identified herself as an excited new partner who had to adapt to the new environment and role. This identity was congruent with the way she perceived KAEP collaboration, as a space where conflict or competition did not occur.

I can still remember the excitement of my first day at work … I thought that the power of collaboration was on acting as one unit to achieve our aims. I couldn't see any other way to make it work. However, I didn't know much about the collaboration. I had to learn how it works ... Everyone was nice ... when I saw how nice they were, I relaxed and put forward my friendly face. ... I made clear to my colleagues that I wanted to work hard, learn my job well and help.

However, two months later Maria disagreed with a teacher on a student's diagnosis*: 'I was in KAEP only for two months. I had a case with Kate (KEDDY teacher) and we disagreed on the diagnosis.'* This disagreement becomes the turning point of the narrative that requested the construction of a new identity. Competition within the collaboration emerges and the context of interaction changes.

She (KEDDY teacher) thinks that because she is working in KEDDY for four years, she knows everything. However, she never took a course on special education … But, as a psychologist, I know more about disabilities because I have studied this field.

In order to validate her diagnosis the teacher asked for the support of another teacher: *'Lisa (KEDDY teacher) actually told me that we should proceed with Kate's diagnosis because I was in KAEP for only two months and I didn't have experience.'*

Realizing that she had entered a competitive environment where teachers support each other and being convinced that her diagnosis was correct, Maria used the boundary strategy of separation. In this way she developed a professional identity that allowed her to support her diagnosis against the diagnosis of the experienced but unknowledgeable teachers. At the same time her professional identity brought her together with the other psychologists and allowed her to work together with them to support her diagnosis: *'I explained my case to her (KEDDY psychologist) and she agreed with my diagnosis. We went together to the manager and we presented our case.'*

Through her initial portrayal of the collaboration Maria became an excited new partner expressing her belief that only through collaborative efforts KAEP would treat their cases successfully. This identity agreed with her perception of a perfect collaboration. Yet, at the end of her story, Maria incorporated a more complex view of the collaboration indicating that collaboration can be achieved even if there is conflict between the partners. In identifying herself as a psychologist her actions within the collaboration changed allowing her to compete with the teachers and seek support from the group of psychologists. In this way, she managed to prove that her diagnosis was correct and support the student successfully. Conflict therefore appeared as part of the collaboration and as part of what working together means.

And in the end, it was proved that my diagnosis, not theirs (teachers), was correct but we worked together for the production of the final report. I guess we can also collaborate even if we have conflicted views. ... I don't see myself just as one of KEDDY psychologists. ... We are here to support children that need our help.

2. Collaborating through ambiguity and complexity

Christine is a new teacher who does not have experience and knowledge working with disabled students. When she first started working for the school, she had in her class a student with a learning disability. KEDDY's team had diagnosed the student and had suggested a plan for his support. KEDDY reassured Christine that she would be supported by a specialist teacher in disability issues in order to be able to implement the educational plan that KEDDY suggested. Even though Christine did not have experience working with disabled students, she used boundaries of integration in order to identify herself as a helpful partner willing to follow her partners' suggestions.

When KEDDY sent me Jenifer's educational plan ... (it indicated that) I had to support the student with extra curriculum activities. He (KEDDY employee) told me that I could organise *my teaching activities with the help of a specialist teacher. ... However, the (KEDDY) employee told me that it will take some time for the establishment of the integration unit, and therefore for a specialist teacher to be available. He actually told me that it usually takes one-two months. ... How could I say no (to help the student)? -- I just couldn't!*

However, Christine's colleagues explained to her that it may take longer than expected for a specialist teacher to be available to help her: *'One of my colleagues and my head teacher had collaborated with KEDDY for another case and KEDDY didn't fulfil their promises. They also told me (that) KEDDY only makes suggestions. The government will decide (the availability of the specialist teacher).'*

Christine realized that she was not part of a supportive and trustworthy group of partners: *'They (KEDDY employees) weren't honest with me. How can we work together if we do not trust each other?'* She therefore had to reconsider her collaborative identity and use the boundary strategy of separation in order to protect herself from the dishonest partners. Christine identified herself based on her organization as an uncompromising teacher and decided that she would not help her student unless she got help from a specialist teacher: *'I decided not to accept the responsibility. ... I didn't mind that I had to work extra hours but it wasn't fair to ask me to do something beyond my responsibilities without having the appropriate support.'* This was Christine's way of resolving the tension she experienced as a partner of the collaboration who had to follow the rules and support the student, and as a partner who was not treated with honesty. This was also her way to put pressure on KEDDY in order to send a specialist teacher as soon as possible. In fact, her approach was successful since KEDDY assigned a specialist teacher to help Christine in less than a month. As such, she was able to overcome delays and obstacles in the process, and offer timely support to her student.

At the end of her narrative, Christine explained that the partners cannot collaborate if they do not trust each other, especially when the collaborative process is ambiguous and complex since they have to deal with different students every time.

I was new and I didn't know how KEDDY works. ... If KEDDY employees were honest with me and had explained to me the process (for the availability of a specialist teacher) I would have accepted to support the student (immediately). You can't work with someone you don't trust! ... Although I accept that it is difficult to understand the rules of such a complex collaboration.

3. Compromise is necessary

George is the father of a disabled child. Through a journey of self-discovery George goes from resistance to compromise while engaging with the collaboration. His journey starts when he first learnt that his son had a disability. Initially he formed the personal identity of a frustrated father who had to deal with the 'bad' and unexpected news of his son's disability.

It took me some time to realize that the teacher actually meant that my child had a problem, that he was sick, that he was not normal. ... I was disappointed and angry at my son. I thought it was his fault because he wasn't trying hard.

Despite his frustration, George wanted to help his son overcome his disability. He therefore went to KEDDY to meet with the social worker and discuss his son's case.

He (the social worker) said that Mike's home environment was not appropriate. ... I was shocked with his diagnosis. How could he claim that it was my fault? I was so disappointed and sad. ... I would do anything to help him!

The diagnosis of the social worker offered the turning point in George's story. The diagnosis upset George who felt the need to formulate a new collaborative identity in order to defend himself against the social worker's accusations and stay focused on the collaborative aim which was the support of his son. Through the boundary strategy of integration, George constructed his identity as a collaborative member willing to work together with the partners to help his child overcome his disability.

Despite the fact that I was helping my child, there were more things I could do. ... I should work with the partners to help my son. ... I decided that I should make clear that I was there to support my son.

The new identity allowed George to understand how he could ensure that his actions and behaviour were in accordance with the collaboration aims. As such, even if his original reaction was negative, he decided that compromise was the best way to engage with the collaboration: *'I tried to defend myself saying that although I was trying, maybe this was not enough. I made clear that I was happy to follow the social worker's suggestions in order to improve the home environment for Mike.'*

4. Breaking the rules to achieve aims

Rob is one of the government representatives of the collaboration. As the collaboration rules indicate, his role is to diagnose a disabled child and then request the intervention of the special school consultant who is responsible for referring the child to KEDDY. His story is about a disabled student, Marina, who needed urgent support from the collaboration. When dealing with Marina's case, George identified initially himself as a governmental partner that should work with the other partners and follow the collaboration rules for the successful support of the student.

Marina was a disabled child. ... I went to the school (to diagnose the child's disability). ... It wasn't hard to conclude that Marina was depressed. ... I wrote my report. It usually takes me one week, but in this case the problem was clear and the case urgent. -- I sent it (the diagnosis) to the head teacher and the special educational needs school consultant, Andy.

Rob explained to Andy the urgency of Marina's case and expected that his partner would take immediate action to support her. Yet, the special consultant ignored Rob's request and delayed the examination of the student: *'He told me that he was still very busy and he was planning to go to Marina's school at the end of the term.'* Rob had to reconsider his collaborative identity if he wanted to help the student. Employing the boundary strategy of separation he was able to distinguish himself from the other partners and find a more effective way to support the student fulfilling his role in the collaboration.

Forming the identity of the rebel against the system, Rob was able to skip the collaborative protocol. He contacted KEDDY's manager and asked his permission to personally refer Marina to KEDDY. Although not all KEDDY managers would be flexible to the collaboration rules, KEDDY Aitoloakarnanias manager was already informed about Marina's case from her parents. He therefore agreed that her case was urgent and decided to make an exception and accepted Marina's referral directly from Rob: *'I called KEDDY. ... He (KEDDY manager) therefore told me that he would make an exception and would accept a student in KEDDY with the school consultant's referral and not the special consultant's referral. I didn't think about it.'*

In order to avoid complications in a social level (since he did not act as it was expected based on his role as a governmental partner) and personal level (he feels guilty for not following the collaboration rules), at the end of his narrative Rob emphasized that even if the specific case called for rule breaking, this would not always be appropriate. The next quotation shows the internal tension he experienced having to form different identities.

I just wanted to clarify that I believe that in some cases partners have to ignore the protocol and adapt to the specific needs of the cases they have to deal with. We need to be flexible since every time we deal with very different cases. -- However, this doesn't mean that we have to underestimate the rules. Rules are there to help the partners achieve their aims; to help us collaborate and know the boundaries of our roles. They should be broken only in 'special' cases.

Concluding discussion

The four stories presented in this paper illustrate that partners used boundary strategies of separation and integration in order to construct different identities that allowed them to respond to the changing social contexts they experienced and achieve the collaborative aims. The paper contributes to the literature on identity formation in collaborations and on the management of public inter-organizational collaborations.

Contrary to the majority of the studies that explore collaborative identity construction in collaborations, the analysis indicates that partners develop not only collaborative but also non-collaborative identities (i.e. professional, personal and organizational) in order to accomplish the collaboration goals. The stories illustrate that, as partners engage in different collaborative social contexts, they employ boundary strategies of separation and integration in order to make sense of the changing context, organise their interactions and relationships, and construct different identities as 'socially negotiated temporary outcome(s)' (Ybema et al. 2009). For example, employing the boundary strategy of inclusion Rob acts as a governmental partner. He therefore follows the collaborative protocol and requests the help of the special consultant. Following the special consultant's delay in responding, he decides to use the boundary strategy of separation in order to be able to abandon his collaborative identity and exclude the consultant from the collaborative process. He therefore forms a personal identity and becomes a rebel against the system. This identity allows him to overcome the special consultant's delays and provide immediate support to the student. Maria's initial collaborative identification as an excited new partner is challenged through her disagreements and misunderstandings with the partners regarding a student's diagnosis. Using both boundary strategies of separation and integration she is able to separate herself from the other partners and work together with the psychologists. She therefore develops the professional identity of the psychologist and accurately diagnoses the child's disability achieving the collaboration aim. Through his embeddedness with the collaborative context, George changes the negative perception of his child's disability and, shifting his personal identity as a frustrated parent, he becomes a collaborative member. Employing the boundary strategy of integration he is able to work together with the other partners to support his son. Finally, Christine initially used the boundary strategy of integration to identify herself as a helpful partner willing to work for the accomplishment of the collaborative goals. However, in her engagement with the partners she experienced dishonesty and luck of trust. She therefore uses the boundary strategy of separation in order to distance herself from the other partners and become an uncompromising colleague. Acting in accordance with her organizational identity, she denied supporting the student before the specialist teacher was available to help her. In this way, she puts pressure on the partners who are forced to fulfil her request immediately and as a result timely support is provided to the student.

The analysis therefore advances the literature on identity construction in collaborations in two ways. Firstly, it reveals that partners dynamically and socially form collaborative and non-collaborative identities in order to respond successfully to the changing collaborative contexts they experience. Secondly, the research illustrates that partners' multiple identities are constructed through boundary strategies of separation and integration that allow partners to both separate and connect with each other (inter)acting and organising their social relations in a way that fits the interests of the collaboration. These findings also advance the management of public inter-organizational collaborations indicating that managers should not only request from the partners the development of collaborative identities. In contrast, personal, professional, organizational etc. identities can also support the collaborative process.

This research contributes to the management of public inter-organizational collaborations in two other ways. Firstly, it offers four collaborative patterns that managers should take into consideration in order to support collaborative work. The first pattern emerges from Maria's story and indicates that while coalition is ideal, confrontation is also necessary when collaborating. The second pattern from Christine's story is that although trust may be a necessary starting point in collaboration, it appears that honesty might be gained only after a long process. Rob's story offers a third collaborative pattern which suggests that even if the ideal way of collaborating is by adapting to the emergent needs of the collaboration, in practice, adaptation or agreement is reached after discussions, disagreements and conflict. The final pattern arises from George's story and suggests that even if partners enter the collaboration believing that the ideal way of collaborating is by compromising, they have to adapt to the emergent needs of the collaboration and accept that resistance is sometimes necessary for achieving compromise. However, by offering these collaborative patterns this research does not suggest that there are easy and fixed ways to manage collaborations (Hibbert and Huxham 2010). In contrast, this paper suggests that even though there are some patterns that managers could follow to support the collaborative efforts, the management of public inter-organizational collaborations is a very complex and difficult endeavour that cannot be accurately planned beforehand since the outcome of the collaboration depends on the partners' interactions, relationships, misunderstandings, disagreements, etc that take place in particular social contexts.

A current debate in the collaboration research is whether inter-organizational collaborations should be perceived as linear and ordered processes where managers can identify factors, stages and structures that could provide some stability and certainty to the management of the collaborative process (i.e. Beck 2006; Walsh and Maloney 2007) or if every collaboration is a unique product of a specific context, time and circumstances and therefore it constantly changes without being possible for the managers to predict its outcome (i.e. Bechky 2003; De Rond and Bouchikhi 2004; Huxham and Vangen 2005). This study goes beyond this debate illustrating that managers should not seek to resolve the tension between stability and change in public inter-organizational collaborations. When partners enter the collaborative context, they have formed some perceptions regarding the collaboration, what their role is and who they are in the collaborative process (Gray 2008). However, as the analysis demonstrates, when the partners engage with the collaborative social context, they face misunderstandings, disagreements and obstacles that challenge established realities, roles, ideas and processes. All these require partners to use boundary strategies of separation and integration in order to form new identities that help them organise their activities. Boundary strategies of separation and integration enable partners to be flexible and form identities that allow them to either follow the protocol of the collaboration or break it in order to nurture the collaborative process and help achieve the collaboration aims. Boundary strategies therefore create both spaces of regulation and stability that offer continuity in the collaborative process, as well as spaces of learning and change that offer innovation and adaptation of the collaborative process. Employing different boundary strategies to form multiple identities allows for inclusion and exclusion, for innovation and stability, and for learning and regulation helping partners engage with the collaborative context in a more effective way, even if temporary. This research therefore offers a third contribution to the management of public inter-organizational collaborations by suggesting that managers should not resolve but maintain the tension between stability and change, between separation and integration, between following and breaking the rules in order for partners to make sense of the collaborative process and accomplish the collaboration goals.

Despite the evidence offered by this research, new studies are needed in order to explore whether there are alternative boundary strategies that partners could use to construct their identities and achieve collaborative goals. Further examination of the formation of collaborative and non-collaborative identities in different types of collaborations would also be useful in order to establish whether boundary strategies of separation and integration are used by partners to identify themselves in different collaborative settings. Finally, further studies could explore identity construction through boundary strategies of separation and integration in order to identify additional collaborative patterns that managers may use to support collaborative work.

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