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**CULTURALLY DIVERSE COLLABORATIONS: A FOCUS ON  
COMMUNICATION AND SHARED UNDERSTANDING**

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## **CULTURALLY DIVERSE COLLABORATIONS: A FOCUS ON COMMUNICATION AND SHARED UNDERSTANDING**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores communication and shared understanding in culturally diverse collaborations. It draws on empirical research involving a large UK organization that collaborates with many public, private and not-for-profit organizations located in many different countries across Africa, Asia, Europe and the USA. Through analysis located in a ‘culture paradox’, it proposes a multifaceted account of cultural diversity which has implications for how communication and shared understanding in culturally diverse collaborations may be understood and managed. It develops two specific management tensions pertaining to ‘developing cultural sensitivity’ and ‘designing communication processes’. These tensions explicate the complexity of culturally diverse contexts and highlight pertinent trade-offs and compromises that may enhance a collaboration’s ability to yield advantage rather than inertia.

## INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, organizations continue to use collaboration as a means to achieving outcomes that are too ambitious for any single organization to deliver on its own. The common rationale underpinning such inter-organizational collaboration is that the amalgamation of different partners' resources, skills and expertise can yield collaborative advantage (Dyer, 2000; Lasker, Weiss, and Miller, 2001; Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Yet collaborations are *evidently challenging* to manage to the extent that *collaborative inertia* rather than *collaborative advantage* describes better what tends to happen in practice (Huxham and Vangen 2005; O'Leary and Bingham 2009; Saz-Carranza, 2012). While a whole host of issues impact on the management of collaborations, one issue that is important yet under-researched in this context is cultural diversity (Im, 2013; Oberfield, 2015; Vangen and Winchester, 2014). Public sector collaborations are increasingly inherently culturally diverse owing to the changing demographics of the workforce and to their sphere of activity increasingly spanning national as well as organizational boundaries (Foldy, 2004; Oberfield, 2015). Moreover, partners that have the potential to generate advantage through joint efforts inevitably bring to the collaboration different professional, organizational and sometimes national cultures which all need to be navigated and managed for the collaboration to yield advantage rather than inertia (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Gibbs, 2009; Kelly et al., 2002; Vangen and Winchester, 2014). While diversity can have both positive and negative outcomes for collaborative work, research often highlights differences in ways of communicating and the high potential for friction and misunderstandings (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Kelly et al., 2002). Individuals' perceptions of diversity impact on how they express and subsequently manage related issues (Ely and Thomas, 2001), but the actual

question of how to manage communication and shared understanding in culturally diverse collaborations could be better understood. To that end, I explore the following questions in the context of research involving individuals who manage and lead culturally diverse collaborations on behalf a large UK-based organization:

How do managers perceive cultural diversity in the cross-national collaborations that they manage?

How do these perceptions inform the management of communication and shared understanding in collaborations?

The paper draws on and aims to make a contribution to literature on the management of collaboration (e.g. Bryson et al., 2015; Keast et al., 2013; Kenis and Provan, 2009; McGuire, 2006; McGuire and Agranoff, 2011; Turrini et al., 2009) and to the theory of collaborative advantage (TCA) (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Vangen and Huxham, 2013). Taking the collaboration as the unit of analysis, the focus is on formalized joint working arrangements between organizations which remain legally autonomous while they engage in coordinated collective action to achieve joint outcomes. The TCA is an evolving, practice-oriented theory addressing issues that are evidently difficult to manage in practice. It is structured around overlapping themes (including goals, power, trust, structural ambiguity and leadership), describes the complexity that underpins collaborative situations and provides theoretical conceptualizations and frameworks that can be used to support reflection in practice. This paper examines a ‘culture’ theme, wherein culture is defined broadly as partners’ habitual ways of being and acting that stem from the distinct professional, organizational and national cultures to which they belong. It explores the research questions with reference to a ‘culture paradox’ which depicts that, with specific reference to

collaboration, *cultural diversity is simultaneously a source of advantage and a source of inertia* (Vangen and Winchester, 2014, 2). This paradox thus explicitly acknowledges the benefits of cultural diversity (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Kelly et al., 2002) as well as associated conflicts, misunderstandings and points of friction (Bird and Osland, 2006; Kumar and Nti, 2004; Prevot and Meschi, 2006; Shenkar et al., 2008).

The paper proceeds to provide a synthesis of literature on cultural diversity in collaborations and an outline of the research approach. It then conceptualizes managers' perceptions of culture in collaborations which effectively highlights the need for a multifaceted account. In that specific context, it proceeds to develop two specific 'management tensions' (Huxham and Beech, 2003) relating to 'developing cultural sensitivity' and 'designing communication processes'. Drawing on the literature and the current research, the two management tensions depict trade-offs and compromises in the practice of managing communication and shared understanding in culturally diverse collaborations.

## **RESEARCHING CULTURALLY DIVERSE COLLABORATIONS**

In the literature on inter-organizational collaboration, culture is typically considered in terms of norms and values, interpersonal behaviours, organizational practices and languages which influence individuals' perceptions, actions and behaviours in collaborative settings (Cray and Mallory, 1998; Martin, 2002; Schein, 2004; Vangen and Winchester, 2014). The literature conceptualizes implicitly a variety of 'communities of belonging' which display different cultural diversities. Diversity is recognized in terms of demographics

variables including race, ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, nationality and sexual identity (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Foldy, 2004).

Three distinct types of culture – national, organizational and professional – that are identifiable from the broader management literature are consistent with the definition of culture above and the perceptions of ‘communities of belonging’ that emerged out of this current study. This broad identification of separate cultures suggests that national culture can convey something about individuals and nations in terms of cognitive values and beliefs (Hofstede, 2001). While organizational cultures may be influenced by shared values and beliefs, the focus in the management literature is primarily on practices and ways of doing things in an organization (Schein, 2004). In comparison with national cultures which are seen as quite permanent in their nature (Cray and Mallory, 1998), organizational cultures may be subjected to change (Cameron and Quinn, 1999). A professional culture refers to a professional community (such as academics or lawyers) who share some core values, attitudes and beliefs independent of or in addition to those that stem from the national or organizational culture to which they belong (Barker et al., 2005; Hall, 2005; van Maanen and Barley, 1982). As with national cultures, professional cultures are difficult to change (van Maanen and Barley, 1982).

Notwithstanding the potential validity of such cultural classifications, in the context of inter-organizational collaboration, extant research has recently come under criticism for its tendency to take a unidimensional focus on culture (Gibbs, 2009; Winchester and Bailey, 2012). The practice of collaboration shows that cultural differences relate to national as well as organizational and professional cultures (see e.g. Gibbs, 2009; Kelly et al., 2002; Sirmon and Lane, 2004; Vangen and Winchester, 2014). Furthermore, specific collaborative entities

tend to be highly dynamic (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Cropper and Palmer, 2008; Thomson and Perry, 2006), and so culture cannot be a stable account, but rather disjointed and ephemeral in nature. Throughout the life of a collaboration, individuals bring multiple cultures to the collaborative context, all of which potentially influence the performance of the collaboration. Therefore, research on cultural diversity in these contexts appears to necessitate a multifaceted construct. For example, Gibbs (2009) proposed a specific framework of ‘culture as a kaleidoscope’, which takes into account multiple cultural dimensions, each of which may help unify or divide a team. ‘The culture of the global team is thus a constellation of all these [cultural] factors, being shaped by, as well as shaping, the communicative interaction of its team members’ (91).

Extant research suggests that similar cultures influence connectivity and shared understanding between partners (Beamish and Lupton, 2009; Park and Ungson, 1997; Pothukuchi et al., 2002). However, as collaborations span organizational, professional and national boundaries, they frequently incorporate cultural diversity that can cause conflicts, misunderstandings and points of friction (Bird and Osland, 2006; Kumar and Nti, 2004; Prevot and Meschi, 2006; Shenkar et al., 2008). Studies have typically focused on addressing cultural frictions through a three-stage process of recognition, research and reconciliation (Bird and Osland, 2006; van Marrewijk, 2004; Vangen and Winchester, 2014). Points of friction are often presented as bipolar tensions in relation to, for example, how cultural diversity influences interaction, information disclosure and attitudes to learning (Foldy, 2004; Gibbs et al., 2009; Im, 2013). As many collaborations comprise a complex mix of more or less identifiable cultures, the extent to which cultural diversities influence communication and shared understanding between partners is potentially significant.

On the other hand, culturally diverse insights, skills and experiences are in effect resources that can be brought to bear on a collaboration's tasks, enabling it to find new and alternative ways of addressing issues and producing collaborative advantage (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Foldy, 2004; Vangen and Winchester, 2014). For example, while heterogeneity within teams can cause tensions and conflicts, diversity can also heighten team performance, as too much comfort and familiarity can reduce productivity (Edmondson and Nembhard, 2009). In inter-organizational, cross-national collaborations, individuals will bring diverse knowledge, information, different vocabulary and cognitive patterns, and so communication and the sharing of understanding is likely to encounter, for example, the classic 'efficiency versus performance tension' (Nissen et al., 2014). This particular tension stresses that shared knowledge bases increase efficiency and facilitate the achievement of known common goals, but different, complementary knowledge may yield increased performance through more creative outputs, for example. In addition, this paper is concerned with communication and shared understanding potentially involving whole organizations and not just individuals.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

This paper forms part of an ongoing research programme in which my colleagues and I aim to develop practice-oriented theory about governing, leading and managing collaborations (see e.g. Vangen and Huxham, 1997, 2003 a/b, 2012, 2013; Vangen et al., 2015; Vangen and Winchester, 2014; Huxham and Vangen, 2000, 2003, 2005; Diamond and Vangen, 2016). In this programme, we make extensive use of research-oriented action

research (RO-AR) (Eden and Huxham, 2005) and so gather data from organizational interventions on issues that are of genuine concern to the individuals with whom we work and on which they need to act. In RO-AR, the expectation is that the joint work will have genuine implications in practice while also generating insights for theoretical development (Eden and Huxham, 2005). Typically, conceptualizations emerge out of interpretive theorizing from data gathered from many organizational interventions (Ladkin, 2004).

In this paper, however, I use insights from an intervention in a very large UK-based organization that benefits from government funding. The organization's main purpose is to make affordable educational products accessible to users worldwide, and hence it needs to collaborate with a range of other public, private and not-for-profit organizations located in different parts of the world. The intervention took place following a request from a senior manager about help with addressing challenges experienced by the individuals who manage these various collaborations on behalf of the organization. Following agreement with the participants, the intervention entailed a series of four in-house development events which focused on exploring ways of understanding and managing key challenges pertaining to divergent goals, power and trust, structural ambiguity and cultural diversity in the collaborations that they managed.

The thirty-five individuals who participated in the events managed a range of different collaborative situations involving individuals with different professional expertise, located in diverse organizations, including governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities and colleges, UK construction industry organizations and a major multinational organization. Most of the collaborative situations involved more than two organizations, and in many cases the specific collaborations being managed were consortiums with as many as

nine different organizations. Many of those who participated in the interviews are involved with the management of more than one such partnership. All but two of the collaborative situations spanned national boundaries, with organizations in Eastern Europe, Russia, Germany, Latin America, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, India, Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Japan and the USA.

Of particular relevance to this paper is the event on cultural diversity. The paper thus draws on the analysis of twenty-seven 60- to 90-minute unstructured in-depth interviews conducted prior to the event. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, stored and analyzed using the cognitive mapping software, Decision Explorer (Eden and Ackermann, 2002). The Decision Explorer software allowed us to produce a large map comprising all interviewees' articulated views about and experiences with the role of culture in collaboration. In this map, individuals' views and experiences were merged by linking similar ideas, thus allowing for the identification of clusters of key issues. This map was explored and elaborated upon with participants during the event itself. The aggregated model, which contained 854 concepts, formed the basis for the conceptualizations in this paper. A small section of a cluster on 'communication complexity' is included below for illustrative purposes.

Insert figure 1 about here

The subsequent process of analysis and conceptualizations focused specifically on the two research questions while drawing on extant approaches to developing practice-oriented theory (see e.g. Huxham and Beech, 2003; Huxham and Hibbert, 2011; Huxham and Vangen, 2003). Thus the aim was to develop concepts that are '*sufficiently recognizable* to seem

relevant to users, *sufficiently generic* to be applicable to users' contexts, *sufficiently creative* to go beyond what users themselves would naturally surmise and have *integrity* through being of importance without providing solutions' (Huxham and Hibbert, 2011, 277). Through interpretive theorizing of the data, I looked for indications of managers' perceptions of culture and identified a wide variety of actions typically taken to deal with challenges and issues that had arisen for them in the management of culturally diverse collaborations. The latter revealed a number of unintended outcomes arising out of seemingly sensible solutions in practice. Further analysis led to the identification of 'management tensions' of the type specified by Huxham and Beech (2003), where a tension is articulated via two extreme ends of practice possibilities. Neither end is likely to be implementable; action in practice is likely to entail compromises and trade-offs located at some point between the two ends. As an integral part of practice-oriented theory, the management tensions are intended to inform reflection in practice. The process of analysis and conceptualization of the tensions was, as is inevitable, interpretive and iterative and entailed experimenting with different possible ways of writing about and articulating the concepts (see e.g. Eden and Huxham, 2006; Huxham and Hibbert, 2011). Nevertheless, the data analysis and subsequent conceptualization included the following steps:

1. Identification of issues and challenges
2. Identification of solutions and actions taken to address issues and challenges
3. Identification of contradictions and tensions associated with specific actions
4. Writing of statements that reflect the nature of contradictions and tensions
5. Identification of causes for and consequences of contradictions and tensions

6. Writing of statements that reflect commonalities between various causes and consequences
7. Reflecting on any generalizable statements emerging out of the process and using these constructively to write about and articulate contextualized theoretical concepts

In the following sections, I conceptualize, first, managers' perceptions of culture in collaboration and, second, the two specific management tensions pertaining to 'developing cultural sensitivity' and 'designing communication processes'.

## **CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE PRACTICE OF COLLABORATION**

Consistent with Ely's and Thomas's (2001) observation that individuals' perceptions directly impact on how they articulate and subsequently manage issues, I begin in this section with a synthesis of how individuals in the current study perceived cultural diversity in the inter-organizational, cross-national collaborations that they manage. This synthesis yields a multifaceted, dynamic account of cultural diversity, which in turn informs the management of communication and shared understanding, as developed in the next section.

A general observation is that managers perceive cultural diversity as something that needs to be seriously considered and related implications on the working relationship carefully managed, if collaborations are to succeed. As indicated in the statements below, cultural differences are seen as both a source of stimulation and reward and hence, at least indirectly, a source of synergy. Yet they also place additional demand on managers' skills and abilities to accommodate difference and are as such potentially also a source of inertia:

*'If I'm honestly speaking, getting to grips with the cultural issues was a big thing.'* (PM involved with collaborations in India, Ethiopia and South Africa)

*'Culture is a big issue for the partnerships I've dealt with' and 'the difference between those two countries [Zimbabwe and Tanzania] is huge.'* (PM involved with collaborations in Zimbabwe and Tanzania)

*'There is this great burst of enthusiasm and excitement – it's been absolutely fascinating, bizarre and amazing.'* (PM involved with collaborations in Saudi Arabia)

The above examples emphasize in particular cultural diversity in cross-national collaborative settings. However, the data also highlight diversity with reference to professions and organizations, indicating that these too are seen as 'communities of belonging' with which individuals identify and which influence communication and shared understanding between partners. Managers' perceptions of these three communities of belonging are described below.

### **Perceptions of national cultures**

In the current study, managers' perceptions of national culture refer to attributes that they typically associate with individuals' behaviours. Similarities and differences between individuals are recognized and articulated in terms of characteristics such as being relaxed, polite, formal, friendly or reserved. Example comments:

*'X-nationals are more laid-back; they kind of let things drift for months on end.'*  
(Director of International Strategic Partnerships)

*'They don't like to lose face and this is more an issue in their cultures than in our culture.'* (PM for partnerships in Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan)

*'The X-ians may be just a bit more reserved, a bit more standoffish than, for instance, people in Y-nation.'* (PM for partnerships in Russia, Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria)

Notably, managers tend to highlight *individuals' behaviours* rather than describe the nation as a whole. When reflections refer to a nation as a whole – e.g. 'x-nationals are more laid-back' – the individual attributes appear more central – e.g. 'they let things drift for months'. Thus, in culturally diverse collaborations, national culture is recognized in individuals' behavioural characteristics and/or perceived as affecting the actions of the individuals in their interaction and communication with others.

### **Perceptions of organizational cultures**

In contrast, managers' perceptions of organizational culture refer to attributes of the organization as a whole and differences in 'the ways in which organizations do things'. The data include many examples in which individuals pinpoint that organizations' different ways of working require them to be flexible and make allowances to accommodate each other's cultures. Comparisons and contrasts are made relating to organizations' infrastructures, systems and procedures. Whether organizations are 'businesslike or procedure-driven', 'small and adept versus large and inflexible' and 'inward- rather than outward-focused' for example, are perceived as determining the ease with which they communicate, share understanding and work collaboratively with others. Example comments:

*'I realize that this is not a commercial institution ... people aren't held accountable, they're not held responsible for successes or failures and as such it can get quite procedure-driven.'* (PM external affairs)

*'[The organization] has got its own very ... quite difficult culture and they're very politically motivated; they get messages from on high that send them all into a bit of a spin.'* (PM for public/private partnerships in UK)

The various ways in which organizations' cultures influence behaviour at the individual level, e.g. 'people aren't held accountable', are articulated. Nevertheless, perceptions of organizational cultures tend to focus on the organization as a unit, e.g. 'this is not a commercial institution'. These articulated perceptions of organizational culture thus appear tangible in nature along the lines of what Schein (2004) termed 'visible organizational structures and processes' rather than beliefs, thoughts and feelings as held and articulated by individuals.

### **Perceptions of professional cultures**

Perceptions of professional cultures relate to the specific experiences, skills and expertise that individuals bring (or do not bring) to the collaboration. Predominantly, contrasts and comparisons relate to style of communication, types of language used to frame a situation and means of communicating. Statements typically focus on issues such as familiarity (or not) with a professional language, the succinctness (or not) with which individuals communicate and whether communication typically happens electronically, via documents and committees and whether it is formal or informal in nature. Example comments:

*'I think their forays into this language really only occur when they have to put documentation together for [the external regulatory body] or us. And [the external regulatory body] has, again, a different vocabulary.'* (PM for public and faith organization in UK and Germany)

*'Politicians on the whole tend to be more wordy than business people.'* (Director for International Strategic Partnerships)

As with perceptions of national cultures, perceptions of professional cultures identified in this current study tend to focus on attributes that are typically manifested in individuals' behaviours rather than the profession as a whole. The managers in this study focused primarily on differences in styles of communicating and use of language, e.g. 'their forays into this language only occur when they are preparing documentation for the collaboration'.

Arguably then, managers perceive differences and similarities in behavioural characteristics, organizational procedures and language and communication styles stemming from national, organizational and professional 'communities of belonging', which in turn influence communication and shared understanding between collaboration partners. Compared to more homogeneous contexts, it is more likely that conflicts, misunderstandings and points of friction will arise. Hence, a better understanding of culturally influenced interaction behaviours and communication issues, and how to address them, appears to be important if the collaboration is to avoid inertia and generate advantage. The extent to which these differences need to be explicitly recognized as stemming from conceptually distinct cultural 'communities of belonging' is, however, a matter for debate. On the one hand, in terms of managing cultural diversity, research has tended to focus on dyadic collaborative

arrangements and/or single sources of cultural diversity. On the other hand, recent extant research has pointed to the need for a multifaceted focus on culture (Gibbs, 2009; Kelly et al., 2002; Sirmon and Lane, 2004; Vangen and Winchester, 2014).

The current study shows then that managers distinguish between different ‘communities of belonging’ and identify cultural differences with reference to these. However, it also shows that in as far as understanding the kinds of issues that need to be managed, the distinctions are blurred rather than clear-cut. Characteristics of national culture are reflected in an organization’s culture. For example, x-nation partner organization culture has been described as ‘extremely last-minute’, thus reflecting the perceived relaxed and laid-back culture associated with certain nations. Organizations as well as nations have been referred to as being politically charged, businesslike or hierarchical, which again influences individuals’ interactions and behaviours towards others in the collaboration. Professional cultural attributes like expertise, style of communication and language are influenced by and rooted in national and organizational cultures too. I have sought to illustrate this in Figure 2 below. The empty, mottled outlines in the figure are there to indicate that other ‘communities of belonging’ may be identifiable in other collaborative settings; the three highlighted here are relevant to the current study.

*Insert figure 2 here*

While explicitly recognized distinctions between ‘communities of belonging’ may not be essential in as far as managing cultural diversity is concerned, the multifaceted account of culture is *in itself* important. It recognizes that in any cross-national, inter-organizational collaboration, cultural diversity is manifest in multiple interacting ‘communities of belonging’. Furthermore, as collaborative units tend to be dynamic in nature, with members

and purpose changing perpetually (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Cropper and Palmer, 2008; Thomson and Perry, 2006), the cultures that feature within them will be too. Hence, the various ‘communities of belongings’ within which individuals will have recognizably different ways of ‘being, interacting and working’ will be in a constant state of flux. Thus, any account of a collaboration’s cultural diversity will at best be an ephemeral phenomenon. In this sense, it is more akin to Gibb’s (2009) metaphor of culture as a ‘kaleidoscope’. This multifaceted, dynamic account of cultural diversity, as discussed further below, impacts on how communication and shared understanding in culturally diverse collaborations may be managed.

## **MANAGING COMMUNICATION AND SHARED UNDERSTANDING**

Managers’ perceptions of ‘communities of belonging’ and the corresponding multifaceted, dynamic account of cultural diversity, as outlined above, highlight some of the complexity that underpins communication and shared understanding in the context of collaboration. Against this backdrop, this section develops the two specific management tensions that emerged from the analysis. Using the steps outlined in the methodology section above, this conceptualization incorporates the identification of ‘solutions’ and ‘actions’ found in the data, while identifying points where these, albeit equally valid in their own right, trigger specific trade-offs and compromises in practice (Huxham and Beech, 2003).

### **Developing cultural sensitivity**

The current study, as well as extant research, suggests that learning how to work with cultural differences is important if collaboration is to yield advantage rather than inertia. The managers with whom I worked reflected on situations where the importance of understanding better their partners' cultural context and ways of working had been particularly apparent.

Example comments:

*'We went in there gung-ho and hadn't really made allowances for the fact that the x-nation would want different models and different ways of working and so on.'* (PM for collaborations in USA)

*'We were being tainted by a British colonial past ... there were definitely times when we were fairly sure the government interfered.'* (PM for collaborations in Zimbabwe and Tanzania)

*'You need to understand partners' political and cultural issues and what issues relate to your dealings with them.'* (PM for collaborations in Saudi Arabia)

Knowing how to go about developing cultural sensitivity is, however, not straight forward in practice. The data include many examples of the specific ways in which managers invested time and resources to gain a better understanding of and deal appropriately with the cultural issues affecting communication and understanding in their particular collaboration. These included formal information gathering, visits and networking, all aimed at enabling managers to learn about their collaborative context, partners' history and culture. Regardless of the specific learning processes put in place, however, the sheer effort required to understand how a collaboration may work to accommodate the cultural issues affecting it cannot be underestimated. Most appear time-consuming and costly, and in practice compromises are

necessarily common in the interest of getting on with ‘the business at hand’. Sufficient time, however, is not the only requirement. Rather, a key question points to the process of learning and the extent to which cultural sensitivity can indeed be learned.

This question relates partly to the multifaceted, dynamic account of culture as developed in the previous section, and partly to notions of ‘stereotyping’ and ‘cultural superiority’. Any description of cultural diversities inevitably carries the danger of expressing similarities and differences in ‘stereotypical’ manners (Osland and Bird, 2000). The examples in the previous section, about individuals’ etiquettes and norms embedded in national cultures, the attributes, outlooks and efficiencies of organizations and the language of different professionals, are indeed stereotypical in nature. In addition, as indicated in the data, albeit to a much lesser extent, embedded perceptions may convey a sense of superiority of one culture over another. So for example, individuals talk about organizational cultures being more or less conducive to collaborative working and national cultures being too laid-back to foster businesslike attitudes. In encountering differences, therefore, partners may conceive of one culture as superior to another or seek to impose a specific culture over the collaboration (Salk and Shenkar, 2001; Sheer and Chen, 2003; Walsh, 2004).

In terms of the process of developing cultural sensitivity, therefore, one important challenge is that both these practices – stereotyping and superiority – can yield highly inaccurate depictions of the ways in which cultural diversities interact in any particular collaboration. The inevitable simplifications can result in false anticipation of behaviours and misaligned expectations about partners’ aspirations and their capabilities and responsibilities in the furtherance of joint collaboration goals. Most obviously, all individuals from an identifiable profession will not use the same jargon, all large organizations are not

bureaucratic and inflexible with external partners and all individuals from specific nations are not either relaxed or highly strung. Cultural diversity, as shown in this study as well as extant research, is simply more sophisticated and more complex.

Nevertheless, at the level of practice, the need to align expectations and deal with perceptions of superiority suggests a need to address the ways in which embedded expectations and perceptions are formed and how they may be readdressed. Learning about and familiarizing with cultural diversity is central to this. Paradoxically, however, learning introduces a particular problem related to stereotyping; attempts to capture the characteristics of a particular cultural community of belonging inevitably generalize ways of perceiving and understanding difference. Such generalization in turn suggests ways of responding that are not necessarily appropriate or helpful. Moreover, each collaborative situation is, to varying degrees, distinctive in nature in its configuration of cultural ‘communities of belonging’. Therefore, learning how to communicate and share understanding with others who have different ‘ways of being’ or ‘worlds taken for granted’ involves knowing how to manage the distinctive characteristics of each individual situation. Generic learning about cultural diversity and stereotypical descriptions cannot capture the specific confluence of cultural diversity within a specific setting, and so the requisite understanding is not usually transferable from one situation to another and hence it cannot be learned away from context. Inevitably, individuals are likely to enter new situations with embedded ‘ways of being’ which may not feasibly be readdressed with every new or significantly changed collaborative situation.

On the one hand, therefore, research suggests that awareness about cultural diversity is essential to working effectively in culturally diverse collaborative contexts, and on the

other hand the pitfalls of ‘stereotyping’ and ‘superiority’ are inherent in the process of learning. This then gives rise to a particular management tension between, on the one hand, seeing cultural sensitivity as something that can be developed without the specific context and, on the other hand, seeing the development of cultural sensitivity as something that must be situated in the particular context. I have sought to illustrate this tension in Figure 3 below.

*Insert figure 3 here*

The right pole sees cultural diversity as detectable and stable enough to support the idea that cultural diversity can be learned without individuals being embedded in the specific context. The left pole sees culture as socially constructed and dynamic and supports the idea that cultural sensitivity can at best be developed in context. Either view – as illustrated in Figure 3 – implies different pros or cons in as far as developing cultural sensitivity is concerned. The tension suggests that developing cultural sensitivity in inter-organizational, cross-national collaborative contexts inevitably requires compromises and trade-offs in practice.

## **ii) Developing communication processes**

The ‘developing cultural sensitivity’ tension above is concerned in general with the approach to learning about cultural diversity and its potential impact on the practice of collaboration. In contrast, the management tension developed in this section is concerned specifically with the many different ways in which cultural diversity affects the process of communicating and sharing understanding, giving rise to both day-to-day and on-going management issues.

In culturally diverse collaborations, language itself tends to feature as an issue as individuals frequently have different first languages and, as suggested above, are likely to use different professional languages and organization-specific jargon to articulate the same situations. Even when partners appear fluent in each other's natural languages and are confident with each other's vocabulary, subtle differences in interpretations and meaning across the different partners tend to cause confusion and misunderstandings. The language of communication tends to require extra effort and care. Example comments:

*'The x-ian colleagues all are very fluent in English, but they're more fluent than linguistically accurate or aware.'* (PM for public and faith organization in UK and Germany)

*'Our x-ian partners tended to spend time thinking about how they were composing their e-mail message.'* (PM for International Strategic Partnerships)

Many language issues are tangible, and with sufficient time it is possible to identify, for example, situations where jargon and terminology are interpreted differently across different communities of belonging. Other communication obstacles, however, relate to individuals' perceptions of culturally determined etiquette and are frequently less tangible in nature. My initial analysis shows that cultural diversity affects communication and shared understanding in terms of *initiating communication, managing the content* and *managing the style of communication*.

Differences in etiquette are manifested in the ways in which communication is initiated through, for example, knowing *which steps to go through*. Differences relating to, for example, whether to shake hands or use other forms of courtesy, or whether to address

someone with their first or second name, with or without titles and so on, can be important in getting the communication off to a good start. Example comments:

*'The language patterns or the language habits emphasize a fairly ritualized way of communicating with strangers.'* (PM for collaborations in Zimbabwe)

*'I relax far slower than I would with any x-nation institution where I'd be straight into first-name terms.'* (Planning Officer, Strategic Relationships)

In many situations, getting these initial steps right simply helps partners feel more at ease and able to trust, but in other situations it may be essential in securing partners' involvement with the collaboration. However, individuals in the current study also related concerns about situations in which they had failed, initially, to gain co-operation and commitment because specific courtesies expected by their partners had not been adhered to. In these situations, it typically takes longer to develop the necessary trust to progress the collaboration.

A second *initiation issue* featuring strongly in the data relates to different expectations about *who should communicate with whom*. The gist here is that cultures generate different expectations about demographics such as status, age and gender of the individuals with whom others will communicate. Example comments:

*'The culture in x-nation is very hierarchical, so they like to speak to somebody that's at the same level as themselves.'* (PM for partnerships in Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan)

*'The x-ians will allocate a spokesperson rather than all chip in like we tend to do here.'* (Director of international partnerships)

For example, in situations where the manager normally dealing with the collaboration does not meet with partners' expectations about status or gender, it may be possible to bring someone who does into the communication loop. The data include many examples of situations where managers say they 'have to pull all the right strings to make sure those meetings between people at the right level can take place'. At best, accommodating cultural preferences in this way adds a layer of complexity. The more individuals who are in the communication loop, the more time and effort is required to ensure that everyone is properly informed. Where an individual acts as a spokesperson for others, sufficient discussion between all concerned is necessary to avoid a bottleneck for information flow. In either case, there is increased risk of unintentionally misrepresenting others' views and skewing the content of the communication. In other situations, the accumulation of different partners' expectations simply makes it impossible to comply with the preferences of all concerned. Being aware of the need to compromise and knowing when and how to do so is nevertheless essential.

Differences in culturally determined etiquettes can also influence the content of communication in a number of different ways. For example, some cultures are perceived by managers involved in this study as instilling a 'fear of error'. The consequence is that individuals within that culture require very specific guidelines about matters concerning the collaboration because they see it as essential in minimizing the chances of errors being made. In other cultures described as 'laid-back' rather than 'formal', such specific guidelines may be perceived as unnecessary and too restrictive. Similarly, when an error has been made, a sensitive response in a culture characterized by 'fear of error' may be to package it as a

systemic rather than a human error; in others, a sensitive response would involve being direct, specific and to the point. Example comments:

*'Don't highlight the fact that it is an error or they have made a mistake.'* (PM for collaborations in Hong Kong, China and Japan)

*'They want guidelines for everything so that they've got documentation ... it says in here we were supposed to do this and this is what we've done, therefore it is correct.'* (PM for collaborations in Singapore)

*'X-ians are very honest with their views; they are so blunt it hurts!'* (Director of international partnerships)

In a similar vein, communication between partners residing in 'laid-back' cultures and others residing in 'formal' cultures may trigger a tendency for delays by the former followed by a need to chase for responses by the latter. This, in turn, can result in a relatively minor issue featuring in several documentations which, to someone new coming into the communication loop at any rate, can seem more important than it is. If not managed carefully, an issue can be perceived as more important than it is simply because partners had different ways of communicating. Example comments:

*'At the x-ian side there are long delays and nothing gets answered unless it is chased.'* (Planning Officer, Strategic Relationships)

*'Be aware that if you press and press and press on particular questions that makes them appear important; in the grand scheme of things, they may be minor.'* (Planning Manager, Strategic Relationships)

These examples illustrate that the content of any communication may have to be interpreted at the back of an understanding of the various cultures that may have influenced it. Indeed, managers see part of their role as that of interpreting partners' needs and helping them communicate more effectively. They also frequently talk about the need to mediate between external and internal partners rather than sending out documentations of meaningless jargon.

Finally, *culturally influenced styles of communication* also result in different ways of managing communication. In contrast to cultures where chasing for a response is a necessary aspect of effective communication, other cultures seem to trigger the opposite response. Different cultures trigger different managerial responses aimed at responding to partners favouring different styles of communication and also to keep the flow of communication at a manageable level. For example, in some cultures, managers choose to communicate succinctly and to the point to avoid lengthy reasoning and questioning into the content of the communication, whereas in other cultures they use more words to better 'position' themselves. Example comments:

*'Another cultural thing with x-ians is they love to negotiate, not just about money but about anything at all.'* (PM for partnerships in Singapore and Hong Kong)

*'With the x-ians politically you're kind of positioning yourself a bit more, so you build words around that – there's much more wording with the x-ians.'* (Director, International Strategic Partnerships)

The need to communicate and share understanding is essential to collaborate effectively across cultural communities of belonging (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Kelly et al., 2002). The

research suggests, as outlined above, that cultural diversity impacts on communication in a number of different ways. In effect the impact of cultural diversity gives rise to a particular management tension between developing bespoke communication processes that are sensitive to partners' culturally determined needs and adopting a generic form of communication to enact the collaborative agenda, as illustrated in Figure 4 below. On the one hand, accommodating specific culturally generated communication styles is advantageous in order to avoid misunderstandings and build trust. On the other hand, a generic form of communication is necessary to avoid inertia and enact the collaborative agenda.

*Insert figure 4 here*

The tension arises because different cultures encompass different natural and professional languages and culturally determined etiquettes, which impacts on both the process and content of communication. Paying attention to these differences may be essential in securing effective communication and shared understanding. At the same time, any generic form of communication, necessary to enact the joint agenda, may not accommodate all the cultural diversity present in any specific collaboration. This analysis begins to suggest pros and cons associated with different approaches to communication and the kind of judgement and compromises that will be necessary for effective communication and shared understanding to take place in culturally diverse collaborations.

## **CONCLUSION**

The paper began by suggesting that the management of communication and shared understanding in the increasingly culturally diverse public sector collaborations could be

better understood. Drawing on empirical research and relevant literature, the paper makes two main contributions. First, it argues for a multifaceted account wherein diversity is manifest in multiple dynamic interacting ‘communities of belonging’ distinguishable with reference to disparate cultures including national, organizational and professional (Gibbs, 2009; Kelly et al., 2002; Sirmon and Lane, 2004; Vangen and Winchester, 2014). This multifaceted account highlights the idiosyncratic culture of any specific collaboration and puts into question the utility of the one-dimensional accounts of culture prevalent in the literature. While single sources of culture may have some validity for research on dyadic collaborations, it does not seem entirely adequate for culturally diverse public sector collaborations.

The multifaceted account illustrates the complexity pertaining to culturally diverse collaborations, dismisses the idea that conflicts, misunderstandings and points of friction are easily tractable and shows that the process of ‘recognition, research and reconciliation’ (Bird and Osland, 2006; van Marrewijk, 2004; Vangen and Winchester, 2014) may not inform appropriately the management of communication and shared understanding. Furthermore, the account developed here explicitly recognizes the importance of managers’ perceptions of ‘communities of belonging’ and the impact it has on how they articulate challenges, propose solutions and take actions. It begins to highlight the kinds of unintended outcomes that arise from overtly sensible ways of addressing specific issues and challenges pertaining to communication and shared understanding, pointing to an approach to management which entails grappling with tensions rather than resolving conflicts, misunderstandings and points of friction.

Second, following on from the first contribution, the paper contributes to a growing body of literature on collaboration which employs the concepts of paradox and tension

explicitly to frame issues, and highlight and describe contradictions and trade-offs in ways that are both conceptually appealing and practically useful (e.g. Clarke-Hill et al., 2003; Das and Teng, 2000; Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010; Vangen and Huxham, 2012; Vangen and Winchester, 2014). In particular, the paper develops two specific management tensions pertaining to ‘developing cultural sensitivity’ and ‘designing communication processes’. These two management tensions are consistent with the ‘culture paradox’ which suggests that cultural diversity is simultaneously a source of advantage and a source of inertia. As such, the management tensions appropriately challenge the idea that conflicts, misunderstandings and points of friction can or should be resolved (Huxham and Beech, 2003; Vangen and Winchester, 2014). Hence, the paper advocates an analytical framework which recognizes that the management of tensions is an integral part of successfully managing collaborations (Clarke-Hill, Li and Davies, 2003; Das and Teng, 2000; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Vangen and Huxham, 2013; Saz-Carranza, 2012).

The multifaceted account, along with the two management tensions developed in this paper, conceptualizes complexities, contradictions and trade-offs pertaining to learning about, and communicating and sharing understanding in, culturally diverse collaborations. The tensions suggest that managing culturally diverse collaborations cannot be a simple process of identifying problems and appropriate solutions. Rather, an approach which acknowledges the need to address real tensions that are inevitably endemic in nature is required. When used to support reflection in practice, the conceptualizations can heighten awareness of the nature of trade-offs and compromises, urge caution and inform managerial judgement in practice.

The kinds of tensions developed in this paper are not unique and many similar kinds of tensions apply in different ways in different collaborative contexts (see e.g. Saz-Carranza,

2012; Vangen and Huxham, 2012). As such, they are consistent with the view that paradoxes and inherent tensions can enhance understanding of collaboration in ways that mainstream theories cannot (Clarke-Hill et al., 2003; Das and Teng, 2000). As the application of paradox and tensions in this paper offer conceptualizations about how to manage communication and shared understanding in culturally diverse collaborations, the paper begins to plug a particular knowledge gap. Nevertheless, the study may be limited by a UK perspective; despite the inclusion of a disparate number of collaborative situations, the managers involved were all working for the same large UK-based organization. Furthermore, the study adopted a definition of culture which explicitly recognized nations, organizations and professions. As suggested in Figure 2, there may be different equally valid ways of distinguishing between communities of belonging which could potentially yield a different set of management tensions with respect to communication and shared understanding. Further research exploring different ‘communities of belonging’ in different collaborative contexts could usefully contribute to this topic.

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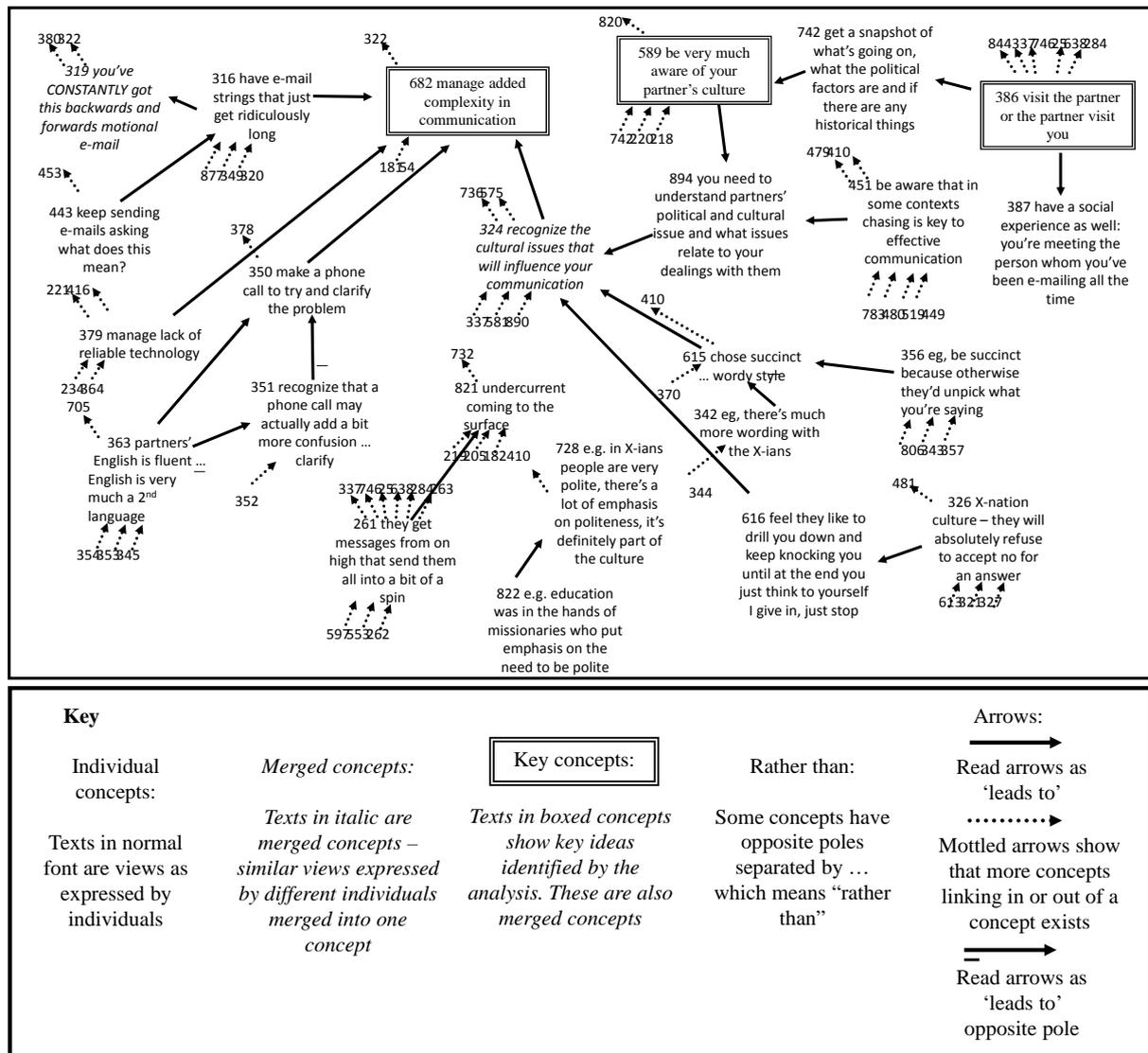


Figure 1: A sample section of the Decision Explorer Map

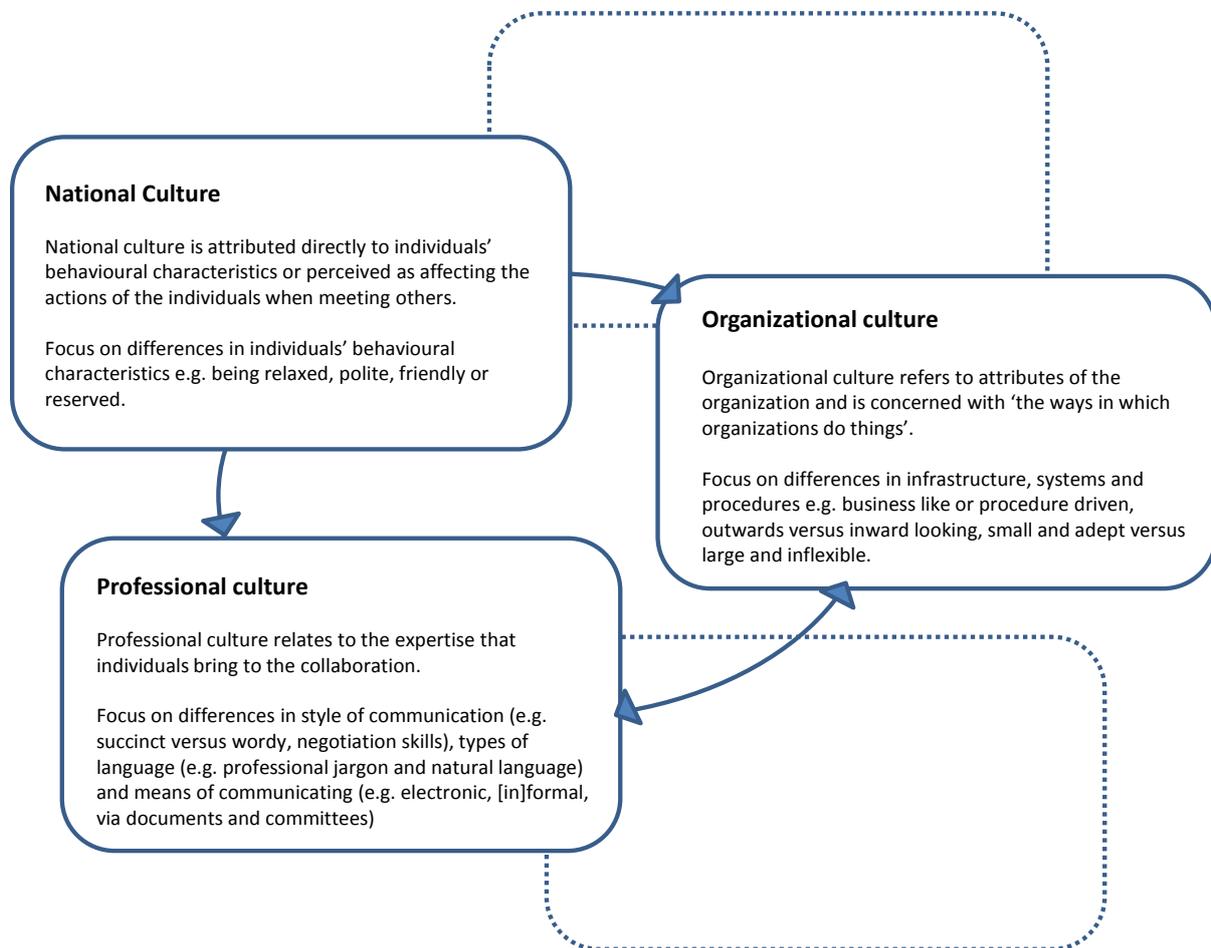


Figure 2: A multifaceted account of culture

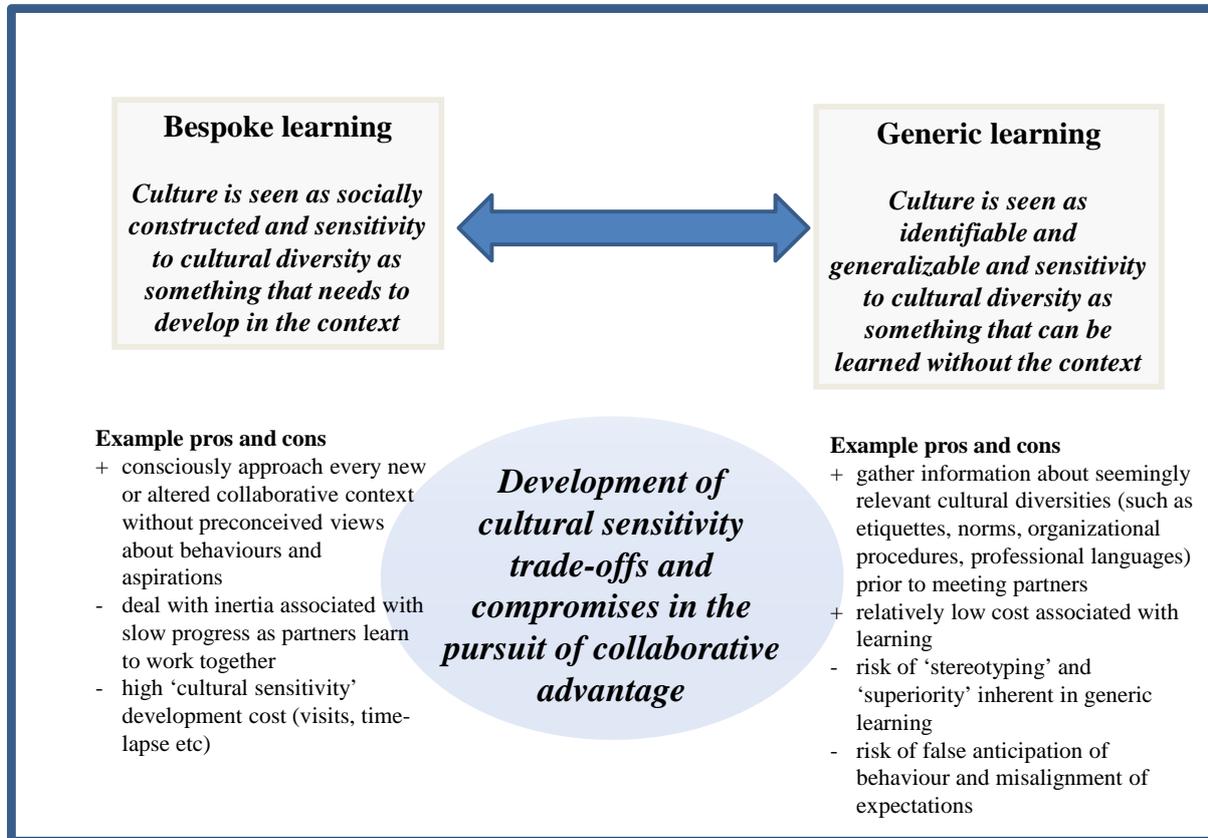


Figure 3: Developing cultural sensitivity tension

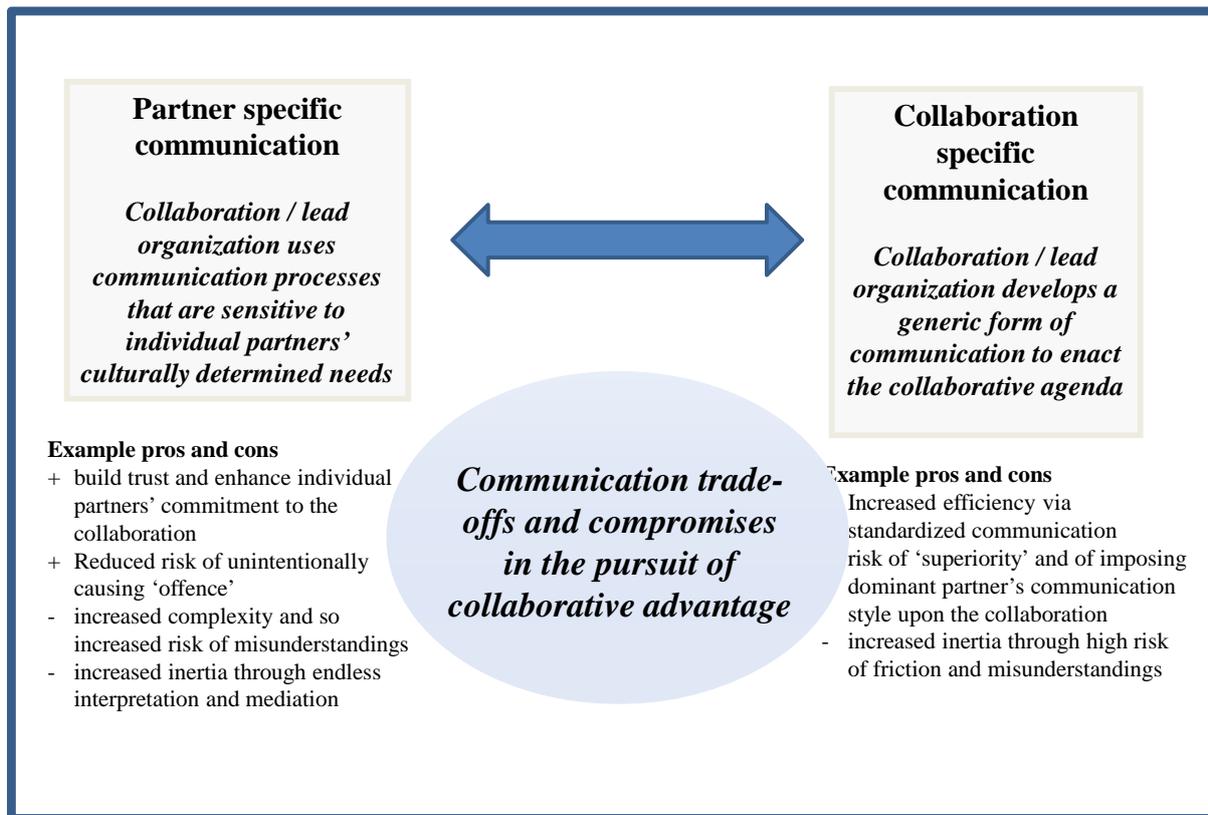


Figure 4: Designing Communication Processes Tension