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Why should we collaborate? Exploring partners' interactions in the psychosocial spaces of an inter-organisational collaboration

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Why should we collaborate?

Exploring partners' interactions in the psychosocial spaces

of an inter-organisational collaboration

Abstract

The study explores the interplay between collaborative and independent action in inter-organisational collaborations (IOCs). Towards this aim, the research suggests the use of psychosocial spaces as an innovative perspective that allows exploring how collaborative and non-collaborative actions unfold, as partners (re)identify themselves in relation to the changing needs of the collaboration. Following a qualitative longitudinal study, the paper contributes the concept of psychosocial space as a distinctive approach to examine IOCs. In this way, the study offers an alternative way to perceive IOCs as interactive spaces characterised and transformed by the collaborative and independent activity embedded within them, and proposes that collaborative and independent actions emerge in IOCs through identity development processes. Finally, the research suggests that identity interactions in IOCs are not a burden in need to be resolved for the achievement of a common collaborative identity.

Introduction

Although the term collaboration by definition relates to different partners/actors working together for the achievement of common goals (Gray, 1989; Huxham and Vangen, 2005), research has shown that, even when partners face issues that obstruct them in working collaboratively, they can still help the collaboration succeed (Bouwen and Taillieu, 2004). In fact, sometimes partners need to work alone in order to manage to work together and achieve the collaboration aims (Bruns, 2013).

This paper builds on this tradition in order to further explore the interplay between collaborative and independent action in inter-organisational collaborations (IOCs). However, as an innovative approach, the study suggests using psychosocial spaces for the exploration of this interplay. IOC's psychosocial spaces relate the need for collaborative action in order to maintain order based on established routines, structures and roles with independent actions that emerge as IOC partners try to organise social relations, interactions and experiences based on the given situations they live through (Dale and Burrell, 2008). The engagement with psychosocial spaces points to the need to explore partners' identities since partners look for identities that will fit the space they experience (Ybema et al., 2012), and allow them to either separate or align their efforts in order to respond successfully to the changing needs of the collaboration. This research therefore offers an original perspective to explore the interplay between collaborative and independent action through identity interactions that take place in IOCs' psychosocial spaces.

The paper uses a qualitative longitudinal study conducted over a period of 16 months with an IOC in Greece. The IOC under investigation consists of four partner-organisations. This research explores the IOC's partners as individual actors that come from different partner-organisations and join their individual efforts in order to achieve the collaborative aims. The focus is on the different collaborative and non-collaborative (organisational. professional, personal) identities that partners bring forward in order to separate or align their efforts in IOC's changing psychosocial spaces (collaborative identity- an individual actor perceives collaboration as the salient category; organisational identity- an organisation becomes the salient category that the individual identifies with; personal identity- a personal category, e.g. parent, victim, becomes salient; or professional category- where the partner perceives his profession as the salient category).

Through the exploration of IOC's psychosocial spaces, the research illustrates the paradoxical and dynamic nature of IOCs that requests partners to constantly (re)identify themselves, in order to be able to bring forward both collaborative and independent actions to respond successfully to the changing spaces they experience. By employing the concept of psychosocial space, the research offers four contributions to the study of IOCs. Firstly, it offers an alternative perception of IOC as an interactive space in a constant state of becoming, characterised and shaped by the collaborative and independent activity that it embeds. Secondly, the paper suggests that identity interactions allow partners to both adapt to the changing needs of the collaboration and maintain some stability. Therefore, it is not necessary to be resolved. Thirdly, it introduces the concept of space for the exploration of different IOC phenomena. Finally, the study proposes that collaborative and independent actions unfold in IOCs through identity interactions.

The article proceeds in the following way. Firstly, the use of psychosocial spaces for the exploration of both collaborative and independent actions as well as identities is presented. Secondly, the research context and methods of the study are introduced. Then, the findings of the study are presented and discussed along with the conclusions of the study.

IOC's psychosocial spaces

Collaborations are commonly perceived as complex and idiosyncratic "temporary evolving forums" (Gray, 1989; Hibbert et al., 2008), where independent actors come together through formal and informal jointly created rules and structures to explore a problem, exchange ideas and find solutions that they could not have found working alone (Gray, 1989). Collaboration, as a process of shared creation, generates a shared meaning, understanding, product, events and action (Das and Teng, 1997). When partners collaborate, they plan, decide, think and act jointly together, and, therefore, the products of their work reflect all the participants' contributions (Ray, 2002).

Yet, being an active member of the collaboration is not only about acting collaboratively (Gray, 1989). Research has shown that, even when partners face, for example, cultural incompatibilities (Kanter, 1994); competitive, opportunistic and individualistic spirits and excessive control by other partners (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Vangen and Huxham, 2003); negative attitudes and opposition to change (Olson et al., 2012); external pressures (Huxham, 1996); different protocols and structures (Bouwen and Taillieu, 2004); or sector

differences which relate to different values, norms and ways of understanding the world (Koschmann, 2016; Olson et al., 2012), they can still be part of an effective collaboration. A smaller part of the IOC research has also illustrated that some tasks require less collaborative efforts than others (Lafond et al., 2011) while individual efforts complement collaborative work (Bruns, 2013) and assist partners in achieving the collaboration aims (Jassawalla and Sashital, 1998). It therefore suggests that partners may act both collaboratively and independently in order to fulfil collaborative goals. The paper builds on this research in order to further explore the interplay between collaborative and independent action in IOCs.

Towards this aim, this research distinctively suggests the concept of psychosocial space as especially useful. Psychosocial space is the space of thought (e.g. knowledge, learning, sense-making, meaning etc.) as well as of social relations and actions (Lefebvre, 1991). It relates the physical environment with the need to maintain order between established routines, structures and roles, and (inter)actions that emerge as IOC partners try to organise social relations based on given situations and spaces (Dale and Burrell, 2008). This explains its dynamic nature and the need for flexibility, innovation and independent action as well as the need for a plan, a collaborative protocol, and collaborative action that will hold it together even if only temporarily.

IOC is not perceived as "a given entity that can be steered from outside, but an interactive space, continuously in-the-making" (Bouwen and Hovelynck, 2006: 130). In fact, IOC as an ongoing process of "heterogeneous becoming" (Chia, 1999: 222) unfolds as partners engage in everyday working relations produced in and by interactions in different psychosocial spaces (Van Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010). These spaces are constantly (re)produced as partners engage in fresh actions which provide the platform for further (inter)actions (Weir, 2010). Psychosocial spaces, therefore, contribute to the transformation of the collaboration and constitute an integral part of the collaborative process.

In fact, while carrying out collaborative tasks, partners have to interact, make sense of, modify, and adjust according to the needs of the specific psychosocial space they experience. In order to do so, they take the undefined space, time and situation and, choosing from different 'interpretative templates' (Czarniawska, 2008), produce a (new) meaning of the space through their practices (Dale and Burrell, 2008). This meaning provides the basis for appropriate action within a specific space that will allow them to fulfil the collaborative aims (Weir, 2010) and is reflected in the identities that partners bring forward (Herington, 1998). In fact, IOC's psychosocial spaces are strongly identity-based since they offer the

'place' where identities are created, developed, expressed and framed as a result of partners' (inter)actions (Lefebvre, 1991). Therefore, identities and actions are intimately related as constituted processes (Simpson, 2009).

Through a "radical historization" process, partners take into account the historical past, previous and current experiences, social relations and interactions in order to bring forward the identity that is situationally suitable (Hall, 1996). Extant research shows that, when a specific psychosocial space requires it, collaborative identity can be brought to the fore to create legitimacy (Wry et al., 2011), increase social capital (Kramer, 2006), enhance in-groupness (Hardy et al., 2005) and/or provide rationale for action according to the moral obligations of a collaboration (Koschmann, 2012). The collaborative identity can therefore be useful in encouraging collaborative action and supporting IOC efforts (Sammarra and Biggiero, 2001). However, when greater flexibility is required to achieve results, partners need to keep their collaborative identity in the background in order to separate themselves from the collaboration and push to the front other non-collaborative identities and roles. For example, while partners try to achieve collaborative aims, they have available organisational and occupational memberships (Humphreys and Brown, 2007), various social groups (Kira and Balkin, 2014) and/or various roles performed at and outside of work (Hogg and Abrams, 1995). All those memberships might be relevant for the collaborative work that partners need to do and offer them potential foci of identification while collaborating (van Knippenberg and van Schie, 2000). Any collaborative, professional, organisational or personal identity is subject to change since, according to the needs of specific psychosocial space that partners experience, different forms of identification emerge, including dis-identification (Garcia and Hardy, 2007). Partners have to constantly search for space-specific identities (Ybema et al., 2012) to align or separate themselves from the collaboration in response to its changing needs (Kourti, 2017). Therefore, by looking at the psychosocial spaces that partners experience while engaging with the collaboration, it is possible to identify the conditions under which different identities come forward, allowing partners to either separate or align themselves and their efforts with the collaboration.

As such, in order to explore the interplay between collaborative and independent action in IOC's psychosocial spaces, this research suggests considering the identity interactions that take place in these spaces. IOCs are highly dynamic (De Rond and Bouchikhi, 2004) and unstable (Hibbert and Huxham, 2010), transformed by the partners' activities (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Through their (inter)actions, partners change the

psychosocial space of the collaboration (Yanow, 2006) and find themselves in need to bring forward different identities in order to cope with the fragmentation of the uncertain psychosocial space they experience, and respond effectively to its changing needs (Van Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010). Identity interactions allow partners to bring forward space-specific identities, allowing them to divide or connect their efforts with the collaboration and others (Ellis and Ybema, 2010). Firstly, this offers opportunities for flexibility, change and innovation (McGuire, 1988) which facilitate effective collaboration (Hardy et al., 2005). Secondly, identity interactions allow partners to align their identities with their work in the collaboration (Kira and Balkin, 2014). Through this alignment, partners are more likely to perceive their work as meaningful (Pratt, 1998), enhance their self-esteem and positive feelings (Haslam, 2001), generate shared understandings and agreements about duties, obligations and location (McInnes and Corlett, 2012) and promote their well-being (Kanter, 1994). Partners are, therefore, more likely to act according to the interests of the collaboration. In contrast, misalignment between their work and their identity will lead to negative emotions (Hogg and Abrams, 1995), reduced performance (Kira and Balkin, 2014) and participation (Haslam, 2001). As such, exploring identity interactions that take place in the changing psychosocial spaces of the IOC is very important to achieve a successful collaboration.

This research focuses on IOC partners as individual actors that come from different partner organisations and join their individual efforts in order to achieve the collaborative aims. As such, it is possible to examine how each partner engages in identity interactions in order to bring forward multiple (collaborative and non-collaborative) identities and organise their actions according to the changing psychosocial spaces of the IOC. When the collaboration becomes the salient social category, then a partner has brought forward a collaborative identity and acts according to the similarities or shared characteristics they have with the other partners and engages in collaborative action with them (Koschmann, 2012). In this study, non-collaborative identities refer to any other type of identity that each partner of the collaboration may bring forward, such as organisational (the partner's organisation becomes the salient category and they act according to the interests of their organisation), professional (the partner's profession becomes the salient category that they identify with and organise their action based on the profession), or personal identity (for example, the partner brings forward their identity as a parent, victim, rebel against the system etc. and acts accordingly).

To summarise, the aim of the paper is to further explore the interplay between collaborative and independent action in IOCs. In order to do so, the study suggests an innovative approach which focuses on the changing psychosocial spaces that partners experience when engaging in daily collaborative work. Looking at IOC's psychosocial spaces allows the exploration of both collaborative and non-collaborative actions that unfold as partners (re)identify themselves in relation to the changing needs of the collaboration.

Research context

The research context is KEDDY Aitoloakarnanias Educational Collaboration (KAEC), where KEDDY stands for Centre for Differential Assessment, Diagnosis and Support of disabled children. KAEC is an inter-organisational educational collaboration established in Messologi (Western Greece) in 2000. Its main aim is to help children with disabilities in the local area by offering free diagnoses and educational plans to support their studies. Following the government's protocol, the collaboration engages regularly with partners that come from four different organisations: KEDDY employees from KEDDY Aitoloakarnanias; parents of disabled children from the local parent council; headteachers and teachers from local public schools; and mainstream and special educational consultants from Aitoloakarnanias Central Departmental Council of Primary Education - ACDCPE (local government service).

As the collaborative protocol -Assessment Protocol (AP)- has specified, the term 'disabled children' is used to cover all the children with long-term medical conditions as well as with learning disabilities. The AP has also defined the roles and responsibilities of each partner as well as the interactions between the partners. As a result, when KEDDY employees, teachers, parents and government representatives engage with the collaboration, they have ascribed identities by the AP. As the KAEC case illustrates, it is only through partners' daily engagement and interactions in the changing IOC psychosocial spaces that these identities are negotiated to ensure that partners act according to the interests of the collaboration.

As the data analysis has revealed, KAEC partners consider the following AP when treating each educational case:

Referral - (main partners involved: headteacher, teachers, educational consultants and parents) following the teachers' observations, the headteacher requests from the educational consultant to examine the child. If the consultant believes that the child is disabled, they request from the special educational consultant to propose some activities to help the child. If these activities fail, the special consultant asks for the parents' permission and refers the child to KEDDY.

Diagnosis - (main partners involved: teacher, special educational consultant and the KEDDY team) the teacher and the special consultant present the child's case to KEDDY. The KEDDY team (psychologist, social worker and teacher) examines the child in order to diagnose their disability and produce an educational plan.

Negotiation - (main partners involved: the KEDDY team and parents) the KEDDY team needs the parents' agreement to be able to send the diagnosis to the child's school and implement the suggested educational plan. The KEDDY team, therefore, presents its report (diagnosis and educational plan) to the child's parents and negotiates its disclosure to the child's school.

Implementation - (main partners involved: ACDCPE, headteacher and school teachers, KEDDY and parents) KEDDY discloses the report to the child's school. The ACDCPE representatives have to approve the funding for the educational support of the child (e.g. establishment of special school units, appointment of specialist teachers, school equipment etc.). The headteacher works with KEDDY to distribute the child's report to the teachers and assist them in implementing KEDDY's educational plan. The parents cooperate with the teachers to assist the child at home.

Method

Data Collection

In order to examine the interplay between collaborative and independent action though identity interactions that take place in KAEC's psychosocial spaces, a qualitative longitudinal study was conducted at four stages over a period of sixteen months.

KAEC weekly informal interactions were observed for a 16 month period. Thirteen formal partners' meetings that took place during this period were also observed. The resulting field notes were incorporated as texts in the final thematic and narrative analysis performed on the data corpus. By observing the partners' everyday lives it was possible to capture the

meaning partners assigned to the collaboration as well as to independent and collaborative actions (Hennink et al., 2011). Moreover, collaboration and identity interactions experienced though daily engagement in different psychosocial spaces were captured. By observing partners' meetings, it was possible to connect different elements and fill gaps on partners' stories and experiences captured during daily observations (Hamera, 2011).

Observations of the collaboration were interwoven with face to face semi-structured interviews in order to go deeper into the various working practices and understand better the meaning that partners ascribed to emergent and established actions as well to the AP (Bryman, 2016). Interviews also offered in-depth information on specific cases (Silverman, 2013) and partners' experiences with the collaboration allowing the researcher to clarify the meaning and interplay of multiple identities that partners went through in emerging psychosocial spaces. In total, 43 in-depth interviews were collected from partners across all the four partner organisations. All KEDDY employees and all local government representatives working for KAEC were interviewed. Further interviews were conducted with four teachers and four local headteachers selected from a list of all the local public schools participating in the collaboration. From a list that KAEC provided, three parents of disabled children were interviewed. The length of the interviews ranged from 18 to 80 minutes, with an average duration of 55 minutes.

Although a total of 85 informal and formal KAEC documents were collected, only 48 were finally deemed appropriate for the research and were included in the analysis. Among the documents collected were partners' reports, blogs, newspaper comments, memos, government and collaboration documents, logs, emails, minutes from meetings etc. These documents showed how different partners interpreted collaborative life, since they were often one of the tangible outputs of partners' interactions and communication in the collaboration.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was initially conducted with all interviews, documents and field notes. The aim of this analysis was to look at changes and similarities in the collaborative process; challenges that partners faced; partners' daily engagement with the collaboration; collaborative practices and interactions; and different collaborative spaces that partners experienced. It was also possible to identify the AP that partners should follow in order to deal with their cases according to the government's instructions. Further, from this analysis it was possible to identify the main characteristics of a salient collaborative identity and define

collaborative actions. More specifically, when partners were bringing forward their collaborative identity, they were working together, prioritising children's needs, following the AP, fulfilling collaborative roles and respecting responsibilities in order to achieve the collaboration aims (mainly, to support effectively disabled children).

The second narrative analysis sought to explore identity interactions and related collaborative and no-collaborative actions in different psychosocial spaces that partners experienced. The study followed a narrative approach for the exploration of identity interactions since "human life is a process of narrative interpretation" (Widdershoven, 1993:2). The study of multiple identities through narratives allowed the exploration of how partners built certain views of reality and the space they experienced, and how they positioned themselves and acted within this reality and space (Figueiredo, 2009). Narrative analysis, therefore, could not have been separated from questions regarding the narrative formation of selves, identities and social realities (Hyvärinen, 2008).

The study focused particularly on personal narratives where partners not only described the psychosocial space of the collaboration but also positioned particular collaborative events and actors (Czarniawska, 1997), organising their experiences and actions from their particular point of view (Riessman, 2008; Wells, 2011). The analysis of personal narratives also offered information about partners' identities (Kourti, 2016) and illustrated 'the active, self-shaping quality of human thought' to produce and recreate identities (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997: xiv).

In order to examine constant identity interactions and unfolding actions in different psychosocial spaces, the personal narratives were approached with a performative lens (Goffman, 1981), looking not only at what was told (the events that the language described) but also at the telling (the positions of characters, listeners, self etc. in particular contexts) of each story (Mishler, 1995). The performative element also included the audience to whom the narration was addressed (Garcia and Hardy, 2007), emphasising that when partners narrated their identities, they did so in relation to an audience who renewed or preserved these identities (Backer, 2008). This placed at the centre of the analysis partners' daily collaborative and independent actions which affected identity interactions (Simpson, 2009). Moreover, through a performative lens, it was possible to explore identity interactions "through a series of performances, or occasions in which identity processes (we)re played out" (Herington, 1998:19), while narrators tried to adjust or manage their identities and actions based on the changing needs of the space (Backer, 2008; Mallett and Wapshott, 2012).

Once each personal story was identified, a poetic structural analysis (Gee, 1991) was used to identify the structure and meaning of each text in relation to its context. The aim of this analysis was not to identify a plot in the text. In contrast, it left space for the open-endedness of the narratives and therefore the inclusion of the ambiguities related to identity interactions. Following this approach, each text was organised in stanzas, scenes and parts. Stanzas were used to incorporate into the analysis non-narrative parts of the interviews. "Each stanza (was) a particular 'take' on a character, action, event, claim, place of information, and each involve(d) a shift of focal participants, focal events, or a change in the time of framing of events from the preceding stanza" (Gee, 1991: 23). Because of the direct performative reference of the narratives of this research, stanzas were organised into scenes (Riessman, 2008) that described the action that took place in a different time and setting, and presented clearly the different ways the narrators positioned themselves in their stories. Finally, the scenes fell into parts; larger units that built the story as a whole.

Each narrative was framed by a main image indicating the narrative's tone and providing a unifying theme. Turning points were also identified. These were moments where partners indicated a fundamental shift in the expected course of the collaboration, partners' actions and/or identities (Riessman, 2002: 706). They were therefore particularly useful in indicating collaborative and independent interplays through identity interactions over time.

Although 22 personal stories were identified and analysed using a narrative approach, only four were selected to represent each partner category in this paper. The following stories present Maria (KEDDY employee), George (parent), Rob (government representative) and Christina's (school teacher) - pseudonyms have been used for the study participants- daily collaborative work with KAEC. These four stories illustrate the different tensions between collaborative identity and multiple personal identifications occurring throughout the four stages of the collaborative process. They illustrate how partners brought forward both collaborative and non-collaborative identities in order to either align or separate themselves and their actions from the IOC, and respond successfully to its changing needs.

Identity interactions in the psychosocial spaces of KAEC

Referral: Referring a disabled child to KEDDY

Rob was a government representative (educational consultant) who had to work with the KEDDY, the school and the special educational consultant (government representative) in order to refer Marina, a disabled child, to KEDDY.

When Rob took over Marina's case he had been working for the government for 11 years and his role and responsibilities as a government representative were deeply rooted. It was, therefore, difficult for him to bring forward his collaborative identity and, as a result, he entered an *incompatible space.* In this psychosocial space his identity as a *government representative* came forward to allow him to act independently from the AP. His *organisational identity* did not obstruct the collaborative work. In contrast, in a paradoxical way, Rob's professionalism and dedication to the governmental protocol (e.g. speaking to the teacher and headteacher, writing the report immediately, calling the special consultant etc.) worked in favour of the collaboration.

"It was very difficult for me to act as a KAEC partner. I was working as a school consultant for eleven years... There are specific responsibilities assigned to my role... I had to go to the school and examine the child to see whether she had a disability or not... My aim is to visit the schools as quickly as I can.... I met the headteacher. He also introduced me to her (Marina's) teacher who provided me with all the necessary background information... I met Marina during the break, before my observation in the classroom... 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 it indicated an urgent case... I sent my report to Andy (special educational consultant) and I called him four days later, as I usually do, to make sure he had received the report and had planned his visit to Marina's school."

However, when his organisational colleague, the special consultant, refused to treat Marina's case as urgent, Rob entered a *resisting space*. Although he knew that the special consultant was only following the government's rules, this obstructed the successful support of the child. Identity interactions took place again in order to allow Rob to work together with the partners and convince the special consultant to prioritise Marina's case. Bringing forward the c*ollaborative identity* of the *partner,* Rob was able to seek assistance from KAEC. He requested the intervention of the KEDDY manager and the school's headteacher who contacted the special consultant and tried to convince him to give priority to Marina's case.

"Two weeks after my call to Andy I was very surprised to hear that the consultant hadn't been to the school yet... He told me that even if he skipped the re-evaluation of the cases he had, there were other cases that had priority over Marina's case. -- Priority in terms of sequence not of emergency!.. I ran out of reasons to convince him. I had to see what other options I had. I called the KEDDY manager and explained to him Marina's case.... I also spoke to Marina's headteacher... They also tried to convince Andy to prioritise Marina's case."

When these efforts failed, the collaborative identity, which instructed to follow the AP and wait for the special consultant to refer the child to KEDDY, clashed with Rob's priority to assist the child. At the same time, in a paradoxical way, this identity became an obstacle for the achievement of the collaboration aims. In the current *obstructing space*, Rob decided to separate himself from the collaboration and bring forward his *personal identity* by acting independently as a *rebel against the collaborative system*. His personal identity allowed Rob to distance himself from the AP, which obstructed the support of the child, and act around it, skipping the special consultant's diagnosis.

"He (KEDDY manager) told me that an exception could be made and KEDDY would accept Marina even if she was not referred to them by the special consultant (as the AP indicates). I didn't think about it. I told him straightaway that I would send him Marina's report if her parents and headteacher gave their permission. As the parents and headteacher agreed to override the protocol, the next day I sent my report to KEDDY... I believe that in some cases partners have to ignore the protocol and adapt to the specific needs of the cases they deal with."

Rob engaged in identity interactins in order to respond to the changing needs of the incompatible, resisting and obstructing spaces he experienced. Through identity interactions, Rob was able to move between collaborative and independent action, achieving the collaboration aims. Firstly, by becoming a government representative, he produced efficiently the child diagnosis. Later, by acting as a partner, he convinced his partners to intervene and ask the special consultant to prioritise Marina's case. Finally, although it is a collaborative paradox, by becoming a rebel against the collaborative system, Rob was able to act independently from his partner that had hindered the achievement of the collaborative aims. By acting according to his personal identity, Rob was able to change his role and responsibilities in the collaboration, skip the collaborative protocol and overcome obstacles that did not allow him to support the child effectively.

Diagnosis: Producing a child's diagnosis

Maria was a KEDDY psychologist and according to her job responsibilities she had to collaborate with the KEDDY teachers in order to diagnose children's disabilities and produce educational plans for their support. The story that Maria tells took place when she was a new member of KAEC.

When she first engaged with KAEC, Maria experienced a *welcoming space* where her partners helped her in order to adjust to the new working environment and fulfil her collaborative role. As such, Maria brought forward the identity of the *helpful partner* who prioritised the children's needs, familiarized herself with the collaborative process and the AP, and worked with her partners in order to achieve KAEC's aims.

"Everyone (partners) was nice. The secretary gave me a tour of KEDDY and he also showed me to my office. The physiologists and social workers explained to me the main rules of the collaboration and their role in KEDDY. They also offered me their help... KEDDY's role (to support children with disabilities) is very important... I could see that the obstacles against our aim are many and, only if we collaborate, can we achieve our aim. I made it clear to my partners that I wanted to work hard, learn my job well and help. I participated in discussions, I asked questions, I offered my perspective, I read books."

However, the changing nature of KAEC, and the different psychosocial spaces that Maria experienced while engaging daily with the collaboration, challenged her collaborative identity and action. For example, when Maria entered a *competitive space*, identity interactions were initiated again in order to allow her to bring forward a non-collaborative identity and work independently from the partners to achieve the collaboration aims. In fact, experiencing the competition between the teachers and physiologists, Maria prioritised the child's needs and brought forward her identity as a *psychologist*. Her *professional identity* enabled her to stay separated from the unhelpful teachers and offered her the flexibility to act independently. As such, Maria changed her role in the collaboration and did not collaborate with the teachers, as the AP indicated. In contrast, she sought advice from the other psychologists and, then, presented her case to the KEDDY Manager, ensuring that the child received appropriate help.

"There is competition between teachers and psychologists. I can see this now. But the teachers started it, at least in my case... I was in KEDDY only for two months. I had a case with Kate (KEDDY primary teacher) and we disagreed on the diagnosis... When she (Kate) realised that she couldn't change my mind (regarding the diagnosis), she became more

aggressive... Kate asked Lisa (KEDDY primary teacher) to join our discussion. Lisa actually told me that we should go with Kate's diagnosis because I was in KEDDY only for two months and I didn't have experience... Teachers have experience because they have worked in schools and they are familiar with the school environment. So they are good at the production of the educational plans... As a psychologist, I know more about disabilities and their characteristics because I have studied these issues. Since when does a teacher with no relevant training have more experience than a trained psychologist?... I was quite surprised. How could they (teachers) say that because I didn't have experience my diagnosis was not accurate?... I explained my case to Anne (KEDDY psychologist) and she agreed with my diagnosis. We went to the manager and presented the case... And in the end, it was proved that my diagnosis was correct, not hers (Kate)."

Moving between a welcoming and a competitive psychosocial space, Maria engaged in identity interactions that allowed her to act both collaboratively and independently in order to achieve the collaborative aims. Firstly, by bringing forward her collaborative identity, Maria familiarised herself with the collaborative process and worked together with the partners promoting the collaboration goals. Later, by becoming a psychologist, Maria separated herself from the collaboration and experienced the collaborative paradoxes of changing her collaborative role, seeking new alliances, ignoring the teachers and acting independently from them in order to produce a valid diagnosis.

Negotiation: Accepting a diagnosis

George was the parent of a child with dyslexia, Mike. He joined the collaboration in order to help his child overcome his disability.

When George was informed about his son's disability by the school teacher, he entered a *challenging space*. His low educational level and lack of knowledge around disability issues did not allow him to understand his son's disability and how he could help him. By bringing forward his *personal identity* as a *frustrated father in need for support*, George went to KEDDY and, instead of offering his help as the AP indicated, he requested KEDDY's help.

"It took me some time to realise that the teacher was actually saying that my child had a problem... I didn't even know what she (teacher) meant by report. She told me that she had written down her observations about Mike and sent them to KEDDY. But again, I didn't know what KEDDY is.... I didn't understand what his problem was but I knew that my child had a

problem... I was lost and wanted to understand how I could help my son... Our appointment with KEDDY was two weeks later."

As such, in a paradoxical way, George's personal identity triggered the collaborative process and changed the psychosocial space. Experiencing a *supportive space* where George received help from the partners, his *collaborative identity* was activated and he became a *supportive partner* willing to act collaboratively.

"I went to KEDDY with Mike... After a while the psychologist came. [George explains that the psychologist went through the process of diagnosis and answered his questions]... Then the teacher came and she also explained to me how the process works. Next, the social worker came to introduce himself... I was happy to follow the collaborative process in order to help my son."

When the diagnosis process was completed, George met with the social worker in order to learn about his son's disability. The social worker indicated that George was not offering to his son the necessary support. This changed the psychosocial space, initiating another identity interaction that would allow George to separate himself from his partners. In fact, George experienced a *defensive space* where he had to defend himself to the partners and prove to them that he was trying to help his son. In a paradoxical way, by bringing forward his *personal identity* as a *caring father*, George was able to redefine himself as a father who was not aware he did not offer enough help to his son and would do anything to support him. Having redefined himself, George was able to compromise and accept his son's diagnosis thereby allowing the collaborative process to proceed to the next stage.

"I had to explain or, to be precise, defend myself to the social worker. I should make clear that I was there to support my son... And so I did make it clear. I tried to defend myself saying that although I was trying, maybe it was not enough. I made clear that I was happy to follow the social worker's suggestions in order to improve Mike's home environment."

Through identity interactions activated by different psychosocial spaces, George was able to overcome misunderstandings, feelings of frustration and disappointment, and finally compromise, managing to help his son. In a paradoxical way, firstly by bringing forward his personal identity, George was able to change his role in the collaboration and, instead of supporting the collaborative process, he requested KEDDY's help. Later in the process, when his collaborative identity obstructed him from accepting his son's disability, George separated himself from the collaboration. His personal identity came again at the front and allowed him to act independently, moving around his role and responsibilities as a partner. George

redefined himself as a father willing to accept the diagnosis and help his son. We therefore see how, through identity interactions, George was able to both separate and align himself with the collaboration, gaining the necessary flexibility to both collaborate and act independently in order to achieve the collaborative aims.

Implementation: Supporting a disabled child

Christina, a new primary school teacher, engaged with the collaboration when she was asked to teach a disabled child. At that moment, she was a newly employed teacher.

When Christina initially engaged with KAEC, she experienced an *unknown space*. She was a new partner who did not know her role in the collaboration, the collaborative structure and the AP. She therefore separated herself from the collaboration and brought forward her *professional identity* as an *inexperienced teacher*. However, this identity did not constrain KAEC aims. In contrast, as an inexperienced teacher, Christina was able to separate herself from the collaboration and take the necessary time to adjust to the new working environment, familiarise with the AP and the collaborative process, and prepare herself to engage with the collaboration.

"When I was appointed as a teacher, I did not know KAEC. After all, it was not part of my job responsibilities to know what the collaboration did... I clarified to my partners that, although I was a good teacher, I did not have experience with the collaboration or with issues of disability... They (partners) allowed me to observe the collaborative process and learn how it worked."

Two months later, when the partners asked her to teach a disabled child, Christina entered a *stressful space*. On the one hand, she did not feel ready to teach a child with disabilities. On the other hand, she felt that she had to prioritise the needs of the child and the collaborative goals. When the partners reassured her that she would get the support of a specialist on disability issues teacher who would be appointed in one or two months, Christina brought forward her *collaborative identity* as a *KAEC teacher.* Therefore, she aligned her efforts with the partners and accepted to teach the disabled child.

"I had a child, Jenifer, who seemed to have learning difficulties... Yet, I was new, inexperienced and I thought my judgement was wrong... It was very stressful. I didn't know what to do... On the other hand, I had never taught children with disabilities. I didn't even have any relevant training. However, I wanted to collaborate... The KEDDY teacher told me

that she would help me until the specialised teacher arrived. They had satisfactorily answered all of my questions. How could I say no? -- I just couldn't!"

However, in dynamic IOCs, such as KAEC, the psychosocial space constantly changes, requiring from the partners to change their identities as well. The following example indicates how another identity interaction was triggered when Cristina experienced a *deceiving space*:

"One of my colleagues and the headteacher had collaborated with KEDDY for another case and KEDDY didn't fulfil its promises. KEDDY only makes the suggestions. The government would decide (the appointment or not of the specialist teacher). What if the government doesn't approve the funding? They (KEDDY's employees) weren't honest with me. How can we work together if we do not trust each other?... I had to protect myself. I decided not to accept the responsibility... It wasn't fair to ask me to do something beyond my responsibilities without having the appropriate support."

Being trapped in a deceiving space where the partners have misguided her, Christina felt like a *defender* who had to act independently from the collaboration in order to protect herself. By bringing forward her *personal identity*, in a paradoxical way, she triggered the collaborative process and set in immediate motion the appointment of the specialist teacher, which took place soon after. Christina was then able to teach the disabled child.

Through identity interactions between professional, collaborative and personal identities triggered by emergent psychosocial spaces, Christina was able to both align and separate herself from the collaboration, achieving the collaborative goals. This was accomplished even when Christina worked independently from her partners, refused to fulfil her collaborative role and respond to her responsibilities, and challenged the collaborative structure.

Discussion

Even if some IOC studies acknowledge that partners may bring forward different identities, they still seek the development and maintenance of a common, relatively stable, collaborative identity (e.g. Huxham, 1996; Salk and Shenkar, 2001). Collaborative identity has been described as the 'we-ness' (Zhang and Huxham, 2009) that each partner assigns, and emphasises the similarities or shared characteristics around which collaboration partners can come together (Cerulo, 1997) and act collaboratively for the achievement of the collaboration aims (Koschmann, 2012). According to the IOC literature, collaborative identity fulfils a

number of positive functions, such as helping partners fit into the collaboration (Maguire and Hardy, 2005), influencing how partners perceive and act on particular issues (Hardy et al., 2005), helping to increase partners' efforts to handle problems (Zhang and Huxham, 2009), enhancing collaborative commitment and culture (Hardy et al., 2005), increasing partners' willingness to negotiate aims, handle power, build trust and communicate effectively (Huxham and Vangen, 2005), and assisting partners to accomplish specific objectives and goals supporting inter-organisational cooperation (Ainsworth and Grant, 2012). It is, therefore, broadly acknowledged that, even if the partners have multiple identities, the aim is to bring forward a common collaborative identity and seek ways to maintain this identity for the success of collaboration.

However, the KAEC stories challenge the quest for a coherent collaborative identity for successful IOCs. More specifically, the narratives presented in this paper demonstrate that, through identity interactions that take place in the psychosocial spaces of the IOC, partners are able to bring forward collaborative and non-collaborative identities. In this way they act collaboratively or independently, and yet effectively to the changing needs of the IOC. On the one hand, a collaborative identity focused on working together, prioritising children's needs, following the AP and fulfilling roles allows KAEC partners to feel part of the collaboration (Maguire and Hardy, 2005), be committed to the collaboration (Hardy et al., 2005) and act collaboratively (Koschmann, 2012) in achieving the overarching aim of the IOC, which is the educational support of disabled children. On the other hand, other non-collaborative identities, such as being a caring parent, an inexperienced teacher, a rebel against the collaborative system or a professional psychologist, allow partners to separate their efforts from the collaboration, providing them with the necessary flexible behaviours to draw distinctions (Cornelissen et al., 2007), sometimes construct superiority (Vaara et al., 2003) and redefine the collaboration (Sammarra and Biggiero, 2001). This separation from the collaboration is not portrayed as negative resistance but rather as "keeping a distance" so as to be flexible and look for alternative ways -outside the AP- to achieve the collaborative aims. For instance, when Maria enters a competitive space where KAEC teachers compete with KAEC psychologists, identity interactions take place in order to push to the back her collaborative identity that in this space obstructs the production of a valid diagnosis. By bringing forward her professional identity as a psychologist, Maria separates herself from the unhelpful teachers, disregards the AP and her established role in the collaboration, and seeks alternative, non-collaborative, solutions to achieve the collaboration aims. Therefore, she

seeks assistance from other psychologists, presents her diagnosis to the KEDDY manager and ensures that the child receives the best help from the collaboration. By moving between a collaborative purpose (helping a disabled child) and her identity as a professional psychologist, Maria is able to respond flexibly to collaborative obstacles triggered by the teachers, ensuring independent innovative behaviours that promote the collaborative goals. She, therefore, shapes her actions as a partner according to the specific psychosocial space she experiences.

Moreover, by exploring the psychosocial spaces of IOC, the data demonstrates the paradoxical nature of IOCs. IOCs are a site "of continuously changing human action (where) human agency is always and at every moment confronted with specific conditions and choices" (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002: 577). Even if partners enter the collaboration having an ideal way of what collaborating implies, when they collaborate in practice, they realise that many collaborative assumptions are challenged (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). In fact, in the carrying out of actual collaborative tasks, partners have to interact in paradoxical ways in order to make sense of, modify, and adjust to the needs of a specific space. For example, Rob had to become a rebel against the collaborative system in order to overcome collaborative obstacles that did not allow him to support effectively a child. Christina had to be deceived first in order to trigger the collaborative process and set in immediate motion the appointment of the specialist teacher. Instead of offering his help, George had to receive help from the partners in order to learn how to engage with the collaboration, while Maria had to ignore her partners' diagnosis in order to produce an accurate diagnosis for a child. Since IOCs are dynamic (De Rond and Bouchikhi, 2004), unstable and tenuous (Hibbert and Huxham, 2010), stability and/or organisation are presented as exceptional achievements, not change (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). What the collaboration becomes depends on the construction and reconstruction of its space. Therefore, there are not easy and fixed routes to collaboration success but taken-for-granted assumptions about effective collaboration are constantly challenged.

Conclusions

By employing the concept of the psychosocial space, the study offers the following implications for the exploration and understanding of IOCs.

Firstly, as the study has illustrated, IOC unfolds as partners engage in everyday working relations produced in and by (inter)actions in different psychosocial spaces (Van

Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010). These interactions can be both collaborative and independent. Collaborative actions offer to the partners spaces of continuity where they follow the rules, the protocol and their job responsibilities in order to achieve stability in the collaborative process. On the other hand, independent actions offer to the partners spaces of flexibility where they can develop innovative ways to respond flexibly to the changing needs of the collaboration. As such, this research proposes an alternative way to understand IOC as an interactive space continuously in-the-making (Bouwen and Hovelynck, 2006) characterised and shaped by the collaborative and independent activity that is embedded within it.

Secondly, by adapting the concept of psychosocial space, it is possible to explore identity interactions in IOCs. There is an emergent research tradition that goes beyond the search for collaborative identity coherence and focuses on exploring multiple (collaborative and non-collaborative) identities that are always in play in IOC contexts (e.g. Hardy et al., 2005, 2006; Maguire and Hardy, 2005; Zhang and Huxham, 2009; Ellis and Ybema, 2010). However, the majority of these studies explore the interactions between multiple identities in an effort to bring forward and maintain the achievement of a common collaborative identity. The study expands this emergent research tradition and suggests that, by looking at the various psychosocial spaces that partners experience, we see that identity interactions in IOCs is not an unnecessary burden that we should aim to resolve in an effort to achieve a common collaborative identity. Instead, constant identity interaction allows partners to both act independently, adapting to the changing needs of the collaboration, and act collaboratively, maintaining the so needed stability.

Thirdly, the concept of space has been broadly used in organisation studies to explore different phenomena, such as creativity (Sailer, 2011), innovation (Allen and Henn, 2007), power (Zhang et al., 2008) and interactions (Parkin et al., 2011). However, it has been hitherto overlooked in IOC studies. This paper introduces the concept of space for the study of IOCs and suggests that it can be used, for example, in order to explore the dynamic nature of the collaboration, understand how collaborative and non-collaborative actions unfold and interact, and consider how multiple identities come forward in IOCs.

Finally, the study contributes particularly to the studies that explore the idea of collaborative and independent action in IOCs. Collaborative and independent action in IOCs has been explored to some extent before with research indicating that individual efforts may complement collaborative work (Lafond et al., 2011; Bruns, 2013). The present study does not only validate these studies but, by introducing the concept of the psychological space, it

also contributes to this literature an innovative approach to explore the interplay between collaborative and independent action in IOCs. Moreover, the paper demonstrates that, as partners engage in changing psychological spaces, they bring forward different identities that offer them the flexibility to either connect or separate themselves and their efforts with the new space and situation they experience. The study, therefore, proposes that collaborative and independent actions in IOCs emerge through identity development processes.

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