

Managing the identity paradox in inter-organisational collaborations

Abstract

A persistent contradiction in inter-organisational collaborations (IOCs) is between individual actors' IOC identity and their other multiple identities, and the subsequent need to maintain a delicate balance between these opposing but mutually dependent identities. Using a paradox lens and individual actors as the unit of analysis, this ethnographic study defines the 'identity paradox' often present in IOCs as the interaction between actors' professional, personal, team and organisational identities with an overall IOC identity. The case demonstrates that the identity paradox allows actors to maintain a balance between adhering to IOC, which offers stability, and adjusting to emergent needs, which enables innovative behaviour. The theorisation of the identity paradox reveals that the conditions that trigger each identity tension relate to the IOC tensions of cooperation and competition, rigidity and flexibility, trust and mistrust, and confrontation and dialogue. The findings offer contribution to IOC research and to management practice.

Keywords

Identity, paradox, tensions, inter-organisational collaborations, IOCs

Introduction

Organisations are increasingly entering into collaborations to respond to complex problems that transcend the boundaries of the single organisation. However, inter-organisational collaborations (IOCs) are commonly characterised as ambiguous, complex and dynamic. This makes it difficult to predict whether an IOC will achieve its aims and to explain why IOCs with the same characteristics thrive and others underperform. This becomes particularly relevant if we also consider that IOCs deal with ambiguities and dynamics while bringing together partners' differing resources, interests, experiences and expertise in an aim to create the potential for collaborative advantage (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). In this paper, the unit of analysis is the individual rather than the organisation. As such, the term partner is used to refer to individual or IOC actors that represent different partner-organisations and who are working together as members of the IOC.

Bringing together individual actors to collaborate across organisational, professional, sectoral and sometimes national boundaries increasingly points to inherent paradoxes and associated tensions (e.g. Clarke-Hill et al., 2003; Jarzabkowski et al., 2018; Vangen, 2017). The need for both integration and differentiation of the elements that individual actors offer, makes IOCs paradoxical in nature, rendering it inevitable that their management involves tensions in practice.

Although IOC research has explored some paradoxical tensions in IOCs, the tension between an IOC identity and other multiple identities that individuals adopt in their IOC life has not been explicitly addressed. IOC research suggests that adopting an IOC identity can affect the achievement of IOC aims (Hardy et al., 2005; Olson et al., 2012). Adopting an IOC identity means that the partners identify with the IOC and work together with other partners to achieve the IOC aims. The IOC identity differs from the organisational identity which suggests that someone identifies with their organisation and they act in ways that ensure that the organisational aims are achieved. When members of different organisations become IOC partners, identifying with the collaboration rather than with their organisation is important so that partners have a conformity in the way they interact and respond to the needs of the IOC. Particularly, some research suggests that adopting an IOC identity is a key enabler for achieving IOC aims (Hardy et al., 2005; Koschmann, 2013; Olson et al., 2012), while other research indicates that partners may have multiple identities to respond successfully to changing IOC contexts (Kourti et al., 2018; Maguire and Hardy, 2005; Ybema et al., 2011).

This paper considers the multiple (personal, team, professional and organisational) identities that stay relevant when individual actors form and practice their IOC identity, giving rise to an identity paradox. The study tackles two important questions: (1) What are the identity tensions that comprise the IOC identity paradox?; and (2) How can the identity paradox assist in the exploration of related IOC tensions? In doing so, the study provides three significant contributions.

With respect to the first contribution, although part of the IOC literature looks at paradoxes and related tensions (e.g. Clarke-Hill et al., 2003; Majchrzak et al., 2015), the identity paradox has been largely neglected. Although some IOC studies under a different label, such as network, association or cluster, explore the interplay between a collective and an organisational identity (Rometsch and Sydow, 2006) or refer to the identity paradox (Lawrence and Kaufman, 2011; Staber and Sautter, 2011), the term paradox is used to describe the contradiction between enduring and flexible identity elements rather than

between multiple identities. These studies do not engage with the paradox literature while identities are analysed either on the level of the collectivity (Lawrence and Kaufman, 2011; Rometsch and Sydow, 2006) or on the organisational level (Staber and Sautter, 2011). This study offers an original contribution by engaging with the paradox literature and theorising the identity paradox in respect of the multiple identities that individual actors adopt during their collaborative life.

Particularly, this research builds on the IOC studies that use a paradox lens to emphasise the existence of contradictory, interrelated, and mutually exclusive elements that are important to fulfil collaborative aims (Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010; Vangen, 2017), to uncover the identity tensions that occur as individual actors engage in collaborations. This enables a theorisation of the identity paradox as emerging from four key identity tensions: professional; personal; team; and organisational. Engaging with the identity paradox is important for the IOCs since identity shifts enable designed and innovative behaviour that allows partners to respond to the changing needs of the collaboration in achieving the IOC aims.

Regarding the second contribution, this research shows how the identity paradox relates to other collaborative tensions. Particularly, the professional identity tension which gives rise to the cooperation/competition tension, the personal identity tension to the rigidity/flexibility tension, the team identity tension to the trust/mistrust tension, and the organisational identity tension to the confrontation and dialogue tension. Therefore, this study responds to calls for paradox research to go beyond the focus on the dualities that comprise organisational paradoxes to thereby embrace the complexities involved in paradoxes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2018; Schad and Bansal, 2018). Specifically, this research diverges from the duality tradition which stresses the interplay between contradictory elements as mutually constituted and ontologically inseparable without the other (Putman et al., 2016; Smith and Graetz, 2006). Here, the identity paradox is presented as a persistent contradiction and compromise between IOC identity and other multiple identities that individual actors adopt, and the subsequent need to maintain a delicate balance between these opposing but mutually dependent identities. However, the meaning of the identity paradox shifts across actors as it is grounded in their interests, values and perception of themselves in different situations. This allows moving towards the study of multiple, related tensions rather than the current tendency to examine polarized dualities (Farjoun, 2010; Farjoun et al., 2018).

With the third contribution, this study unveils the implications that the identity paradox has for IOC management practice. IOC research suggests that paradoxical tensions cannot be controlled or eliminated, which thereby asks for research which highlights tensions that have practical usage for IOCs' management (Vangen, 2017). This article explains how the identity paradox -along with its related tensions- requires managers to re-evaluate their understanding of the IOC and partners' engagement with it, and offers alternative and flexible ways to fulfil collaborative goals.

To that end, this paper begins by presenting the paradox lens and reviewing the relevant IOC literature that argues in favour of the partners adopting an IOC identity, as well as of adopting multiple identities.

Adopting a paradox lens for the exploration of IOC identity

Many studies acknowledge the importance of paradox in organisational life (e.g. Farjoun et al., 2018; Putman et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016). Paradoxes are defined as "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 382), and are constituted by tensions that arise between different sides of the paradox (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Although the paradox entails a dynamic and shifting relationship between alternative poles, the core elements remain impervious to resolution (Schad et al., 2016). This makes paradoxes a complex nexus of multiple shifting meanings (Jarzabkowski et al., 2018), enabling the exploration of multiple related tensions. This understanding of paradox allows the exploration of the question - How can the identity paradox assist in the exploration of related IOC tensions? This study, therefore, diverges from a dialectics and duality tradition that considers changes that lead to a unified synergy -a synthesis- between paradoxical alternatives (Benson, 1977), seeking a final transcendence of one of the positions (Smith and Graetz, 2006). It goes beyond stressing the dualities that comprise paradoxes (Farjoun, 2010), or the synthesis that meets a newly emerging antithesis (Benson, 1977), making it impossible to describe one pole without the other (Putman et al., 2016). It is therefore possible to focus on how each pole of the identity paradox, with the related collaborative tensions can assist in the achievement of IOC aims.

Using a paradox lens allows studying contradictory and interdependent aspects while moving beyond dilemmas and trade-offs, which are usually solved by splitting and choosing (Fairhurst et al., 2016). No choice needs to be made amongst contradictory aspects since

"paying attention to one alternative while neglecting its opposite can easily lead to a deficiency" and eventually disrupt organisational success (Tse, 2013: 694).

In IOC studies where dynamics are found to occur continuously (Majchrzak et al., 2015), "the application of a paradox lens entails examining how multiple, seemingly contradictory forces coexist," maintaining a delicate balance of pairs of competing forces and exploring relevant implications for the IOC (Vangen, 2017: 265). Collaborative advantage is achieved through the synthesis of differences (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). IOCs try to both retain the different resources, experiences and expertise of their individual actors and bring them together to achieve collaborative aims (Kourti, 2017). They are therefore inherently paradoxical in nature (Clarke-Hill et al., 2003) which makes their management a complicated task.

Paradoxical tensions have been explored before in strategic alliances, networks and IOCs. For example, Chung and Beamish (2010) examine the tension between cooperation versus competition. Jorde and Teece (1989) explore competition and cooperation while considering ways in which firms can cooperate to compete. Bengtsson and Kock (2000) explore the relationships among competitors, explaining that they can be involved in both cooperation and competition simultaneously, and hence that both types of relationships need to be emphasized at once. Clarke-Hill et al. (2003) also discuss the cooperation and competition paradox, suggesting that partners should not choose between cooperation and competition but try to manage the tension between them because their contradictory nature is part of complex organisations. Das and Teng (2000) address the paradoxical tension of rigidity and flexibility towards the IOC rules, suggesting that both are present in IOCs and that IOC actors should maintain a delicate balance between these competing forces to fulfil goals. Moreover, Huxham and Vangen (2005) discuss the tension between trust and mistrust, suggesting that partners need a certain level of trust to collaborate while they also need to mistrust their partners so as to evaluate more carefully their course of action. Finally, according to Ospina and Dodge's (2005) exploration of the confrontation versus dialogue paradox, IOC actors examine the needs of a particular situation to decide whether they should confront or engage in dialogue with the partners, since both sides of the paradox should be honoured for IOCs to achieve their aims. Despite the focus of IOC studies on paradox and related tensions, the identity paradox has been neglected.

Theorising the identity paradox in IOCs

This study builds on the concept of organisation identity defined by Albert and Whetten (1985) as the central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics that define ‘who we are’ and ‘what we do’. An organisational identity allows members to identify with their organisation and act in accordance with the beliefs, values, interests and aims of the organisation. Organisational actors do not have a single identity but multiple identities that emerge from multiple overlapping or cross-cutting memberships (van Knippenberg and Schie, 2000). Multiple identities arise during periods/contexts of change that precipitate the emergence of a new identity, which assists individual actors to respond in alternative -more adequate- ways to new periods/contexts (Perry, 2008). Even if actors experience periods where they negotiate an optimal balance between identities, periods also come where organisational actors adopt different identities to act in appropriate ways (Brown, 2015). For example, individual actors can bring forward an *organisational*, *personal*, *professional* or *team identity*. In this study, these four different identity types are referred to as '*multiple identities*', a term used in identity studies to refer to the different identities that individual actors hold. These multiple identities are contrasted with an *IOC identity*. An IOC identity enables partners to identify with the IOC and act in accordance with the beliefs, interests and aims of the collaboration, which can be different from those of their organisation. Table 1 defines the identities that IOC actors may adopt in their collaborative life.

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IOC studies acknowledge the importance for IOC partners to have an IOC identity, which has been described as the ‘we-ness’ of IOCs (Zhang and Huxham, 2009), emphasising the similarities or shared characteristics around which actors collaborate (Koschmann, 2013). IOC identity consists of a set of attitudes that represent the essence of the IOC and fulfils a number of functions that increase the chances of actors fulfilling IOC aims -e.g enhances collaborative commitment and culture (Hardy et al., 2005); helps partners fit into the IOC (Maguire and Hardy, 2005); and increases partners' efforts to handle problems (Zhang and Huxham, 2009).

IOC studies also acknowledge the dynamic and paradoxical nature that usually characterises IOCs. Therefore, some IOC research suggests that the actors’ IOC identity interacts with their multiple memberships (e.g. profession, organisation and collective) that make the maintenance of an IOC identity difficult (Ybema et al., 2011). Some IOC studies

suggest that the existence of multiple identities (e.g. professional, organisational, personal and team identities) along with an IOC identity allows partners to utilise their different backgrounds, organisations, professions, and experiences (Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Maguire and Hardy, 2005) and adopt different identities to better fit various collaborative situations and contexts (Hardy et al., 2005).

Embedded in the IOC literature are two opposing perspectives that aim to support collaborative goals; the first stresses the importance of partners having a common IOC identity and the second of having multiple identities. This gives rise to the identity paradox. Although the management literature has advocated the use of the paradox lens regarding the multiple and dynamic nature of organisational identities (e.g. Besharow and Sharma, 2017; Kozica et al., 2015; Whetten, 2006), with a few exceptions, the IOC literature has largely neglected the identity paradox. For example, Rometsch and Sydow (2006) explore how a network identity in franchise systems informs us about how member organisations collectively perceive and construct their interorganisational network as a distinct social entity, exploring the interplay between network and organisational identity. Lawrence and Kaufman (2011) refer to the identity paradox when they explore the inherent tension between cooperation and conflict within franchise systems, by exploring how an adaptive association identity interacts with the perceived instability of franchisor identity. However, in their study the identity paradox signifies the contradicting stable and fluid elements that characterise identity. The same identity paradox is addressed by Staber and Sautter (2011) when they explore cluster identity as having both enduring and malleable attributes. In these studies, the unit of analysis is the organisation or the collective rather than individual actors. Moreover, these studies do not engage with the paradox literature, instead they use the term paradox to highlight the paradoxical nature of identity regarding the interplay between enduring and malleable attributes. The different identities that actors may adopt and the tensions involved in the identity paradox are not explored.

The IOC identity paradox provides a means to explore how individual actors create and practice an IOC identity, which is necessary to have continuity in their engagement with the IOC. It also enables the exploration of how partners adopt other identities that enable flexible and innovative behaviour to occur, which is necessary to respond to the dynamism of IOCs. The tensions between partners' IOC and other multiple identities should not be seen as negative experiences to be avoided, but as persistent contradictions between interdependent elements (Schad et al., 2016) which need to be managed. Oppositional identity tensions

inform and define another, and are necessary for achieving collaborative work. This research suggests that, if IOC partners maintain the tension between IOC and other multiple identities, and appreciate them as opposing, but equally valid and beneficial identities, they can assist in accomplishing collaborative aims.

Thereby, this study targets the question: What are the identity tensions that comprise the IOC identity paradox?

Following this analysis, an initial theorisation of the identity paradox in IOCs is offered. Identity paradox is theorised in this article as a persistent contradiction and compromise between IOC and other multiple identities. The subsequent need to maintain a delicate balance between these opposing but mutually dependent identities is examined. The identity paradox relates stable IOC elements and the need to maintain order with elements that emerge through everyday engagement in IOC work. Theorising the fluid nature of the identity paradox in terms of the multiple identities that individual actors hold offers an original contribution.

Methodology

Research context: KAEC

In order to explore the identity paradox in IOCs, this case study examines KAEC (KEDDY Aitolokarnanias Educational Collaboration), established in 2003 in Messologi, Western Greece. KEDDY stands for Centre for differential assessment, diagnosis and support of disabled children. KAEC is an inter-organisational educational collaboration, that supports disabled children in the local area.

The partners -individual/IOC actors belonging to a partner-organisation- collaborate following the IOC design which outlines the roles, responsibilities and possible interactions for and between each partner category. Partners' interactions change as every case/disability can be very different since supporting a child with a disability goes beyond the production of a diagnosis. The home environment, the background and the educational level of each child are among the factors, which can vary between each child. The partners must also consider offering individualised support plans. These factors affect the partners involved, the funding requested, the implementation of an education plan etc. and could make each case the partners deal with very different.

The partners studied come from four organisations: KEDDY employees from KEDDY Aitolokarnanias, which has 25 employees; parents of disabled children from the local parent

council, which has more than 100 members; head teachers and teachers from local public schools, which have more than 90 teachers; and government representatives, mainstream and special education consultants from ACDCPE (Aitoloakarnanias central departmental council of primary education), which consists of 16 members.

The figure below summarises the main responsibilities of KAEC partners.

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Data and Method

To support a disabled child the partners follow four stages defined by the KAEC design: Referral (First stage: the teacher and head teacher or parent refer a disabled child to KEDDY), Diagnosis (Second stage: KEDDY employees produce a report -diagnosis and education support plan), Negotiation (Third stage: KEDDY employees present the report to parents, and disclose it to the head teacher and teacher) and Implementation (Fourth stage: actors from all partner-organisations make interventions for the child's educational support). Table 2 illustrates the data collected at each stage over a period of 16 months.

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KAEC actors' weekly informal interactions and 13 formal partners' meetings that took place during a 16-month period were observed. The resulting field notes were incorporated as texts in the final analysis performed on the overall data corpus. In seven out of the 13 meetings observed, the partner-organisations were all represented (one meeting in Referral, two in Diagnosis and four in the Negotiation stage). One meeting was observed in the Referral stage where only KEDDY employees and teachers attended, KEDDY employees and teachers attended two meetings in the Diagnosis stage while KEDDY employees, teachers and parents attended one meeting in the Diagnosis stage. Finally, in the Negotiation stage one meeting between government representatives and KEDDY was observed and one meeting between KEDDY, government representatives and teachers was observed.

Moreover, 43 in-depth interviews were collected with individual actors from all four partner-categories. The interviews were conducted with: all KEDDY employees; the main local KAEC government representatives; four local teachers and four head teachers selected from a list of all local public schools working with KAEC; and three parents of disabled children from a list that KAEC provided. The length of the interviews ranged from 18 to 80 minutes, with an average duration of 55 minutes. The interviews were organised in four

topics: introduction (e.g. How long have you been a member of the KAEC for? What is your role in KAEC?); designed collaborative elements (e.g. Can you share an example where you collaborated successfully with your partners by fulfilling the formal requirements of your role? How would you describe yourself as a partner of KAEC?); emergent collaborative elements (e.g. Did you ever have to override your official KAEC role to achieve a KAEC aim? Have you experienced any situations where you took an unexpected role in KAEC?); conclusion (e.g. Does the way you see yourself as a partner correspond to the role assigned to you? What can partners do to increase the chances of achieving KAEC aims?).

Finally, 48 informal and formal documents pertaining to the KAEC and actors' interactions were included for textual analysis. Among the documents collected were partners' reports, blogs, newspaper comments, memos, government and KAEC documents, logs, emails, minutes from meetings etc. Information was also gathered on issues, such as established collaborative elements, KAEC obstacles and facilitators, workload, collaborative processes, exchanges among internal and external actors, and emergent collaborative interactions.

Data analysis

The data were analysed in three stages. First, an analysis was conducted with all interviews, documents and field notes. This analysis shed light on: differences and similarities in the collaborative process; challenges that partners face; actors' daily engagement with KAEC; routines; collaborative practices; and different collaborative interactions that partners experience. The analysis aided in outlining a common IOC identity, or otherwise a KAEC identity.

After obtaining an overall view of how individual actors understood KAEC and themselves as KAEC actors, a second analysis was performed to find the ways partners identified themselves within the changing KAEC context. The analysis offered thematic categories, such as following the KAEC identity, overriding the KAEC identity, identity tensions and triggers of identity tensions. To differentiate between the different identities placed under the overriding KAEC identity category, the researcher looked at the organisational literature and identified the most common identities that individuals may adopt in organisational contexts and consulted the definitions and main aspects of each identity (see also table 1). For example, when an individual actor's quotes indicated that the organisation became the salient category they identified with, illustrating that they were acting on behalf

of their organisation and showing commitment towards the organisation and its members, the quotes were categorised as organisational identity. Similarly, when an individual illustrated they were acting on behalf of a team or profession and indicated commitment to their team or profession, the team or professional identity was assigned. When an individual actor's personal identity became salient, illustrating that individuals assigned roles from their personal life, such as those of a parent, wife or sister, the personal identity was assigned. This analysis revealed the multiple identities which partners adopt, showing four particular identity tensions that partners experienced while forming and practicing their IOC identity, namely professional, personal, team and organisational. All the data were then grouped according to the four emergent identity tensions.

The final stage of the analysis explored whether the identity paradox was related to other paradoxical tensions in KAEC. The researcher considered each identity tension separately. The triggers of each identity tension were explored. It was identified that the trigger of the team identity tension was mistrust; of the organisational tension was communication challenges; of the personal identity tension was behaviours towards the collaborative design; while the trigger of the professional identity tension was professional expertise that led to lack of cooperation. Looking at each identity tension in relation to their triggers, a particular collaborative tension to which each identity tension was related was identified. The researcher then looked at how the actors experienced an identity tension and the related collaborative tensions, as well as whether the meaning of the paradox shifted across actors while experiencing an identity tension.

Findings

Before the exploration of the four identity tensions that KAEC partners experienced, what it means to be a KAEC partner is presented.

KAEC identity development

The analysis illustrates that achieving the main collaboration aim, namely, to effectively support disabled children, is the core aspect of KAEC which IOC actors felt more identified with. Most of the IOC actors embraced the collaboration aim before or once they joined KAEC. Note the following example:

I was so excited when I got a job as a social worker in KAEC. I had worked with KAEC partners before and I admired the work they do. I wanted to support their cause. I really believed that in our community that lacks formal processes for supporting disabled children, the KAEC role is very important. (KEDDY social worker)

However, as the following extract illustrates, some other KAEC actors had to learn more about KAEC, spend some time with their partners and get to know the IOC processes before they were able to identify with the KAEC aims.

I didn't know much about KAEC before joining it... I realised how hopeless the parents are without our support; how important it is for us to help these children effectively. It was not enough to make recommendations, we had to find ways to work together and see them implemented. (Government representative)

The analysis reveals a large proportion of utterances pertaining to a common KAEC identity shared across all individual actors: the importance of partners working together, prioritising children's needs, following the KAEC design, fulfilling roles and respecting responsibilities. It was interesting to see that these themes appear in all four formal support stages of Referral, Diagnosis, Negotiation and Implementation. These themes were interpreted as illustrations of a KAEC identity that individual actors follow. Below is an illustrative extract first from an interview and then from a document:

I made clear to my partners that I wanted to work with them, learn my job well and help. They (physiologist and social worker) explained the main rules of the collaboration and their role in KEDDY and offered me their help. (KEDDY teacher)

What brings us together is a common aim and the collaborative design that specifies how we should work together and what is expected of each of us. (Partner report)

The analysis shows that at some point every individual actor perceived themselves as KAEC partners even if this was for a short time. In fact, when partners were asked, they all stated they believed in the main aim of KAEC- to effectively support disabled children- and explained that they were acting with this aim in mind.

The analysis also illustrates that in their effort to achieve the IOC aims, KAEC actors sometimes had to interact in ways that seemed unconventional to their KAEC identity. The findings reveal four identity tensions along with related IOC tensions, as these emerged from the data analysis. These are presented next using illustrative examples. The main intention is not to represent 'a generic truth', but to exemplify how the KAEC partners experienced the

identity paradox of having an IOC and other multiple identities along with the related tensions that arose. In doing so, this study illustrates the relationships between the empirical evidence and its theorisation of the identity paradox.

Table 3 summarises the main findings of the study.

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1) Professional identity tension

The professional identity tension is experienced repeatedly by KAEC partners, with little variation in occurrence across IOC actors from schools, government services, KEDDY and the parent association. In drawing upon their professional identity, individual actors find ways to both cooperate and compete with partners from their profession, supporting disabled children.

Professional identities help partners find alternative ways to achieve the IOC aims by cooperating with people from the same profession. For example, even if KAEC rules indicate that KEDDY psychologists and teachers should work together, a KEDDY psychologist will commonly ask for advice to produce a diagnosis from other psychologists, while a KEDDY teacher will usually cooperate with other teachers to produce education plans. Therefore, psychologists are constructed as professional experts for the diagnosis of a disability and teachers for the production of education plans, and join forces with experts from their profession. Under these circumstances, partners' profession becomes the trigger for the professional identity tension which is momentarily resolved by adopting a professional identity.

Professional expertise also becomes a trigger to identify with the IOC. For example, when a KEDDY teacher cannot convince a school teacher to implement a KEDDY education plan, she asks for the psychologist's cooperation. Similarly, when a special education consultant refuses to prioritise a case, the mainstream consultant competes with him, requesting the partners' intervention. Note the following extract from the field notes:

I tried to explain several times to the special consultant that we had to prioritise this case but he wouldn't agree. I couldn't work with him... I work with the KEDDY manager instead. (Government representative)

The professional identity tension illustrated by the interplay between a professional and KAEC identity is not interpreted as a negative contradiction, but as an opportunity for KAEC partners to respond with innovative behaviour to the emergent challenges of the different

cases. Consider the following example where a KAEC psychologist firstly brings forward her professional identity to compete with a teacher, while later she uses this identity to cooperate with the teacher, becoming eventually a KAEC partner.

I had a case with Kate (teacher) and we disagreed on the diagnosis...She thinks that because she has worked for four years in KEDDY, she knows everything ...Suddenly there was a competition between the psychologists who had expertise in disabilities and the teachers who had experience in disabilities ... My diagnosis was correct. (KEDDY psychologist)

Some partners have expertise in one area, some others in a different area. We must share our expertise to make KAEC work. In this case, I forgot what happened, and worked together with the teacher to ensure that we offered the right education plan to support the child. (KEDDY psychologist)

This example from an interview portrays how KAEC partners experience the professional identity tension by moving between a professional and KAEC identity, which enables them to both compete and cooperate with their partners in achieving KAEC aims. A similar type of engagement with the IOC through cooperation and competition has also been found by Bengtsson and Kock (2000), Clarke-Hill et al. (2003) and Jorde and Teece (1989) in their exploration of cooperation and competition tension.

Situations where KAEC partners had to *share or overcome expertise, maintain authority, prioritise cases, and produce a diagnosis and/or education plan* become conditions that give rise to the professional identity tension. Experiencing this tension is not a matter of inclusion of 'us' and an exclusion of 'them' and of cooperating or competing. It is a matter of IOC actors finding alternative ways to engage with their partners and achieve KAEC aims.

2) Personal identity tension

The personal identity tension was also found in the data. Although the personal identity commonly highlights uniqueness and specificity, and is used to differentiate individual actors, KAEC partners also use personal identity to align their efforts by drawing on the IOC design.

The data revealed that every IOC actor was aware of the KAEC design, which stated KAEC aims, partners' roles, responsibilities and prescribed courses of action in the Referral, Diagnosis, Negotiation and Implementation stages. Upon drawing on the KAEC design and identifying with the KAEC, partners could respond to *conflicting demands, leave on the side*

reputation and overcome personal gains and motives. Here is an extract from a KAEC meeting, as recorded in the field notes, which exemplifies how rigidity to the IOC design brought forward KAEC identity.

The school director refused to accept the KEDDY report... He had to follow a series of interventions to support the child and he was unwilling to work extra or to 'jeopardise', as he said, the reputation of the school for one child.... Only when I referred to the collaboration rules, he agreed to work with me to implement KEDDY's report. (Parent)

However, the findings also indicate conditions, such as *negotiating time to accept a diagnosis or education plan, requesting resources and overcoming stress*, which allow KAEC actors to adopt personal identities and be flexible towards the design. The following extract from the field notes illustrates how a KEDDY teacher moves from KAEC identity to a personal identity to skip the IOC design and request resources to support a child.

I worked together with the school teacher to help her implement a KAEC plan... However, the school teacher couldn't respond to Anna's special needs... I am a teacher too, but above all I am a mother and I couldn't see the child falling behind... I asked the KEDDY manager to skip the process and request a specialist teacher. (KEDDY teacher)

While flexibility or rigidity towards the KAEC design brings forward the personal identity tension, it does not obstruct individual actors from achieving KAEC aims. In contrast, the findings offer examples where school teachers move between KAEC and parent identity in the Referral stage, KAEC social workers move between KAEC and their gender identity in the Diagnosis stage, parents move between KAEC and parent identity in the Negotiation stage, and government representatives move between KAEC and class identity in the Implementation stage, finding innovative ways to collaborate.

In the KAEC case, the tension between a personal and KAEC identity triggered by the IOC design reflects the collaborative tension of rigidity versus flexibility depicted in IOC studies. As Das and Teng (2000) have noted, both rigidity and flexibility are present in IOCs where partners try to maintain a balance between these competing forces in order to achieve aims. Indeed, KAEC partners were aware of the rigidity-flexibility tension and acknowledged that both following and breaking the IOC rules was necessary to achieve aims. Below is an extract from a document:

It isn't always possible to follow the collaborative design. Sometimes, we must be flexible and move around the rules and our formal responsibilities ... We need to be able to understand children's needs and think sometimes as parents, sometimes as partners, in order to respond to the collaborative rules and handle best different cases. (Meeting minutes)

3) Team identity tension

In KAEC, the IOC actors have created formal and informal teams. For example, in the Referral stage to refer a child to KEDDY for diagnosis there is the formal team of the mainstream and special education consultants, and the informal team of the school teacher, government representatives and the parents. In the Diagnosis stage there is the formal team of the KEDDY psychologist, KEDDY teacher and social worker that produces a child's report. In the Negotiation stage the same team of the psychologist, teacher and social worker becomes informal when these partners join forces to convince the formal team of the parents and the school to accept the KEDDY report. Finally, in the Implementation stage there is the formal team of the government representatives and the school, and the informal team of KEDDY and the parents that come together to ensure that the formal team implements the KEDDY report.

The findings illustrate that, triggered by a move between trust and mistrust, KAEC actors move between a team and KAEC identity in order to *refer a child to KEDDY* in the Referral stage. For example, the teacher, the mainstream education consultant and the parent share their observations for a boy named Jack, building a case and referring him to KEDDY. However, when the mainstream consultant does not trust the mother and believes that she was not fully honest, he seeks the KEDDY approval to refer the child, ignoring the mother's objections.

KAEC partners experience the team identity tension in the Diagnosis stage, by moving between trust and mistrust when the formal KEDDY team does not manage to *reach a consensus for a child's disability or education plan*. For example:

We trust each other and we work well as a team and we quickly decided on Maria's diagnosis. However, it was difficult for the teacher and the psychologist to agree on the education plan. The teacher insisted that Maria should be taught by the school teacher while the psychologist insisted on the appointment of a specialist. ... We had to discuss

the case with other KEDDY colleagues and we decided together on the education plan.
(KEDDY manager)

In the Negotiation stage, the informal KEDDY team struggles to *convince a mother* that does not trust them enough *to approve their report*. In similar situations where a team must build trust to achieve their aims, team members join forces with other KAEC actors, bringing forward KAEC identity.

I understand that it isn't easy to hear that your child should be transferred to a special school. But questioning our intentions is a different thing...It wasn't easy to make her (mother) trust us, we asked for the help of the school teacher and the KEDDY manager to convince the mother to accept our report. (KEDDY social worker)

Finally, in the Implementation stage, a negotiation between trust and mistrust generates the team identity tension, ensuring the *right allocation of funding*. For example, while dealing with a case, the KEDDY team and a parent realised that the school did not use the first budget instalment as the KEDDY report recommended, and they were worried that the same will happen with the rest of the funds. The KEDDY team and the parent convinced the government representative to run an investigation on the school budget spending.

We see that in the KAEC case, the tension between an IOC and a team identity is triggered by the collaborative tension of trust and mistrust. Sometimes lack of trust leads partners to follow a KAEC identity and some other times to follow a team identity. As Huxham and Vangen (2005) suggest in their exploration of the trust-mistrust tension, sometimes partners have to mistrust their partners in order to evaluate more carefully their course of action. The team identity tension is experienced by KAEC partners as a positive interaction between two opposing identities which under conditions of trust and mistrust complement each other, allowing individual actors to achieve KAEC aims.

4) Organisational identity tension

The organisational identity tension was the fourth one in KAEC. This involved individual actors identifying themselves by maintaining proximity either to their organisation (the school, parent council, ACDCPE or KEDDY), or to the IOC (KAEC). This tension was mostly found in conditions where partners sought to *overcome partners' resistance, deal with urgent requests, keep the support process going, or secure budget*. Here are two extracts from an interview with a government representative which illustrate how he moved between an organisational and KAEC identity to secure budget and deal with an urgent request.

We usually work well together. We have an understanding. We share an office and it's easy for me to catch up with him about work on a daily basis. When the head teacher's request arrived, after a short discussion we decided to approve the budget. So, we dealt with that urgent request very quickly, as we should have done. (Government representative)

It was the first time I felt so frustrated with one of my colleagues. There was funding available but my colleague refused to use it for this case. I spoke to him but it seemed that we spoke a different language. We started debating and ended up arguing. You would think that working in the same organisation will make things easier, but sometimes you need to look outside your organisation to make things happen... I spoke to the KEDDY employees who assisted me in relocating the budget. (Government representative)

The above account is one of many from the analysis, illustrating that the organisational identity tension was triggered by KAEC actors' efforts to communicate with their partners through dialogue and discussion or debate and confrontation. In the above example, the government representative experiences this tension in a positive way as it offers him alternative ways to *communicate with a resistant partner*. The findings also offer examples where this identity tension is triggered by partners' efforts to *clarify the IOC needs and convince partners of a different way forward*. Like Ospina and Dodge's (2005) exploration of the confrontation/dialogue tension in IOCs, the analysis illustrates that KAEC partners used confrontation or dialogue to identify with their organisation or IOC, evoking some sort of resolution to collaborative obstacles. Below, is an extract from the field notes that illustrates how a KEDDY teacher sought alternative ways to engage in dialogue with a resistant school teacher, bringing forward firstly the organisational and then KAEC identity.

I spoke on the phone with the school teacher and explained to her how to support the child. She wouldn't listen to me. We briefly discussed the child's needs but, when it came to her supporting the child, she didn't want to discuss it... I went to the school a few days later to discuss how the collaboration between KAEC and the school goes and clarify what was expected of her... At the end, we had a productive discussion, clarifying her role in the process. (KEDDY teacher)

Note how the KEDDY teacher uses the verb 'discuss' in her quote, firstly to illustrate resistance to collaborate and later to illustrate a positive collaborative outcome, moving between an organisational and KAEC identity. Similar use of the terms *discussion, dialogue,*

confrontation and disagreement was found in other extracts in the analysis. It therefore appears that through dialogue and confrontation, KAEC partners experience the organisational identity tension which allowed them flexible ways to achieve KAEC aims.

Discussion

This paper uses KAEC, an educational IOC that supports disabled children, to explore: (1) What the identity tensions are that comprise the IOC identity paradox, and (2) How the identity paradox can assist in the exploration of related IOC tensions. This exploration offers important contributions to the study of IOCs and the study of paradox in management studies.

This research responds to the lack in IOC research to address the identity paradox through an engagement with the paradox literature (e.g. Lawrence and Kaufman, 2011; Staber and Sautter, 2011), or through the use of individuals as the main unit of analysis (e.g. Rometsch and Sydow, 2006). It also contradicts an established perspective which highlights the importance of an IOC identity (e.g. Koschmann, 2013; Olson et al., 2012; Zhang and Huxham, 2009). The study offers an original contribution by engaging with the paradox literature in order to explore the identity paradox, focusing on the multiple identities that individual actors adopt during their collaboration life. This allows the theorisation of the identity paradox in IOCs.

This article offered at the start a theorisation of the identity paradox. After adding the insights from the empirical data, the study enriches this initial theorisation of identity paradox as comprising four identity tensions pertaining to an interaction between professional, personal, team, organisational and IOC identities. This paradox theorisation, which has been detected and developed through research, can assist to better understand and make sense of collaborations. Collaborations that have the potential to achieve their aims are mainly paradoxical in nature since achieving aims requires the simultaneous protection and integration of partners' uniquely different resources, experiences and expertise in dynamic contexts. In the KAEC case, these differences were expressed through the multiple identities that IOC actors adopted. Identity interactions allow KAEC actors to respond to the unfolding requirements of the collaboration in achieving its aims. Similarly, IOCs' paradoxical nature can be portrayed through tensions between cultures, values, priorities or assets- or other unique elements that make different partners join forces (Majchrzak et al., 2015; Olson et al., 2012). This study shows that IOCs achieve aims by combining partners' differences (Vangen,

2017). It also shows the importance of recognising the context of collaboration as inherently paradoxical and to focus on working arrangements, interactions and tensions that both protect and integrate partners' uniquely different resources for the achievement of collaboration aims.

Paradoxical insights apply as context dynamism and complexity increase the experience of the paradox (Schad et al., 2016), while individual actors adopt different identities to respond to shifting IOC contexts. In fact, as the IOC context shifts, in this case when KAEC moves between the Referral, Diagnosis, Negotiation and Implementation stages, the partners' identities shift too. This article shows that contextual elements (such as, negotiating professional expertise, acting against or according to the IOC design, interacting with trust/mistrust and reacting to communication challenges) trigger the identity paradox, and drive partners to search for context-specific identities to align or separate themselves from the IOC. Identity shifts arise in contexts of change that require IOC actors to adopt different identities to assist them to respond in alternative, more effective, ways to new contexts. For example, the Referral stage requires a shift between professional and KAEC identity; the Diagnosis stage an interplay between personal and KAEC identity; the Negotiation stage a move between team and KAEC identity; and the Implementation stage a shift between organisational and KAEC identity.

The study confirms the value of researching and understanding the practice context that comprises multiple, seemingly contradictory, collaborative elements that coexist in close relationship. How partners respond to these elements as the collaboration unfolds influences the outcome of collaboration. In this practice context, KAEC partners moved between enacting a designed element based on their KAEC identity and exploring new options by adopting other identities. Understanding collaborations as paradoxical practice contexts suggests that research can explore collaborations' flexibility to move between designed elements that had prior meaning, but occasionally became sources of obstruction, and emergent collaborative elements that could obtain meaning as partners seek to implement a design that may undermine the collaboration. The identity paradox captures a process of immersed and fluid navigation through co-existing contradictory collaborative elements that allow partners to be reflexive and flexible, adapting creatively to dynamic circumstances and contextual needs.

The identities that partners bring forward do not become fixed categories. In contrast, they become reference points in an ongoing identity journey. The identity paradox highlights

that the aim is not to achieve even a temporary coherent sense of self by closing down alternative considerations in favour of a particular identity, but to engage in a continuous journey of self-discovery (Gioia et al., 2013). This exploration allows to extend current IOC accounts (e.g. Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Hardy et al., 2005; Koschmann, 2013) which neglect the identity paradox. This study suggests that the tensions between actors' IOC and other multiple identities should not be perceived by the IOC research or collaboration stakeholders as negative implications that obstruct collaborative work. In contrast, this article suggests that IOC research explores identity tensions as positive interactions that allow partners to maintain a balance between adhering to and ignoring an established course of action, between adjusting to emergent needs and maintaining continuity of the collaborative process.

As such, this article suggests that identity resolutions are momentary and context-specific, and highlights the need to regard them as relatively ephemeral. We are perhaps envisaging a situation in which individual actors' IOC identity is at the forefront of collaborative work but other multiple identities remain in the background, ready to come forward when the situation or context requires. The article expands this ephemeral resolution to other IOC paradoxes (e.g. trust-mistrust, rigidity-flexibility etc.), suggesting that each pole of the tension should be valued (Schad et al., 2016) since it allows partners to find relevant actions and avoid situations where one alternative continually dominates the other, potentially leading to collaborative inaction.

Moreover, the theorisation of the IOC identity paradox adds theoretical and empirical depth to management studies, that usually explore the identity paradox in organisations as the tension evolving between the similarity to a wider collective and the individuality that actors try to maintain within a collective (Kozica et al., 2015; Poole and van de Ven, 1989; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Particularly, this research advances the theorising of the identity paradox by demonstrating that it goes beyond the mere duality of a collective versus individual identity to incorporate the entanglement of professional, personal, team, organisational and IOC identities. Moreover, it opens up the exploration of the identity paradox in management research based on particular identity tensions and contradictory, but equally valid, identities. This assists in representing more adequately the complex nature of organisational identity, as well as in better capturing the complexities that characterise identity development and the related tensions embedded in organisational contexts.

Responding to the management studies' call for paradox research that goes beyond a focus on the dualities that comprise organisational paradoxes, to embrace the complexities

and tensions involved in paradoxes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2018; Schad and Bansal, 2018), the KAEC study reveals collaborative tensions related to the identity paradox. Particularly, it demonstrates that the professional identity tension relates to a cooperation-competition tension (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000; Clarke-Hill et al., 2003; Jorde and Teece, 1989); the personal identity tension to the rigidity-flexibility tension (Das and Teng, 2000); the team identity tension to the trust-mistrust tension (Huxham and Vangen, 2005); and that the organisational identity tension relates to the confrontation and dialogue tension (Ospina and Dodge, 2005). The identity paradox, therefore, becomes a construct to elaborate on the kinds of paradoxical tensions that arise in unstable organisational contexts, such as IOCs, which this research treats as two sides of the same coin, rather than as polarised contradictions. The often paradoxical nature of IOCs with their embedded paradoxes and tensions implies that, no matter how carefully identified and expressed these are, they cannot be terminated or regulated. This highlights that research needs to extend IOC explorations in ways that go beyond labelling a paradox or a tension, to elaborate on the kinds of tensions and interactions as well as interrelated tensions that arise when different actors come together. Tensions that are well articulated can contribute both to theory and to the knowledge of managing IOCs. In fact, having a named paradox and expressed associated tensions, researchers can elaborate the paradox through focusing on the exploration and clarification of positive and negative elements related to the paradox.

Recommendations for practice

This study enhances other IOC studies that use a paradox lens (e.g. Das and Teng, 2000; Huxham and Beech, 2003; Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010), and responds to the need to highlight tensions that have practical usage for IOC's management (Vangen, 2017) by unveiling the implications the identity paradox has for management practice.

Firstly, by experiencing the identity paradox, partners can move between designed IOC aspects, connected to their IOC identity, and emergent IOC aspects, related to their multiple identities. Therefore, management practice ought not to be constrained by seeking to control or eliminate emergent elements in hoping to maintain stability and order in the collaborative process. Maintaining a delicate balance between how an IOC should formally operate and how it can operate in practice can assist in achieving collaborative work in paradoxical IOC contexts. This means that managers should not choose between design and emergence but seek to manage the tensions between them because their contradictory coexistence is part of

the complex business reality. The tensions involved in the identity paradox suggest that even if management practice encourages partners to retain a collaborative identity, trust, dialogue, rigidity and cooperation, it should also acknowledge the emergent nature of these elements as a vital aspect of collaborative work. Emergent elements, such as multiple identities, mistrust, confrontation, flexibility and competition can become inherent benefits to collaborative practice.

Secondly, IOC identity and elements, such as cooperation, trust, dialogue and design rigidity, may lead to some order. However, management practice should not always perceive this order as a result of inaction, but more as a creative order that allows IOC actors to have some continuity in dealing with changing IOC needs. Simultaneously, multiple identities and elements, such as competition, design flexibility, trust suspension and confrontation, may lead to new ways of engaging with IOC actors. However, these are not portrayed as anarchy or chaos but as acts of adapting to emergent situations. This study recommends to management practice to consider that some IOC aspects change in view of becoming 'otherwise possible', and some other aspects achieve stabilisation in working together to increase the chances of fulfilling the IOC goals. The important message for management practice is that IOCs are better understood and managed if the managers have realistic rather than idealistic expectations, and if they recognise, accept and nurture the strengths and weaknesses associated with contradictory, and yet necessary, IOC elements. This means that managers should not always require to maintain established guidelines and plans in the collaborative process. In contrast, they can consider that traditional means such as schedules, routines and an established IOC identity can become largely inadequate if they rely on design and standardisation, and ignore the actors' need to address unprecedented collaborative circumstances. This can be especially apparent in governmental collaborations that may bring reluctant, and sometime unwilling, individuals to work together. These actors, which may come from different professions and disciplines, have to achieve both the aims of their organisation and of the collaboration. If they are asked to follow a collaborative schedule and identity, without the option of being flexible and open to emergent collaborative elements, they may find it difficult to adapt to the changing needs of the environment in which IOCs operate.

Concluding remarks

Despite the contributions of the study, this research has limitations as well. It was conducted with a very dynamic IOC, since each case that KAEC deals with is different, being based on each child's disability and individual circumstances (e.g. home environment, educational level and background). Moreover, the KAEC case which requires individual actors to come together to support disabled children, may be responsible for the fact that the identities of individuals, teams, organisations and professions proliferate more in the data than one would expect. Further examination in different types of IOCs is required to establish the identity tensions incorporated in the IOC identity paradox, along with the mechanisms that explain the prevalence of different identities. It is also noted that the identity paradox in KAEC was explored using a qualitative research design. Following other studies that explore multiple identities (e.g. Maguire and Hardy, 2005; Ybema et al., 2011), as a next step, the number of the participants can be increased (through e.g. surveys or field experiments) to explore identity tensions from different vantage points (Schwandt and Gates, 2017). Further research should also be conducted to examine the shifting meaning of tensions and explore the complexities involved in the identity paradox.

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Table 1: Definitions of the identities that IOC actors may adopt

Identity type	Definition
Organisational identity	Organisational identity is defined as a set of statements that describe how we perceive ourselves within our organisational context, based on aspects that are central, distinctive and enduring to our organisation (Albert and Whetten, 1985).
Personal identity	Personal identity refers to who we are, and highlights our uniqueness and specificity. It is what differentiates each of us from every other human being, allowing us to recognise ourselves as unique and different from every other person (Perry, 2008).
Team identity	Team identity is the concept which describes how we perceive ourselves within our team, demonstrating belongingness, a desire to work together, and a sense of clarity around the role of each team member (Mitchell et al., 2015).
Professional identity	Professional identity is the concept which describes how we perceive ourselves within our occupational context, based on occupational attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences (Ibarra, 1999).
IOC identity	IOC identity is a set of statements that emphasise the similarities or shared characteristics which represent the essence of the collaboration and around which we come together and perceive ourselves as members of the IOC (Koschmann, 2013).

Table 2: Data collected at each formal support stage

	<i>Partners' Meetings Observed</i>	<i>Interviews Collected</i>	<i>Documents Gathered</i>
KEDDY overview	-	-	7
Referral	2	5	13
Diagnosis	5	13	9
Negotiation	6	16	10
Intervention	-	9	9
<i>Total</i>	13	43	48

Table 3: Identity and collaborative tensions, and management implications arising from the IOC identity paradox

Support Stages	Referral	Diagnosis	Negotiation	Implementation
Identity tensions	Professional identity tension (Professional vs IOC identity)	Personal identity tension (Personal vs IOC identity)	Team identity tension (Team vs IOC identity)	Organisational identity tension (Organisational vs IOC identity)
Triggers of identity tensions	IOC actors negotiating professional expertise	IOC actors following and breaking the KAEC design	IOC actors dealing with mistrust	IOC actors overcoming communication challenges
Resulted IOC tensions that actors experience	Cooperation and competition	Rigidity and flexibility	Trust and mistrust	Confrontation and dialogue
Implications for IOC work	Resistance is necessary for IOC actors to achieve a compromise	While IOC actors are expected to cooperate, sometimes confrontation is also necessary	Sometimes partners may start collaborating without trusting each other. Trust might be a gain after a long process	Discussions and disagreements between individual actors seem necessary before they can adapt or reach an agreement

Figure 1: Representation of the KAEC partners and their main responsibilities

