



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



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## 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. It also 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.

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## 1. Introduction

Although the term collaboration by definition relates to different partners/actors working together for the achievement of common goals (Gray, 1989; Huxham & 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 & Taillieu, 2004; Gray, 1995). 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 & 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, Vroemise, & van Marrewijk, 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

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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.

## 2. IOC's psychosocial spaces

Collaborations are commonly perceived as complex and idiosyncratic “temporary evolving forums” (Gray, 1989; Hibbert, Huxham, & Ring, 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 & 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 & Vangen, 2005; Vangen & Huxham, 2003); negative attitudes and opposition to change (Olson, Balmer, & Mejicano, 2012); external pressures (Huxham, 1996); different protocols and structures (Bouwen & 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, Jobidon, Aube, & Tremblay, 2011), while individual efforts complement collaborative work (Bruns, 2013) and assist partners in achieving the collaboration aims (Jassawalla & Sashittal, 1998). It therefore suggests that partners may act both collaboratively and independently in order to fulfil collaborative goals (Kourti, 2017). 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 (Wapshott & Mallett, 2012). 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 & Hovelynck, 2006). In fact, IOC as an ongoing process of “heterogeneous becoming” (Chia, 1999) unfolds as partners engage in everyday working relations produced in and by interactions in different psychosocial spaces (Van Marrewijk & 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 & 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, Lounsbury, & Glynn, 2011), increase social capital (Kramer, 2006), enhance in-groupness (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 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 (Beech & Huxham, 2003; Sammarra & 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 & Brown, 2007), various social groups (Kira & Balkin, 2014) and/or various roles performed at and outside of work (Hogg & 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 & 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 & 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 (Brown, 2015). 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 & Bouchikhi, 2004)

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