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Developing Practice-Oriented Theory on Collaboration: A Paradox Lens

Research Synthesis

Abstract: *Collaboration is present throughout public administration as a means to address social issues that sit in the interorganizational domain. Yet research carried out over the last three decades has concluded that collaborations are complex, slow to produce outputs, and by no means guaranteed to deliver synergies and advantage. This article explores whether a "paradox lens" can aid the development of practice-oriented theory to help those who govern, lead, and manage collaborations in practice. It draws on a long-standing research program on collaboration and a synthesis of relevant literature on paradox and collaboration. The article develops five propositions on the application of a paradox lens that explicitly recognizes the context of collaboration as inherently paradoxical; acknowledges the limitations of mainstream theory in capturing adequately the complex nature of and tensions embedded in collaborative contexts; and uses the principles of paradox to develop practice-oriented theory on governing, leading, and managing collaborations.*

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Practitioner Points

- Collaboration is present throughout public management as a means to address social issues that sit in the interorganizational domain. Yet research carried out over the last three decades has concluded that collaborations are complex and prone to failure.
- Collaborations that have the potential to achieve collaborative advantage are inherently paradoxical in nature. The paradoxical nature arises because gaining advantage requires the simultaneous protection and integration of partners' uniquely different resources, experiences, and expertise in complex, dynamic organizing contexts.
- A paradox construct detected and named through research has the potential to aid understanding and sensemaking. It can reduce managers' anxiety by emphasizing why there cannot be one optimal solution to aid action in practice.
- The theoretical concepts should go beyond simple labeling to elaborate on the kinds of tensions that arise for governing, leading, and managing collaboration in practice.
- The theoretical concepts should help managers recognize and accept the strengths and weaknesses associated with contradictory, equally valid, but opposing solutions to governing, leading, and managing collaborations. It should do so in ways that are transparent, thus enabling effective reflection in practice.

Society's most challenging issues are complex and multifaceted beyond the reach of any single organization to tackle effectively on its own. Regardless of problem domain—be it poverty, health, education, terrorism, migration, or climate change—the boundaries between states, markets, and civil society in addressing challenging social issues are increasingly blurred. Collaborations, in the shape of formalized joint working arrangements between independent public, private, and nonprofit organizations, are thus seen as necessary means of addressing major issues facing society today (e.g., Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Bryson, Crosby, and Stone 2015; Heinrich, Hill, and Lynn 2004; Huxham and Vangen 2005; Ospina and Foldy 2015; Quick and Feldman 2014; Thomson and Perry 2006; Weber and Khademian 2008). Yet research over the last three decades has concluded that collaborations are complex, slow to produce outputs, and by no means guaranteed to deliver synergies and advantage (Huxham and Vangen 2005; McGuire and Agranoff 2011; O'Leary and Bingham 2009; Saz-Carranza 2012).

While a number of factors contribute to the challenge of collaboration, research increasingly points to inherent paradoxes and associated governance, leadership, and management tensions (e.g., Clarke-Hill, Li, and Davies 2003; Connelly, Zhang, and Faerman 2006; Das and Teng 2000; Huxham and Beech 2003; Huxham and Vangen 2005; Provan and Kenis 2008; Saz-Carranza 2007; Saz-Carranza and Ospina 2010; Tschirhart, Christensen, and Perry 2005; Vangen and Huxham 2003, 2012; Zeng and Chen 2003). These studies usually draw on definitions of paradox put forth by

contemporary organization theorists that emphasize the existence of contradictory, interrelated, mutually exclusive elements (e.g., Lewis 2000; Lewis and Smith 2014; Poole and Van de Ven 1989; Quinn and Cameron 1988; Smith and Berg 1987; Smith and Lewis 2011). Following a review of 25 years of paradox research in management science, Schad et al. offer a summarizing definition of paradox as "persistent contradiction between interdependent elements" (2016, 6).

As collaborations are vital in addressing societal challenges yet frequently unable to deliver successful outputs in practice, this article explores whether a "paradox lens" can aid the development of practice-oriented theory to help those who govern, lead, and manage them. Specifically, the article develops five propositions on the application of a paradox lens that explicitly recognizes the context of collaboration as inherently paradoxical; acknowledges the limitations of mainstream theory in capturing adequately the complex nature of and tensions embedded in these contexts; and uses the principles of paradox to develop practice-oriented theory on governing, leading, and managing collaborations.

Conceptual Foundation

This article draws on an extensive program of empirical research into governing, leading, and managing collaborations that has been ongoing for more than two decades (Vangen and Huxham 2014) and a synthesis of relevant literature on collaboration and paradox. The program focuses on themes—including goals, trust, power, culture, communication, governance, leadership, identity, and membership structures—identified from research with practitioners as affecting the success of a collaboration. Ensuing theoretical conceptualizations typically depict the complexity inherent in collaborative situations and the resulting challenges that are intrinsic to them.

The program relies primarily on research-oriented action research (RO-AR), which involves a process of conceptual theorizing from data gathered during organizational interventions on matters that are of genuine concern to the organizational participants and on which they need to act (Eden and Huxham 2006). It has involved interventions in numerous contexts with participants whose roles have ranged from directing collaborations to representing specific stakeholder groups as members. The collaborations have ranged from simple dyads to complex international networks and have spanned public policy areas including health, area development and regeneration, education, and social welfare.

RO-AR is similar to ethnography in that insight is drawn from naturally occurring data (Galibert 2004; Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993) and to a practice ontology in that it requires "a tolerance for complexity and ambiguity" and engagement with organizational life through "observing and working with practitioners" (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011, 1249). In addition, in RO-AR, the intervention is explicitly intended to change the way practitioners think about or act in a situation. Theoretical insight is derived emergently (Eisenhardt 1989) in a manner that has some similarities to the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998), with a specific focus on the development of theory that is meaningful for use in practice. Typically, this yields conceptualizations that capture the complexities of organizational life

through the "highlighting of issues, contradictions, tensions and dilemmas" rather than through generating synthetic explanatory variables (Langley 1999). Theorizing practice-oriented research in ways that meet the dual requirements of practice and the advancement of the field of knowledge is not straightforward (Eden and Huxham 2006; Pettigrew 1997). As pointed out by Feldman and Orlikowski, "practice accounts do not always conform to some readers' and some reviewers' expectations of conventional management science" (2011, 1249). Furthermore, deriving useful conceptualizations is inevitably an iterative process that entails experimenting with different ways of writing concepts (Eden and Huxham 2006; Huxham and Hibbert 2011).

In what follows, five propositions are developed to explicate why and how a paradox lens is a suitable framing device for researchers aiming to develop practice-oriented theory about governing, leading, and managing collaborations. The first proposition highlights the paradoxical nature of the context of collaboration. The second proposition advocates the use of a paradox lens as an integral part of research on collaboration. The last three propositions focus on the development of theoretical constructs that can aid sensemaking and highlight the nature of agency in relation to governing, leading, and managing collaborations.

Throughout the article, synthesis of extant research on collaboration and on the use of paradox in research on collaboration helps derive the propositions and salient issues in generating practice-oriented theory. Example conceptualizations are included to illustrate the validity and utility of the propositions. In particular, the development of propositions 3, 4, and 5 draws on a specific intervention that addressed the management of cultural diversity from the perspective of a major international organization and its many collaborative partners throughout the world. In terms of theory development, the intervention led to the conceptualization of a "culture paradox" and a set of five interrelated management tensions (see Vangen 2016; Vangen and Winchester 2014).

The Paradoxical Nature of Collaborative Contexts

Throughout the world, public organizations collaborate across organizational, professional, sectoral, and sometimes national boundaries to deal more effectively with complex, multifaceted issues and problems that are beyond individual organizations' capabilities to tackle effectively on their own. The literature is rich in examples in which partners as diverse as nonprofit, commercial, and faith-based organizations collaborate with schools, social enterprises, community groups, and public agencies. The general premise underpinning such collaborative arrangements is that differences between organizations—including their areas of expertise, assets, know-how, priorities, cultures and values—constitute unique resources that, when brought together, create the potential for synergies and collaborative advantage (Bryson, Ackermann, and Eden 2016; Gray 1989; Huxham and Vangen 2005; Lasker, Weiss, and Miller 2001; Quick and Feldman 2014).

Importantly, then, collaborative advantage is achieved through the synthesis of differences. It thus requires working arrangements that simultaneously protect and integrate partners' uniquely different resources for the furtherance of joint collaborative goals

> Collaborative advantage is achieved through the synthesis of differences.

(Huxham and Vangen 2005; Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010; Quick and Feldman 2014; Shaver 2006; Vangen and Huxham 2012).

In these kinds of interconnected contexts, autonomous organizational units deliver services and remits within traditional vertical command-and-control relationships. Yet they also participate in a variety of horizontal collaborative relationships that support the delivery of joint goals (Heinrich, Hill, and Lynn 2004; Ospina and Foldy 2015). Additionally, when the joint work addresses major social issues in the public domain, the collaborative arrangements tend to be highly dynamic owing to changing public policies and varying stakeholder engagement and preferences (Cropper and Palmer 2008; Huxham and Vangen 2000; Quick and Feldman 2014; Thomson and Perry 2006). This necessary combination of autonomous organizational hierarchies and collaborative governance structures is recognized in extant research as a source of multiple paradoxes (see, e.g., Huxham 2000; Ospina and Foldy 2015). In this sense, the notion of paradox recognizes collaborative contexts as complex webs of overlapping, dynamic hierarchies and systems that comprise competing designs and processes that are necessary to achieve desired outcomes.

The idea that collaborative contexts are inherently paradoxical, containing "persistent contradiction between interdependent elements" (Schad et al. 2016, 6), is recognized both implicitly and explicitly in the literature. For example, research suggests, paradoxically, that *both* similarities and differences in member organizations' goals influence the success of a collaboration (Vangen and Huxham 2012). When partners have similar organizational goals, agreement on joint collaboration goals can follow more easily (O'Leary and Bingham 2009; Thomson and Perry 2006). Yet similar goals suggest that partners may have competitive interests that leave them reluctant to cooperate and share information (Provan and Kenis 2008; Tschirhart, Christensen, and Perry 2005). For example, community groups and nonprofit organizations often compete for scarce resources. Hence, the need to convince funders about their organization's ability to produce public and social value, over and above that of potential partners, can make collaboration difficult in practice. Differences in goals also facilitate collaboration as this implies greater synergies from diversity of resources, but this can also lead partners to seek different and sometimes conflicting outcomes (Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Percival 2009). For example, faith-based organizations, community groups, and schools frequently have conflicting value bases and goals. Yet such diverse institutions are often partners in implementing public policy pertaining to issues such as public health, social well-being, and area regeneration, where their value bases and goals would suggest different priorities and approaches. This "goals paradox" shows that goal congruence and diversity are in tension, rendering the management of goals challenging in practice. The general premise of collaboration and evidence from its implementation in practice, yields the first proposition:

> **Proposition 1:** Collaborations that have the potential to achieve collaborative advantage are inherently paradoxical in nature. The paradoxical nature arises because gaining

advantage requires the simultaneous protection and integration of partners' uniquely different resources, experiences, and expertise in complex, dynamic organizing contexts.

The paradox lens offers a way of recognizing explicitly the interorganizational context of collaboration as one that is characterized by contradictions and compromises. Individuals thus operate in a context in which tensions cannot be resolved per se; rather, opposing management actions are integral to the complex systems within which work takes place (Huxham and Vangen 2005; Lüscher and Lewis 2008; Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010). Sustainable high performance in these contexts requires practitioners to embrace multiple opposing forces simultaneously (Lewis and Smith 2014). If the aim of research is to develop better-contextualized theory about governing, leading, and managing collaborations, then explicitly recognizing the context of collaboration as one that is paradoxical in nature will have important implications for empirical research and theoretical development.

Investigating Collaboration Using a Paradox Lens

In terms of empirical research, the application of a paradox lens entails examining how multiple, seemingly contradictory forces coexist and what the implications are for managing these simultaneously. This contrasts with a contingency approach (Lawrence and Lorsh 1967), whereby research aims to identify and highlight opposing forces and explore conditions in which each should be the focus of management (Lewis and Smith 2014). While the paradox lens has been used extensively in organization theory (e.g., Lewis 2000; Lewis and Smith 2014; Poole and Van de Ven 1989; Quinn and Cameron 1988; Smith and Berg 1987; Smith and Lewis 2011), its use in research on collaboration is less established. Nevertheless, researchers have begun to use paradox more explicitly in research on collaboration to frame issues and to highlight and describe interesting tensions, oppositions, and contradictions in ways that are both conceptually appealing and practically useful (e.g., Clarke-Hill, Li, and Davies 2003; Das and Teng 2000; Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010; Saz-Carranza 2007, 2012; Vangen and Huxham 2012; Vangen and Winchester 2014; Zeng and Chen 2003).

The idea that collaborations can be understood as highly paradoxical contexts is thus beginning to influence the methods that researchers use to study collaboration phenomena. In general, researchers have argued that mainstream theories—such as transaction cost theory, game theory, resource dependence theory, agency theory, and strategic behavior theory—do not adequately capture the complexity of collaboration. They have thus begun to use paradox to represent more adequately the complex nature of, and the tensions embedded in, these contexts. For example, arguing that mainstream theories cannot fully address the instability of strategic alliances, Das and Teng (2000) develop a framework of internal tensions focusing on cooperation versus competition, rigidity versus flexibility, and short-term versus long-term orientations. They describe why and how these three tensions play out in strategic alliances and conclude that there is a need to maintain a delicate balance of several pairs of competing forces. Similarly, Zeng and Chen (2003) argue that although dominant theories—including transaction cost economics,

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organizational learning, and resource dependence theory—have greatly enhanced knowledge of alliance management, these theories lack a grasp on the complex interdependencies between cooperation and competition among partners. They explore the use of social dilemma theory to study this tension between interdependent parties in alliances and subsequently identify propositions for partnership management. As a final example, Clarke-Hill, Li, and Davies (2003) argue that a multiparadigm approach (combining strategic positioning, a resource-based view, and game theory) provides a better framework than orthodox theories in exploring the contradictory, interactive, and dynamic nature of strategic alliances. They suggest that alliance partners should not choose between cooperation and competition but seek to manage the tensions between them because their contradictory duality is part of the complex business reality. These examples all relate to strategic alliances that as dyads are structurally simple. In comparison, collaborations that address challenging societal issues tend to include many diverse partners. Hence, it is reasonable to deduce that these mainstream theories also cannot adequately capture the complexities of collaboration in these latter contexts.

The literature includes a few examples in which paradox has been used in research on public sector collaborations (e.g., Connelly, Zhang, and Faerman 2006; Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010; Provan and Kenis 2008; Sedgwick 2014; Vangen and Huxham 2003, 2012). For example, in an empirical project focusing on leaders of successful networks, the researchers link paradox and collaboration to better understand network management (Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010). Here, two paradoxes—unity versus diversity and confrontation versus dialogue—that emerged from narrative inquiry (Ospina and Dodge 2005) were used conceptually to empirically document how leaders manage paradox (Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010, 431). In terms of collaborative leadership, the findings suggest that successful leaders respond in ways that honor both sides of the paradoxes. They do so by effectively addressing contradictory demands through inward-focused activities that facilitate interaction, cultivate relationships, and promote openness and through outward-focused activities that emphasize managing credibility, multilevel working, and cultivating relationships. In terms of methodology, the example illustrates the use of the paradox lens in analyzing and conceptualizing management implications for practice.

In other examples, paradox is used as an analytical lens to examine collaborative paradoxes with reference to varying collaborative activities (Sedgwick 2014), to document the types of paradoxes that typically feature in collaborations (O'Leary and Vij 2012), or to develop theoretical constructs that may be used reflectively to support practice (Huxham and Beech 2003; Huxham and Vangen 2005; Vangen and Huxham 2012). These examples show the kinds of contextualized knowledge advancement that can be gained by using paradox as an integral part of research methods in the investigation of collaborations. In summary, these studies identify new paradoxes and tensions, describe and elaborate on these, and explore possible governance, leadership, and management responses to them. This review of cases in which paradox forms an integral part of research methods on collaboration suggests the second proposition:

> **Proposition 2:** A paradox lens can be used to enhance research on collaborations. It can overcome the limitations of mainstream theory by capturing the complex nature of and tensions embedded in collaborative contexts. It can help researchers analyze and conceptualize the implications for collaboration in practice.

The paradox lens is proposed as a useful and integral component of research methodology, complementing other more common linear sequential approaches to research on collaboration (Saz-Carranza 2012). The use of the paradox lens, as explored in the next section, can help develop better-contextualized theoretical constructs to inform the governance, leadership, and management of collaboration.

Theorizing about Collaboration Using the Paradox Lens

The development of the first two aspects of the paradox lens brings to the fore the inherently paradoxical nature of collaborative contexts and the idea that mainstream theories cannot adequately capture the complex nature of, and the management tensions embedded in, these contexts. Building on the propositions developed in the previous two sections, in this section, the focus is on using the paradox lens explicitly to develop practice-oriented theoretical conceptualizations about collaborations. The analysis suggests that the paradox lens may inform the development of theoretical conceptualizations through a focus on detecting and naming paradoxes, identifying and expressing tensions, and developing reflexive conceptual constructs. In what follows, a proposition pertaining to each of these is developed through a synthesis of literature on paradox and excerpts from the RO-AR project on cultural diversity.

Detecting and Naming Paradoxes

In the organization literature, there is a generic discussion about different ways of working with paradox and whether paradoxes need to be removed or resolved (Lewis 2000; Poole and Van de Ven 1989). We can note that resolution, according to Poole and Van de Ven (1989), does not imply the elimination of a tension but rather a need to address tensions in ways that account appropriately for contrasting demands. Nevertheless, if the context of a collaboration is inherently paradoxical, and this is a necessary condition for synergy and advantage, then tensions certainly cannot be resolved per se. Instead, as has been argued throughout this article, there is a need to embrace the existence of paradox while simultaneously accepting that in practice, some kind of resolution is required insofar as enabling agency is concerned.

The literature also highlights that paradoxes and tensions are not the most comforting of concepts for individuals who need to act. The primary reason is that paradoxes do not lend themselves to actions that apply formal logic based on internal consistency. Instead, paradoxes emphasize distinction and inconsistencies. This, then, can trigger some anxiety and feelings of being "stuck" for individuals who have to make sense of underlying tensions (Smith and Berg 1987) and decide how to act in practice. Consequently, research suggests, there may be a tendency for actors to seek strategies for consistency to regain clarity and control (Cialdini, Trost, and Newsome 1995) or take actions that seemingly avoid rather than confront tensions (Lewis 2000). This may include splitting, polarizing, and choosing between opposing forces (Lewis 2000); choosing one polarity over another can serve to highlight the need

for the other, which, in turn, may trigger defense mechanisms and hamper learning (Foldy 2004; Saz-Carranza 2007).

For example, the RO-AR project highlights that cultural diversity is now an increasingly common aspect of public sector collaboration (Foldy 2004; Im 2013; Oberfield 2016). On the one hand, research suggests that cultural similarities can enhance interconnectivity and shared understanding between partners (Beamish and Lupton 2009; Pothukuchi et al. 2002). On the other hand, cultural diversity can cause conflicts, misunderstandings, and points of friction (Bird and Osland 2006; Kumar and Nti 2004; Prevot and Meschi 2006; Shenkar, Luo, and Yeheskel 2008). For the latter reasons, research has typically focused on managing conflicts in culturally diverse contexts through a three-stage process of recognition, research, and reconciliation (Bird and Osland 2006; van Marrewijk 2004). In the complex, dynamic context of interorganizational collaboration, this approach is of limited value because it assumes that conflicts, misunderstandings, and points of friction are both identifiable and manageable. As interorganizational collaborations are typically characterized by multiple, dynamic, and interacting cultural "communities of belonging" pertaining, for example, to national, organizational, and professional cultures (Gibbs 2009; Kelly, Schaan, and Joncas 2002; Sirmon and Lane 2004; Vangen 2016; Vangen and Winchester 2014), the idea that cultural issues are both identifiable and manageable does not generally pass muster. It is also the case that partners' culturally diverse insights, skills, and experiences are resources that, when harnessed, can help a collaboration address issues in new and alternative ways and so achieve synergistic gains (Ely and Thomas 2001; Foldy 2004; Vangen and Winchester 2014). This value of cultural diversity is not generally recognized in the "recognition, research, and reconciliation" approach to addressing cultural diversity.

These competing logics lead to the identification of a contradiction pertaining to the role of cultural diversity in collaboration that can be named a "culture paradox." It suggests that "cultural diversity is simultaneously a source of advantage and a source of inertia," as illustrated in figure 1. The paradox explicitly acknowledges the benefits of cultural diversity (Ely and Thomas 2001; Kelly, Schaan, and Joncas 2002) as well as associated conflicts, misunderstandings, and points of frictions (Bird and Osland 2006; Kumar and Nti 2004; Prevot and Meschi 2006; Shenkar, Luo, and Yeheskel 2008).

The RO-AR project on cultural diversity highlights a paradox and inherent tensions that cannot be resolved per se. The nature of paradoxical tensions is such that actions and choices will trigger new situations and new tensions ad infinitum. Nevertheless, using paradox constructs to convey that there cannot be easy answers can be reassuring and thus empowering for those who need to act (Huxham and Vangen 2005). To that end, researchers may

usefully identify and name the conceptualization of paradox in ways that identify contradictory yet valid and coexisting features of the collaborative arrangements. This, in turn, can enhance understanding about how to manage them. Hence, the third proposition is as follows:

> **Proposition 3:** A paradox construct detected and named through research has the potential to aid understanding and sensemaking. It can reduce practitioners' anxiety by emphasizing why there cannot be one optimal solution to aid action in practice.

This proposition points out that researchers may want to strive for *clarity* in expressing a paradox and its related tensions. A concise statement that explicates the nature of a paradox can both contribute to knowledge about governing, leading, and managing collaborations and enhance the usability of that theoretical concept in practice. Similarly, subsequent paradoxical tensions will need to be expressed in a manner that informs sensemaking and reduces anxiety for individual actors. This can be achieved through ensuring that the rationale behind the paradox, and hence the nature of resolution, is understood. Naming a clear paradox, such as the culture paradox, makes explicit the need for research and theory development to emphasize both the potential conflicts and benefits of an aspect of the collaborative context—in the current example, this is cultural diversity. There is also a "commonsense" quality to this statement, which suggests that it may be applicable in general to culturally diverse collaborations in practice.

Identifying and Expressing Paradoxical Tensions

If the aim is to enhance understanding, aid sensemaking, and help practitioners decide how to act in specific situations, then theoretical conceptualization clearly needs to go beyond the naming of a paradox. In terms of defining and expressing paradoxical tensions, the "commonsense" quality of theoretical constructs mentioned earlier is an important aspect of practice-oriented theory. Beyond that, Huxham and Beech (2003) suggest that researchers need to consider how conceptualizations may be framed in order to capture practitioners' expressed needs. If theorizing is concerned with paradoxical tensions, then the generation of useful practice-oriented theory cannot be about the provision of good practice prescriptions, as these are not implementable in practice (Huxham and Beech 2003). Nor can it be, as highlighted throughout this article, about negating paradoxical tensions. It can, however, be about asking questions (being reflexive) with respect to how tensions are managed (Bouchikhi 1998; Saz-Carranza 2007).

The literature includes examples in which researchers have designed processes wherein paradoxes facilitate managers' engagement with the management questions. For example, Lüscher and colleagues use action research to explore organizational change paradoxes with practitioners. It entailed a "collaborative sensemaking process" of working with paradoxes that helped practitioners move from either/or interpretations toward a paradox perspective that, the authors report, enabled managerial action (Lüscher, Lewis, and Ingram 2006; Lüscher and Lewis 2008). Similarly, Huxham and Beech (2003) argue that the use of practice management tensions within a "reflective practice approach" will facilitate practitioners to make choices. Huxham and Vangen (2005) find that raising awareness,

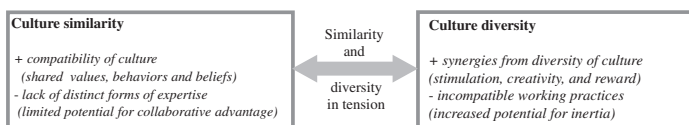| Culture similarity	Similarity and	Culture diversity
+ *compatibility of culture (shared values, behaviors and beliefs)* - *lack of distinct forms of expertise (limited potential for collaborative advantage)*	diversity in tension	+ *synergies from diversity of culture (stimulation, creativity, and reward)* - *incompatible working practices (increased potential for inertia)*

Figure 1 Example Construct: Culture Paradox

through "capacity-building events," of the types of paradoxes and tensions that typically arise will enhance practitioners' ability to manage them in ways that are appropriate to their particular situation. These examples show that theoretical constructs, expressed as paradoxes, emphasize tensions that are not simple and static. They highlight that any action requires judgment and choice (reflexivity). Yet the differentiation that is integral to the paradox lens can help identify aspects of competing demands and creative ways of integrating those demands (Suedfeld, Tetlock, and Streufert 1992).

The second extract from the RO-AR project on cultural diversity provides an example of how paradoxical tensions, derived from empirical data, may be identified and expressed. Initial thematic data analysis on the large amount of data gathered resulted in the identification of 29 themes on topics ranging from perceptions and behaviors embedded in different national, organizational, and professional cultures to challenges relating to communication, decision making, and accountability. Further analysis, guided by the named culture paradox, led to the identification of five areas of interrelated management tensions pertaining to beliefs about how cultural sensitivity may be developed, level of organizational adjustment within a collaboration, individual agency and orientation toward the collaboration versus own organization, the quantity and extent of cultural diversity within a collaboration, and the nature of communication and knowledge sharing (Vangen 2016; Vangen and Winchester 2014).

Guided by the method developed by Huxham and Beech (2003), further conceptualizations focused on expressing the key tension within each of these areas. It entailed identifying extreme opposite yet equally valid forms of possible actions from the data. As suggested by Huxham and Beech (2003), because such extreme opposites are unlikely to be implementable in practice, the tensions serve as means to identify the nature of compromises and trade-offs that may be required in practice. As the tensions emerge out of sensitively analyzed, naturally occurring data, they are likely to capture practitioners' genuine concern. The five tensions, listed in figure 2, are thus examples of the kinds of management tensions that surface when the aim is to harness cultural diversity toward the achievement of collaborative advantage. Further elaboration of these tensions can be found in Vangen (2016) and Vangen and Winchester (2014), but for illustrative purposes, one of the tensions is described in more detail in the next section.

Identifying and expressing paradoxical tensions, such as those pertaining to the culture paradox, can help researchers convey insight about the management of collaborations in ways that can aid practitioners in practice. Importantly, however, the inevitably dynamic nature of tensions implies that, no matter how carefully identified and expressed, tensions will not be of a definitive and permanent quality. Nevertheless, it is possible to develop theoretical constructs that, when used reflectively (and reflexively), can inform both theory and practice. Hence, the fourth proposition is as follows:

> **Proposition 4:** The theoretical concepts should go beyond simple labeling to elaborate on the kinds of tensions that arise for governing, leading, and managing collaboration in practice.

This proposition highlights that researchers need to extend conceptualizations in ways that are reassuring for practitioners who need to make reflexive judgments in practice. Well-expressed tensions not only contribute to knowledge on governing, leading, and managing collaborations but begin to provide conceptual handles for reflection by practitioners in practice.

Developing Reflexive Conceptual Constructs

Bearing in mind the conceptual qualities of "clarity" and "common sense," one of the problems with paradoxes and tensions, as pointed to in the literature, is the idea that paradoxes are themselves paradoxical. They are both confusing and understandable and
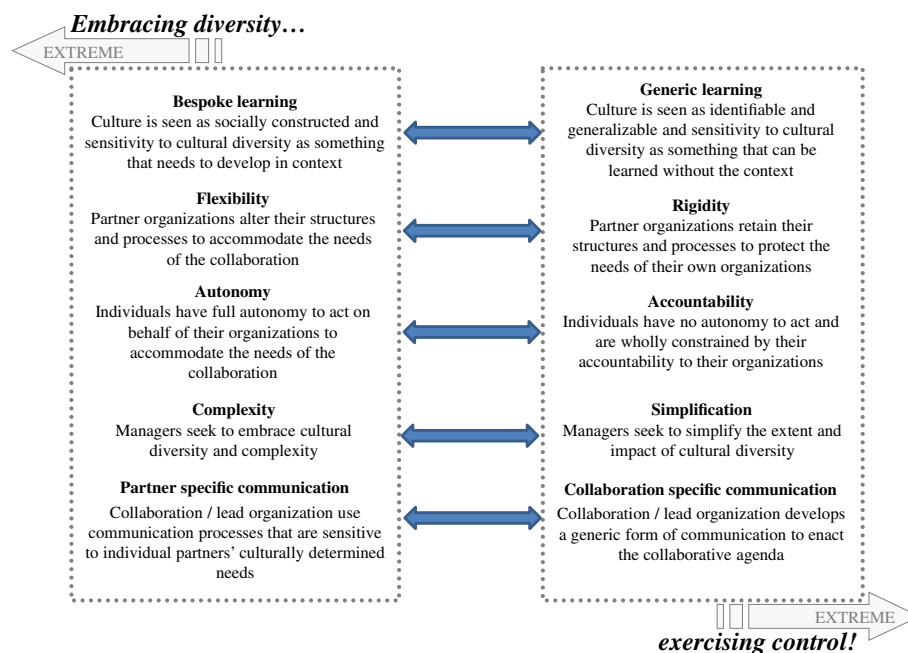

Embracing diversity…

EXTREME ◄

Bespoke learning
Culture is seen as socially constructed and sensitivity to cultural diversity as something that needs to develop in context

Flexibility
Partner organizations alter their structures and processes to accommodate the needs of the collaboration

Autonomy
Individuals have full autonomy to act on behalf of their organizations to accommodate the needs of the collaboration

Complexity
Managers seek to embrace cultural diversity and complexity

Partner specific communication
Collaboration / lead organization use communication processes that are sensitive to individual partners' culturally determined needs

Generic learning
Culture is seen as identifiable and generalizable and sensitivity to cultural diversity as something that can be learned without the context

Rigidity
Partner organizations retain their structures and processes to protect the needs of their own organizations

Accountability
Individuals have no autonomy to act and are wholly constrained by their accountability to their organizations

Simplification
Managers seek to simplify the extent and impact of cultural diversity

Collaboration specific communication
Collaboration / lead organization develops a generic form of communication to enact the collaborative agenda

EXTREME ►

exercising control!

Figure 2 Example Tensions: Managing Cultural Diversity

both common and surprising (Quinn and Cameron 1988; Schad et al. 2016). Indeed, the process of conceptualizing entails building concepts that accommodate contradictions. "Rather than polarize phenomena into either/or notions, researchers need to use both/and constructs for paradoxes, allowing for simultaneity and the study of interdependence" (Lewis 2000, 773). As such, the process of conceptualizing paradoxical tensions can in itself be seen as paradoxical; the necessary differentiation highlights contradiction, yet the act of differentiation also helps integration.

> Being able to accommodate partners' specific culturally determined communication preferences can help avoid misunderstandings and build trust.

Having named a paradox and expressed associated tensions (exemplified in figures 1 and 2), researchers can elaborate the theoretical constructs through focusing on the identification of positive and negative aspects of agency that favor one pole of the tension over the other. This process of diversification can, in turn, be used constructively to identify intermediate positions where agency can be enacted. Although theoretical conceptualizations may include suggestions of possible intermediate positions (e.g., where these have emerge from empirical data analysis), the constructs can also be used reflectively by practitioners to aid their judgment and identification of possible intermediate positions in specific contexts of practice (Huxham and Beech 2003). Importantly, the identification of positive and negative aspects of agency can help practitioners question alternative ways of doing things. It is this questioning that enables practitioners to be consciously reflexive in their management of paradoxical tensions.

For example, as illustrated by the third extract from the RO-AR project on cultural diversity, the tension between "bespoke learning versus generic learning" (figure 2) captures contrasting beliefs about how cultural sensitivity of relevance to a particular collaborative situation may be developed. Elaborated briefly, the tension is about developing "bespoke" communication processes that are sensitive to partners' culturally determined needs versus adopting a generic form of communication to enact the collaborative agenda (see Vangen 2016). Being able to accommodate partners' specific culturally determined communication preferences can help avoid misunderstandings and build trust. Yet doing so may not be pragmatically possible. This theoretical tension captures the idea that awareness about cultural diversity is essential to working effectively in culturally diverse collaborative contexts, but the pitfalls of "stereotyping" and "superiority" are inherent in the process of learning. It suggests that any description of cultural diversities inevitably carries the danger of expressing similarities and differences in "stereotypical" manners (Osland and Bird 2000). Furthermore, it suggests that in encountering differences, partners may (sometimes subconsciously) conceive of one culture as superior to another or seek to impose a specific culture over the collaboration (Salk and Shenkar 2001; Sheer and Chen 2003; Walsh 2004). Both practices can yield highly inaccurate depictions of how cultural diversities interact in any particular collaboration. This gives rise to the particular management tension between, on the one hand, seeing cultural sensitivity as something that can be developed without the specific context and, on the other hand, seeing the development of cultural sensitivity as something that must be situated in the particular context.

In this particular tension, the right pole depicts cultural diversity as detectable and stable enough to support the idea that cultural diversity can be learned without individuals being embedded in the specific collaborative context. The left pole depicts culture as socially constructed and dynamic and supports the idea that cultural sensitivity can at best be developed in context. Either view—as illustrated in figure 3—implies different benefits and advantages in as far as agency
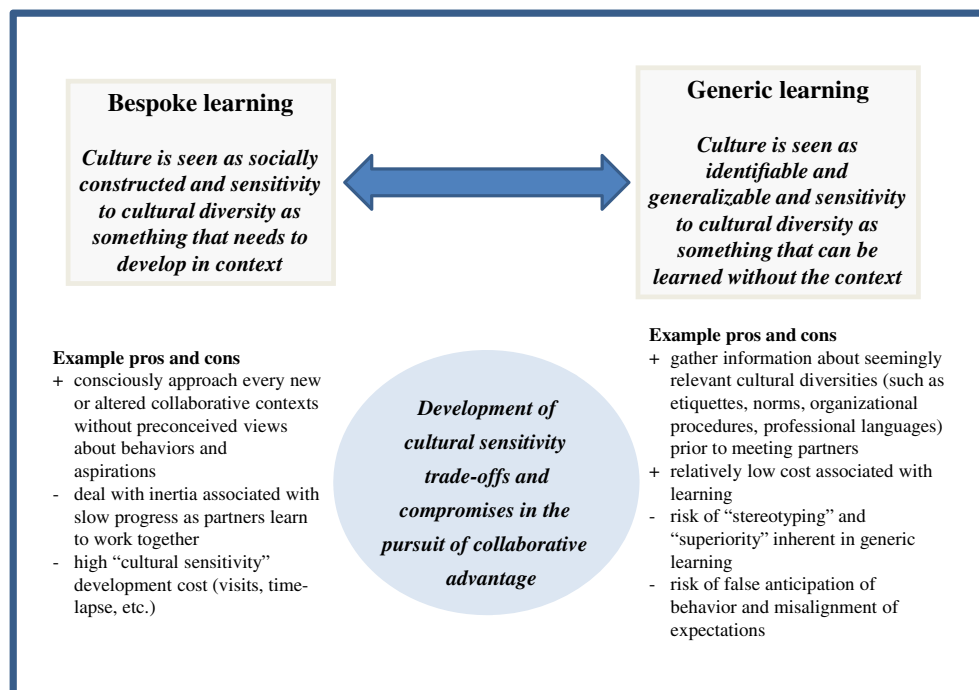

Bespoke learning

Culture is seen as socially constructed and sensitivity to cultural diversity as something that needs to develop in context

Generic learning

Culture is seen as identifiable and generalizable and sensitivity to cultural diversity as something that can be learned without the context

Example pros and cons
+ consciously approach every new or altered collaborative contexts without preconceived views about behaviors and aspirations
- deal with inertia associated with slow progress as partners learn to work together
- high "cultural sensitivity" development cost (visits, time-lapse, etc.)

Development of cultural sensitivity trade-offs and compromises in the pursuit of collaborative advantage

Example pros and cons
+ gather information about seemingly relevant cultural diversities (such as etiquettes, norms, organizational procedures, professional languages) prior to meeting partners
+ relatively low cost associated with learning
- risk of "stereotyping" and "superiority" inherent in generic learning
- risk of false anticipation of behavior and misalignment of expectations

Figure 3 Example Tension Elaboration: Developing Cultural Sensitivity

is concerned. The elaboration seeks to highlight that developing cultural sensitivity in interorganizational, cross national collaborative contexts—in the pursuit of collaborative advantage—inevitably requires compromises and trade-offs in practice. It is the culture paradox—the idea that cultural diversity is simultaneously a source of advantage and a source of inertia—that gives rise to the specific trade-offs and compromises, which, in turn, can usefully aid management in practice toward the achievement of collaborative advantage.

In differentiating between two extreme poles, it is helpful to explain the rationale pertaining to each—and thereby enhance acceptance of a paradox and associated tensions. The compromises necessary with reference to one pole will also suggest the type of compromises that are necessary with reference to the other pole. The differentiation thus highlights the value of each alternative, which, in turn, can identify actions and help avoid situations where one alternative continually dominates the other. Similarly, the increased appreciation of the value of each extreme pole allows for better-informed integration, including enhanced possibility for new, creative solutions to emerge that may ultimately enable longer-term success. Hence, the fifth proposition is as follows:

> **Proposition 5:** The theoretical concepts should help practitioners recognize and accept the strengths and weaknesses associated with contradictory, equally valid, but opposing solutions to governing, leading, and managing collaborations. It should do so in ways that are transparent, thus enabling effective reflection in practice.

This proposition points to the need for appropriate conceptual *elaboration* in expressing the paradox and the related tensions. The emphasis on tentativeness is an important aspect of this; paradoxical tensions as pointed out above are not definitive and permanent in nature. Collaborations themselves are idiosyncratic and dynamic, and so conceptualizations about how to manage inherent tensions have to rely on careful judgment for deriving specific solutions (Huxham and Vangen 2005; Vlaar et al. 2007; Weber and Khademian 2008). This current research suggests that in constructing paradox, researchers could aim for generality in the expression of the paradox itself. For example, it was pointed out earlier that the culture paradox has a generic quality that renders it immediately applicable to culturally diverse collaborations. In going beyond the paradox to the identification and subsequent elaboration of inherent tensions, research can offer frameworks for more in-depth exploration that enhances understanding in practice.

A Comment on Methods for Developing Practice-Oriented Theory

Research-oriented action research and other forms of qualitative research that engage with practice are particularly appropriate for developing contextualized theory that relates closely to practice (Eden and Huxham 2006; Huxham and Hibbert 2011; Pettigrew 1997). Yet it was not the intention, in this article, to propose that all practice-oriented theory development about collaboration requires the use of qualitative research, paradox, and related constructs. However, if researchers choose to use these, then the five propositions can serve as pointers while researchers retain their creativity

> The paradox lens can help derive contextualized theoretical concepts relevant to the complex context of collaboration.

and integrity in the articulation and description of paradox and related tensions. Such constructs can undoubtedly form an integral part of otherwise contextualized theoretical outputs.

The five propositions, along with the examples, are presented at an opportune time, as qualitative research methods, including action research, are increasingly popular (Aguinis et al. 2009; O'Reilly, Paper, and Marx 2012). It responds to numerous specific requests from researchers who seek exemplars of theory building from qualitative research and in particular action research. Although the specific examples provided in this article are brief, individuals who are interested can find more detail in the articles where they were originally published.

This article has made a contribution through focusing on the paradoxical nature of collaboration in general and through highlighting implications of this for investigating and theorizing about collaboration. The RO-AR project on cultural diversity illustrated here is qualitative in its entirety. This is not to suggest that the paradox lens is not applicable to quantitative methods. Rather, as pointed out by Schad et al. (2016), the majority of empirical articles in the literature rely on qualitative data. However, the article highlights the merits of using a paradox lens to develop contextualized theory on collaboration. It thus invites researchers to explore different uses—in both quantitative and qualitative methods—of a paradox lens as an integral part of investigating and theorizing about collaboration.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore the application of a paradox lens to enhance theory development for the practice of collaboration. Drawing on relevant literature and empirical research, it developed five propositions that can help researchers develop contextualized theory about collaboration using a paradox lens. The first highlights the paradoxical nature of collaboration indicating that tensions, contradictions, and compromises are integral to success in these contexts. The second highlights the merits of using a paradox lens as an integral part of research methodology. These two propositions are important building blocks for the remaining three, which address directly the aim of developing practice-oriented theory. Using the example of cultural diversity and collaboration, the last three propositions show, in a sequential manner, how the paradox lens can be used by researchers to develop theoretical constructs. Such constructs can inform reflexive and reflective practice and aid practitioners in their active responses to all kinds of paradoxes and paradoxical tensions.

The article does not claim that these propositions constitute an exhaustive list or that all applications of paradox to the study of collaboration need to adopt the principles inherent in these. Yet they are clearly important in highlighting the inherently paradoxical nature of collaborative contexts, how the paradox lens can contribute to research methods, and how to theorize about collaboration phenomena in ways that are meaningful in practice. In essence, they show how the paradox lens can help derive contextualized theoretical concepts relevant to the complex context of collaboration. For the practice of collaboration, the acceptance of the paradoxical nature of collaboration,

with its intrinsic tensions, can ultimately lead to consideration of realistic rather than idealistic expectations of what can be achieved. Hence, if the research aims are to generate practice-oriented theory that simultaneously captures some of the complexity that underpins the interorganizational collaboration phenomenon under investigation and to convey this in a manner that is appropriate for use in practice, then using the paradox lens can be fruitful.

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