

**MANAGING  
INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL  
COLLABORATIONS**

# RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF  
ORGANIZATIONS VOLUME 64

# MANAGING INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATIONS: PROCESS VIEWS

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# INTRODUCTION: PROCESS VIEWS ON INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATIONS

Hans Berends and Jörg Sydow

Inter-organizational collaboration has become indispensable for many organizations. Organizations may collaborate, for instance, to develop innovations (e.g., [Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doerr, 1996](#)), address grand challenges ([Seidl & Werle, 2018](#)), streamline supply chains (e.g., [Dyer & Nobeoka, 2000](#)), set standards ([Leiponen, 2008](#)), realize creative projects ([Windeler & Sydow, 2001](#)), or respond to emergencies (e.g., [Beck & Plowman, 2014](#)). Inter-organizational collaboration enables organizations to pool resources and accomplish objectives that they cannot realize on their own ([Gray, 1985](#)).

As a consequence, inter-organizational collaboration has emerged as a key topic in management and organization research since the 1980s. It has been studied from many perspectives including resource dependence and resource-based views, transaction cost economics, social networks, institutional theory, organizational learning, and many others (see, e.g., [Barringer & Harrison, 2000](#)). Specialized literature has emerged on specific forms of collaboration such as alliances, consortia, industry–university collaboration, project networks, global production networks, cross-sectional partnerships, regional clusters, and meta-organizations. Much of this literature has taken a variance research approach ([Langley, 1999](#); [Mohr, 1982](#)) as it has been concerned with the conditions for effective collaboration, the properties of collaborative relationships, and the outcomes of collaboration (see, e.g., [Gulati, Wohlgezogen, & Zhelyazkov, 2012](#); [Salvato, Reuer, & Battigalli, 2017](#), for reviews).

Another approach which is central to this volume, however, has been to focus on processes of inter-organizational collaboration. A process approach views “phenomena dynamically – in terms of movement, activity, events, change and temporal evolution” ([Langley, 2007](#)). Process research seeks to explain how phenomena emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time ([Langley, 1999](#)). Process is a distinct way of theorizing as well as a way of conducting research (e.g., [Langley & Tsoukas, 2017](#);

Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Process research on inter-organizational collaboration seeks to explain how it emerges, develops, changes, and ends, usually by taking a longitudinal approach in order to trace events over time. Early research on inter-organizational collaboration has already acknowledged its processual aspects (e.g., Gray, 1985). Process research on inter-organizational collaboration received a boost in the 1990s from early papers by Ring and Van de Ven (1992, 1994) and a special issue in *Organization Science* (1998), and has received more attention ever since (cf. Majchrzak, Jarvenpaa, & Bagherzadeh, 2015).

Over time, research on inter-organizational collaboration processes has become more attentive to the complexities involved. Early process models often represented the process of collaboration as a life cycle (e.g., D'Aunno & Zuckerman, 1987), a linear sequence of stages through which partners could move in the development of their collaboration, including, for example, its initiation, negotiation, formation, and operation (Schilke & Cook, 2013). In-depth empirical studies have, however, pointed out that real-life cases usually do not follow such an orderly sequence (e.g., Deken, Berends, Gemser, & Lauche, 2018; De Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004). The development of collaboration is also driven by the agency of managers who respond to intermediate outcomes and shifting conditions (e.g., Ariño & De la Torre, 1998; Das & Teng, 2002; Doz, 1996). Thus, the development of inter-organizational relationships typically comprises iterations of initiation, action, evaluation, and readjustment, to recalibrate the initial terms and conditions for the partnership, incorporate learnings, and adapt to changing conditions. Other studies emphasize the impact of existing relations on new partnerships (e.g., Gulati, 1995; Li & Rowley, 2002), demonstrating that managerial agency is enabled and constrained by the web of relations spun through prior interactions. In addition to past experiences, future expectations also matter in processes of relationship building, maintenance, and ending (e.g., Ligthart, Oerlemans, & Noorderhaven, 2016).

The interplay of structural dimensions and managerial agency in such processes has been captured in structuration theoretical accounts of inter-organizational collaboration (e.g., Berends, van Burg, & van Raaij, 2011; Manning, 2010; Sydow & Windeler, 1998). Structuration theory explains how social reality is continuously in the making through the interaction of structure and agency: knowledgeable actors draw upon structural dimensions that enable as well as constrain actions and thereby either reproduce or transform these structures with the help of practices. Collaboration is not determined by preexisting conditions, but not free to be formed by rational managers, either. Inter-organizational collaboration is continuously in motion and inherent tensions are never fully resolved (De Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004; Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2017).

This ever-evolving nature of inter-organizational collaboration emerged as a consistent finding in Majchrzak et al.'s (2015) review of in-depth process studies, irrespective of whether they adopt a weak or strong process view (Langley et al., 2013). Collaboration evolves due to organizational agency, inherent tensions, external events, and the achievement of outcomes. Majchrzak et al. conclude from their review that stability is not per se preferred: dynamics in goals, interactions, and governance actually indicates a healthy collaboration process.

In order to give just one example: more often than not, goals are not clear at the outset of a collaborative endeavor, but can only be defined in this very process of collaborating (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). That is not to say that anything goes. Process research has uncovered nuanced insights into the dynamics which help to move forward with the initiation, development, or maintenance of inter-organizational collaborations, and into which dynamics are detrimental.

This volume seeks to advance research on processes of inter-organizational collaboration. The contributing chapters are organized in three parts. The first part focuses on the theme that has received most attention in process research on collaboration: relational dynamics between partnering organizations. The second part advances beyond current approaches by shifting attention to changes in the organizations involved in collaboration and the transformation of intraorganizational collaboration into inter-organizational collaboration, and vice versa. Finally, the third part broadens the perspective by considering emerging forms of more distributed collaboration with crowds and other groups of heterogeneous actors.

## **RELATIONAL DYNAMICS IN INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION (PART I)**

A significant share of research into inter-organizational collaboration has focused on the relations between collaborating partners. Relations can be studied as entities with properties, which can be characterized in terms, for instance, of commitment, trust, mutual understanding, governance modes, or contractual obligations. Process views of inter-organizational collaboration move beyond the description of properties and make two related moves. First, process researchers investigate organizational processes within such relations; in other words, they analyze the relational embeddedness of interactions. Second, a processual view takes these relational features not as being stable or given, but as being in motion. From the early studies of [Ring and Van de Ven \(1992, 1994\)](#), the development and change of relations has been the focus of research. Today, inspired by structuration theory and other theories of practice, research has examined relations themselves as a processual phenomenon. More often than not aligned with a process philosophy of becoming (e.g., [Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, & Holt, 2014](#); [Tsoukas & Chia, 2002](#)), researchers argue that inter-organizational relations exist only in so far as they are enacted. These moves surface in different ways in the four chapters of Part I.

In Chapter 1, Peter Smith Ring and Andrew H. Van de Ven extend their classic work on the development of inter-organizational relationships ([Ring & Van de Ven, 1992, 1994](#)). Starting from the observation that the trust assumed in the development of an inter-organizational relationship is not always present in a particular society, they theorize three types of relational bonds. In addition to trust-based commitments, they discern forbearance-based and apprehension-based commitments. Whereas trust-based commitment fits societies with strong exogenous institutional protection, forbearance-based commitment fits societies with moderate levels, and apprehension-based commitments with low levels of exogenous institutional protection. They explain how collaboration processes in these

different types of relational bonds play out over time: during negotiations, after contracts have been entered into, and when repairing breaches in relational bonds.

Subsequently, in Chapter 2, Stephan Manning explores the processual characteristics of organizing in project networks. In the context of TV movie production, he examines how project network organizations create new collaborations for each production by effectively drawing upon a network of previous collaborative relations. He finds that the adaptive capacity of these organizations depends not only on structural network properties and strategic agency, but also on the contextual embedding and disembedding of network ties and relational practices. This requires seeing how previous collaborations and practices might connect with a new project, drawing both on a specific joint history as well as the broader potential of past partners and practices. Along the way, these findings also offer an excellent illustration of the structurational insight that the existence and value of relations depends upon recurrent collective efforts to enact those relations in practice.

In Chapter 3, Harry Sminia, Anup Nair, Aylin Ates, Steve Paton, and Marisa Smith analyze how actual interactions between organization members define an inter-organizational relationship. In a study of contemporary manufacturing and the supply networks involved, they focus on the people maintaining, changing, and developing relationships between organizations. They unpack how actors deal with three paradoxes: the capability paradox, the appropriation paradox, and the governance paradox. A key feature of their insights is that these paradoxes are addressed in nested relationships. Zooming in on an inter-organizational relationship between partner organizations reveals a nested network of interpersonal relations in which the challenges of organizing are addressed.

Finally, Chapter 4 by Katharina Cepa and Henri Schildt directs attention to the technological dimension of inter-organizational relations, which has hitherto been underemphasized. Focusing in particular on big data technologies, they propose the concept of “technological embeddedness” to capture how technology is used to shape activities at inter-organizational interfaces. They develop propositions on how technological embeddedness facilitates inter-organizational collaboration processes, such as the development of trust, mutual adaptation, and the temporal structuring of inter-organizational interactions.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS FORMING AND DISSOLVING COLLABORATION (PART II)**

Part II of this volume addresses organizational dynamics in collaboration processes. Much previous research on inter-organizational collaboration has taken those organizations involved in collaboration for granted, by black-boxing them or treating them as monolithic wholes. Typically, scholars have investigated how the collaborations emerge, develop, and change over time. Much less attention has been paid to what happens in, or with, the partnering organizations themselves. As an initial step into this direction, some earlier studies unpacked how people and groups within organizations drive the formation and dissolution of inter-organizational collaboration (e.g., [Berends et al., 2011](#); [Marchington & Vincent, 2004](#)). The chapters



in the second part further advance insight into organizational dynamics in the development of inter-organizational collaboration.

Across the chapters, related insights can be discerned. First, organizations themselves are not stable in any collaboration: just as collaboration is fluid, organizations, too, are more or less continuously changing and intraorganizational dynamics are the key to understanding the dynamics of external collaboration, and vice versa. Moreover, these chapters point at the continuity between intraorganizational collaboration and inter-organizational collaboration. Inter-organizational collaboration can transform into intraorganizational collaboration (Faems & Madhok, Chapter 6), and intraorganizational collaboration can transform into inter-organizational collaboration (Delbridge, Endo & Morris, Chapter 7; Wiedner & Ansari, Chapter 8). The chapters also underscore the value of a process approach, as they show in various ways how, at one point in time, collaborative processes are of consequence for transformed processes at a later stage.

The opening chapter in this second part, Chapter 5, is by Kristina Lauche. She focuses attention on the individuals within an organization, who advocate collaboration as a means to realize change. Extending previous work on the role of individuals in the context of inter-organizational relations, she investigates the intraorganizational dynamics before organizations enter into relations. In particular, Lauche zooms in on the “issue selling” efforts of organization members. She shows how interaction with external actors helps organization members to understand complex problems (see also [Seidl & Werle, 2018](#)), and how those organization members draw upon their external network to promote change and make the case for collaboration internal. Six different cases illustrate different issue-selling strategies to mobilize various recipients. These deliberate efforts at the intraorganizational level contribute to an emergent trajectory at the level of inter-organizational collaboration.

In Chapter 6, Dries Faems and Anoop Madhok present and theorize an in-depth case study of collaborating partners that gradually merge into one organization. A multi-national company called GCOMP first took an equity stake in a technology-based start-up labeled OPTICS, then later actually acquired OPTICS. Whereas much of the alliance literature has investigated the consequences of macro-level governance modes such as equity alliances (e.g., [Oxley & Sampson, 2004](#); [Salvato et al., 2017](#)), the chapter by Faems and Madhok dives into micro-level forms of governance. The micro-level forms of governance shift from arms-length governance to embedded governance in the equity alliance, and then to preserving and later absorbing the acquired start-up. Moreover, the authors show how micro-level processes, such as trust building and knowledge transfer, subsequently influence the conditions and trigger choices at the macro-level. In this way, the chapter also illustrates how inter-organizational collaboration can morph via multiple micro- and macro-level shifts into intraorganizational collaboration. Thus, changes in the form of collaboration are also associated with changes in the internal organizing of both partners.

The last two chapters in this part describe a related phenomenon with dynamics moving in the opposite direction: constituents of a single organization which separate and form autonomous organizations, thereby transforming

intraorganizational collaboration into inter-organizational collaboration. Chapter 7 by Rick Delbridge, Takahiro Endo, and Jonathan Morris uncovers the phenomenon of “disciplining entrepreneurialism”. This particular approach combines elements of hierarchy, markets, and networks, yet is distinct from all of them. Based on an in-depth study of a media, gaming, and advertising business called CyberAgent, they show how entrepreneurial individuals were encouraged to seek and grasp opportunities for new business projects, which they could pursue as subsidiary firms. Despite the formal hierarchical relationship with headquarters, such subsidiaries had a strong sense of autonomy. Initial socialization with the values of the parent organization, however, also meant that individuals who autonomously pursued opportunities as a subsidiary did so with a sense of loyalty to the parent organization and disciplined by a shared sense of corporate identity.

Finally, in Chapter 8, Rene Wiedner and Shaz Ansari further theorize processes of separation leading to inter-organizational collaboration. The rich literature on the formation of inter-organizational collaboration (e.g., [Deken et al., 2018](#)) typically assumes that collaboration is initiated by two distinct organizations. Wiedner and Ansari, instead, examine how collaboration can emerge as constituent parts of a single organization become separate. Drawing upon the subtle but important distinction between autonomy and independence, they develop a process perspective on “collaborative separation”, which does not lead to independent entities, but establishes autonomy while harnessing remaining interdependencies. Collaborative separation may help to increase performance and sustain access to resources, but several factors, ranging from regulations to feelings of betrayal and shame, may prove to be a barrier. They, therefore, identify five steps that can aid separating organizations to develop effective collaboration.

## **DYNAMIC COLLABORATION BEYOND ORGANIZATIONS (PART III)**

Over the past two decades, new forms of collaboration have become more prevalent. Much of the empirical literature has focused on relatively stable forms of collaboration, involving established organizations in strategic alliances, joint ventures and R&D consortia. While these “traditional” forms of inter-organizational collaboration still exist, they are frequently complemented with more fluid forms of collaboration involving a larger variety of partners. These include, for instance, ecosystems around open source software and digital platforms that allow organizations to collaborate at arm’s length with organizations and individuals developing complementary products and services. Many of these new forms of collaboration are enabled by digital technologies, and they typically involve a heterogeneous and distributed set of partners, potentially including organizations as well as loose collections of individuals. As a consequence, collaboration dynamics tend even to be emergent and fluid.

In this volume, we have four chapters exploring such dynamics of collaboration that extend beyond organizations. In Chapter 9, Karl-Emanuel Dionne and Paul Carlile report about the opening up for innovation to access and develop

a greater amount and variety of knowledge and resources. The authors' critical literature review, paired with an analysis of different empirical cases from a nonprofit organization helping to drive digital health innovation, reveals user-centric, firm-centric, and field-centric approaches to opening innovation that progressively connects a greater variety of actors and resources. The authors show how specific new relational practices address the new relational dynamics which these connections bring in order to accumulate more resources for innovation and sustain progress.

Chapter 10, written by Linus Dahlander, Lars Bo Jeppesen, and Henning Piezunka, integrates research on organization theory and innovation and develops a framework that characterizes crowdsourcing as a sequential process through which organizations (1) define the task they wish to have completed; (2) broadcast to a pool of potential contributors; (3) attract a crowd of contributors; and (4) select among the inputs they receive. For each of these phases, the authors identify the key decisions organizations make, provide a basic explanation for each decision, discuss what the trade-off organizations face when choosing among decision alternatives, and explore how organizations may resolve these trade-offs. This decision-centric approach shows that there are fundamental interdependencies in the process, which makes the coordination of crowdsourcing challenging.

In Chapter 11, Luca Giustiniano, Terri L. Griffith, and Ann Majchrzak focus on the forms of collaboration that blur the lines between organizations, calling into question the fundamental label of crowd-focused inter-organizational collaboration. The authors employ the concept of liminality and consider two forms: crowd-open and crowd-based organizations. They show the organizational design impact of openness that spans from the mere scalability associated with organizational growth to the phenomena of reshaping formalization and the standardization of roles and processes, and self-organizing over time.

The final chapter of this volume, Chapter 12, also advances our understanding of collaborative innovation processes that span across organizational boundaries. In this case, Benjamin Schiemer, Elke Schüßler, and Gernot Grabher report ethnographic research about an online platform that supports distributed songwriting. They discovered three parallel processes that were triggered and maintained over time by the temporary stabilization of provisional, interim outcomes: content-in-the-making, skill-in-the-making, and community-in-the-making. Quite in line with a practice-based view, the authors elucidate interferences between these three processes and highlight the constructive role of incompleteness (Garud, Jain, & Tuertscher, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

This volume presents an up-to-date window into process research on inter-organizational collaboration. In this introduction, we have identified several process themes that cut across these chapters, the comparison of which reveals a large variety of theoretical perspectives. Process research often develops in dialogue with core theories on collaboration and organizing (e.g., on governance,

networks, and resources), which are not per se processual in nature. Process research contributes to making such perspectives more dynamic, for instance, by examining core assumptions, uncovering how causal mechanisms play out over time, or showing how fundamental processes unfold in the context of collaboration. Engaging with broader theoretical perspectives, however important, may have the unintended consequence of limiting the accumulation of findings into a distinct body of process insights. That is a clear challenge for future process research on inter-organizational collaboration.

The chapters in this volume have pointed at several areas requiring further research from a process perspective, and could therefore become themes for the further accumulation of process insights. First, more research is needed on the tensions and contradictions involved in collaboration. Tensions and contradictions point to the limits and potential dark sides of collaboration, but are also the engine of progress and change in collaboration. Second, the relation between intraorganizational and inter-organizational processes is a new area that calls for further research. Some of the chapters observed interactions between inter-organizational and intraorganizational processes and theorized how they may transform into each other. The increasing permeability of boundaries and fluidity of collaboration calls for a deepening of this line of research. Finally, more research is needed on new forms of collaboration. As technological development progresses, distributed forms of collaboration are likely to increase over the coming years. This will invite further exploration of these phenomena and call for the examination of differences between the types of collaborative processes.

Future process research faces some methodological challenges. Attention to how people deal with tensions in day-to-day organizing calls for ethnographic research approaches. However, the more collaboration becomes distributed and emergent, the more difficult it becomes to trace, requiring smart choices in how to do ethnographic research in such settings (Berthod, Grothe-Hammer, & Sydow, 2017). Ethnographic and other qualitative approaches can be complemented by the study of digital traces which are becoming more and more abundant, ranging from e-mail and enterprise social media to workflow systems and algorithmic data decision making. The quantitative analysis of digital traces may document patterns that qualitative sources may help to further explain. Such multi-method studies may help to overcome the limitations of any specific method and contribute to the further advancement of process research on inter-organizational collaboration.

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