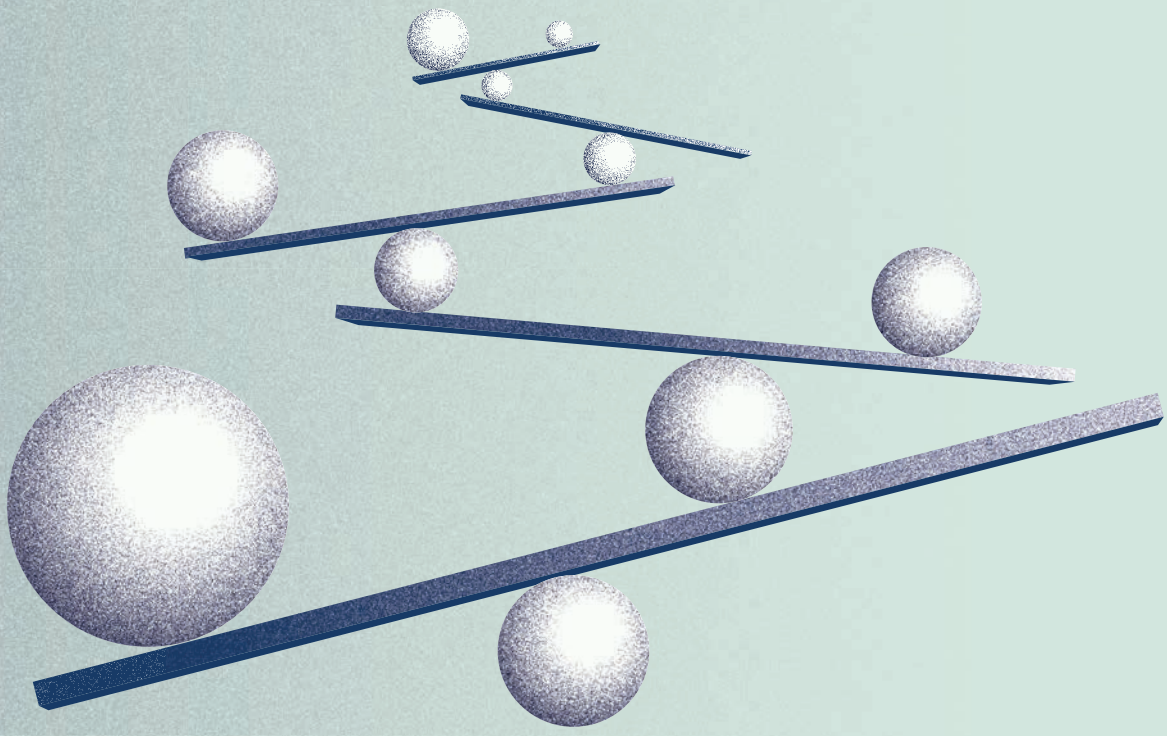
# Emergence of Organizing Inter-Organizational Collaboration in Addressing Societal Challenges:

## A Multilayer Paradox Perspective



Luc van de Sande

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# Emergence of Organizing Inter-Organizational Collaboration in Addressing Societal Challenges

## A Multilayer Paradox Perspective

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# Emergence of Organizing Inter-Organizational Collaboration in Addressing Societal Challenges

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Proefschrift ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen
op gezag van de rector magnificus prof. dr. J.M. Sanders,
volgens besluit van het college voor promoties
in het openbaar te verdedigen op

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door

Lucas Franciscus Leonardus van de Sande
geboren op 24 maart 1992
te Oosterhout

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Prof. dr. T. Hahn (Esade Universidad Ramon Lull, Barcelona, Spanje)

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from Radboud University Nijmegen
on the authority of the Rector Magnificus prof. dr. J.M. Sanders,
according to the decision of the Doctorate Board
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by

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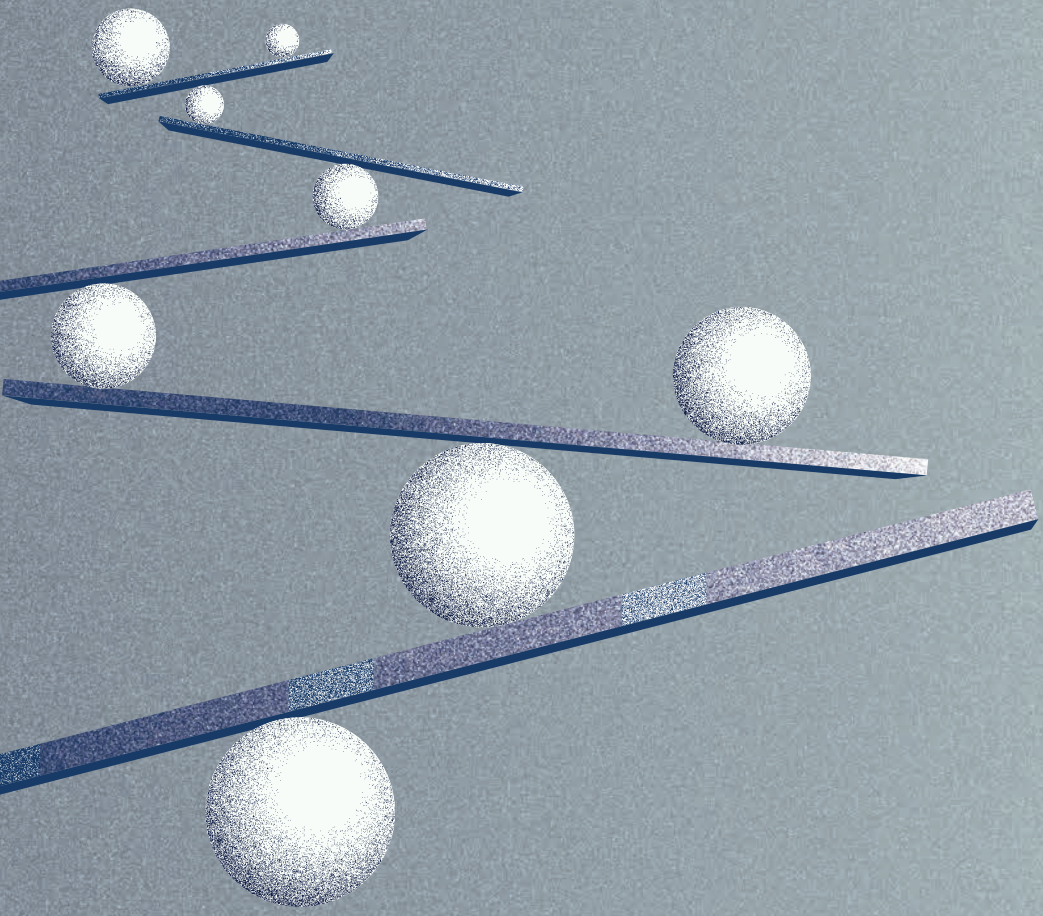


# Chapter 1

## General introduction

Imagine: the government has largely privatized the healthcare sector, budget cuts ensue, people are expected to live at home longer instead of in an elderly home, more skilled healthcare workers are required to help this aging population at home, too few skilled healthcare workers are coming into the industry, people are increasingly diagnosed with complex chronic diseases and require increasingly more diverse goods and services to be able to stay at home longer and treat illnesses. Given this situation, how do you organize care provision for vulnerable people in their homes in the neighbourhood on a regional level? This complex scenario sets the scene for one of the cases we followed the last couple of years, which set out to provide an integrated service of home care, wellbeing and logistics services to vulnerable clients in a Dutch neighbourhood. They introduced a new role: a community concierge, who delivered goods to vulnerable clients, and in doing so, was able to identify additional (hidden) needs of clients. These concierges functioned as a linking pin between the clients and other organizations such as healthcare providers, wellbeing organizations and suppliers who would be able to provide requested services. Such a collaboration would provide high quality services to clients in different neighbourhoods, integrate deliveries and reduce congestion, and prevent long term illnesses and therefore costs for society.

This example shows some of the complexity of organizing for such societal challenges. Central to these challenges is the need to collaborate between organizations: collaborating across organizational departments, boundaries and professions to design solutions no single organization could provide on their own. Such initiatives are increasingly needed to address pressing societal challenges such as in liveable cities, as the complexity of the issues at hand requires a variety of resources, specialized knowledge and complementary assets to design novel solutions. There is unique beauty in bringing together actors from different backgrounds, expertise and cultures to work on innovative solutions which bring value to our society - and also lots of (unexplored) potential. However, getting such collaborations off the ground is no easy matter - many of them fail and there is great complexity in sustainably scaling and developing them. With this dissertation I therefore set out to unravel the emerging stages of such collaborations. I do not merely focus on the structures or governance types of such endeavours but put the individual at the centre of my research: how do actors get to an understanding of emerging competing demands and tensions, and what do they actually do to navigate these tensions in these emerging and uncertain settings.

## Initiating inter-organizational collaboration to address societal challenges

Complex challenges as described in the previous paragraphs are also known as "grand challenges" (Ferraro et al., 2015), "wicked problems" (Grewatsch et al., 2023) or "societal challenges" (Hilbolling et al., 2022). Whether it is the global climate crisis, poverty, clean energy or affordable and accessible healthcare, they are all challenges that can be defined as "specific critical barrier(s) that, if removed, would help solve an important societal problem with a high likelihood of global impact through widespread implementation" (George et al., 2024, p. 1881). Societal challenges can be defined in three ways according to Ferraro et al. (2015). First, they are particularly complex as issues such as climate change involve a wide array of actors, they cross organizational, national and jurisdictional boundaries and require different time horizons to effectively address them (Garud et al., 2011; George et al., 2024). And, issues are often interrelated, so solving or addressing issues in one location or within one domain can spark different issues in another (Schad & Bansal, 2018). Second, societal challenges are characterized as being particularly uncertain (Ferraro et al., 2015). Uncertainty mainly revolves around what the future looks like or could look like. There are a variety of factors that contribute to this uncertainty, for example how economic, political or social environments change over time. Preferences and decisions of actors may change over time, making it difficult to plan out the gap between the current and the potential futures (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2022). And finally, societal challenges are evaluative, which means that there is inherent ambiguity in how actors perceive or understand these challenges. Addressing societal challenges constitutes a combination of different actors with different beliefs and approaches to specific issues and about how to deal with them. This means that there are multiple views of an issue, and rarely one "just" solution to addressing challenges (Ansari et al., 2011). Therefore, individual and collective efforts are in a continuous state of becoming.

One way to effectively address societal challenges, such as the last-mile case I presented in the first paragraph, is through initiating inter-organizational collaboration (Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Lauche, 2019). By pooling resources, knowledge and expertise, multiple actors can come up with innovative solutions no single organization could come up with on their own (George et al., 2024; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Majchrzak et al., 2015). Due to the inherent complexity and plurality of societal challenges, inter-organizational collaboration and understanding of the more interconnected environment organizations conduct in has become increasingly important (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2024; Howard-Grenville & Lahneman, 2021; Schad & Bansal, 2018). It is a means to achieve common goals,

solve shared problems or pursue mutual interests (DiVito et al., 2021; Ungureanu et al., 2020). Inter-organizational collaboration is a broad concept and can therefore encompass different forms such as partnerships (Ungureanu et al., 2020), alliances (Todeva & Knoke, 2005), joint ventures (Wassmer, 2010), networks (Provan et al., 2007) or buyer-supplier relationships (Hoegl & Wagner, 2005), and has shown its potential in contexts such as innovation (Deken et al., 2018; Diriker et al., 2023) and addressing societal challenges (Nicholls & Huybrechts, 2016; Sharma & Bansal, 2017), due to their ability to create novel solutions to complex issues.

Yet, inter-organizational collaborations also pose their own unique challenges, as research has shown how over half of collaborations that are started are ultimately terminated (Dyer et al., 2001). Hence, the early stages of inter-organizational collaboration are crucial in setting participants up for success. New relationships must be forged (Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013), new structures and routines are to be set up (Ahuja et al., 2012; Deken et al., 2016), goals have to be aligned (Chung & Beamish, 2010) and mutual trust has to be built to foster a collaborative environment (Beck & Plowman, 2014). But inter-organizational collaborations pose their own unique challenges which often complicates these efforts. The diversity and number of actors participating in collaboration make it increasingly difficult to align different identities, cultures or goals which are not always among participants (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Jay, 2013; Reypens et al., 2021). As different goals may exist on organizational and inter-organizational levels, actors may be forced to both collaborate and compete at the same time (Adegbesan & Higgins, 2011; Stadtler & Van Wassenhove, 2016). Furthermore, collaborations are challenging to orchestrate, as there often is no clear and designated decision maker who is allowed, or able, to make decisions for others in the collaboration (Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006; Huxham & Vangen, 2000). Some stages of collaboration may favour more serendipitous encounters between actors with consensus based orchestration, whereas others may favour "arranged marriages" or dominating orchestration (Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013; Reypens et al., 2021). As actors attempt to get collaborations off the ground, they are therefore faced with additional uncertainty and complexity before they can move to more formalized ways of collaborating.

What the majority of these studies, sometimes explicitly but often implicitly, have in common is that actors are confronted with competing demands that they must navigate while deciding on how to organize and set up inter-organizational collaboration. Collaboration across organizational boundaries rarely is a linear path with simple questions and simple solutions. Actors cannot decide to focus only on sustainability while ignoring the business case (Hahn et al., 2018; Hahn et al., 2014),

or expect a stable collaboration without accepting that change is a crucial element to guarantee continuity (Farjoun, 2010; Lalaounis & Nayak, 2022). They are faced with elements and decisions that are interrelated and opposing and require adequate thought before addressing them. Although prior studies provide insights into the challenges of organizing or initiating inter-organizational collaboration, or how structures, factors or processes contribute to the emergence of inter-organizational collaboration (Ahuja et al., 2012; Beck & Plowman, 2014; Deken et al., 2018), we still lack a thorough understanding of how actors and their activities actually contribute to the emergence of collaboration while coping with the competing demands depicted above. By focussing on what actors do to understand and navigate such tensions provides us with a more comprehensive and bottom-up perspective on the complexities and multifaceted nature of getting these collaborations off the ground. We therefore complement work which has focused on actors' activities in organizing for collaboration (e.g. Deken et al., 2018), by also including the tension-riddled environment which actors must navigate. We therefore also heed to the call of Ahuja et al (2012) and Majchrzak et al. (2015) to focus on the underlying drivers and subtleties of emerging inter-organizational collaboration. Hence, our research question for this dissertation is: *How do actors navigate emerging paradoxical tensions while initiating inter-organizational collaborations to address societal challenges?*

To unravel this research question I put the individual at the centre of my research. I draw on the emerging stream of research combining paradox theory with a practice perspective (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Lê & Bednarek, 2017), in which paradoxes are framed as socially constructed between individuals, and where the "sayings" and "doings" of individuals shape the paradox - and the perceived effects of the paradox subsequently affect the individual. By taking a longitudinal and/or processual account I show how actors navigate paradoxes through the enactment of practices over time. In the remainder of this introduction I outline the strengths and benefits of a paradox perspective and the combination of a practice perspective, I elaborate on my research context and the research design, and finally I provide an overview of the structure of the dissertation.

## A paradox perspective on inter-organizational collaboration

Paradoxes are rife in organizational settings and can manifest themselves in many different ways. For example between competing goals such as business and society (Hahn et al., 2018), between flexibility and control (Adler et al., 1999), individual

identity and group identity (Ashforth et al., 2011) or short and long term horizons (Ricciardi et al., 2022). Smith & Lewis (2011), characterize these into four dimensions, namely paradoxes of organizing, performing, belonging and learning. Following the definition from Smith & Lewis (2011), paradoxes have three main elements that characterize them. First, opposition, as paradoxes involve elements that may seem logical in isolation but can be perceived as absurd or irrational when trying to combine them (Quinn & Cameron, 1988). Second, interdependence, as both elements of the paradox are inextricably related and cannot be seen apart from one another – they are two sides of the same coin (Lewis, 2000). And third, persistence, as the tensions between poles cannot be resolved, but persist over time, therefore requiring constant navigating to maintain balance (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This also implies the need for a more processual approach in navigating paradox, as actors must take into account the dynamic relationship between the poles over time, and work through the tensions as opposed to relying on a more traditional "problem-solution" mindset (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Schad et al., 2016). Paradoxical tensions often remain latent while organizing, as such actors do not necessarily perceive or experience tensions all the time (Smith & Lewis, 2011). However, tensions may become salient in environments of turbulence and complexity (Quinn & Cameron, 1988), for example under conditions of plurality (Jay, 2013), where different perspectives have to be taken into account simultaneously, conditions of change (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), where there is a discrepancy between the future and the present - spurring the need for action, and conditions of scarcity (Smith, 2014), where resource constraints may hinder actors to pursue different goals.

Hence, it is crucial for individuals and organizations to navigate tensions and move from an "either/or" mindset where issues are framed as dilemmas (Cameron & Quin, 1988), to accepting the existence of tensions and embracing "both/and" approaches (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lewis, 2000). Actors can employ a variety of different responses to paradox, which may be characterized as either active or defensive (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Individuals are often inclined to choose the path of least resistance due to the need for consistency of their actions and routines and to reduce discomfort (Smith & Berg, 1987; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Then, when faced with competing demands they may be more inclined to deploy defensive responses to paradox, such as repressing one of the paradoxical poles (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989), or frantically holding on to the past - overlooking alternative perspectives and cues that change may be required (Ebrahim et al., 2014). These responses may provide some short-term relief from the experienced tensions but provide no sustainable long-term solution to address the tensions - which will inevitably resurface again. As actors refrain from addressing the paradox, this may result in ongoing downward spirals of conflict

and stagnation - or vicious cycles (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003; Smith & Lewis, 2011). When these are not adequately and timely addressed, these may eventually result in the collapse of the system as tensions escalate (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). Active responses on the other hand are much better suited to offer long-term solutions. Actors who accept and embrace paradoxical tensions are capable of unravelling the underlying complexity of the opposing elements (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Having a paradoxical mindset and fostering paradox thinking (Hahn et al., 2014) have shown to be key skills and traits actors can leverage to actively engage with paradox, and allowing actors to make sense of paradoxical tensions fuels their ability to frame opposing demands and come up with active responses to paradox (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Hahn et al., 2014). Furthermore, responses such as structurally or temporarily separating different objectives over time or finding synergies between poles have shown to be effective approaches to navigate paradox (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Such active approaches result in virtuous cycles, where positive features of paradox are strengthened and sustainable solutions are created.

Research on paradox management in inter-organizational collaboration has grown over the years, which is important as individual or organizational paradox navigation cannot automatically be copied to inter-organizational settings (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Schad & Bansal, 2018). Inter-organizational collaborations are particularly sensitive for certain types of paradoxes, for example the need for actors to both collaborate and compete at the same time (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Stadtler & Van Wassenhove, 2016), which is especially troublesome when working with diverse actors which may have different identities (Beech & Huxham, 2003; Ungureanu et al., 2020) and work towards diverging objectives (Jay, 2013). But also their management can be more challenging, as research has shown how tensions can become nested (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Gilbert et al., 2018; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013): issues can become intertwined, where for example organizing paradoxes coexist with belonging paradoxes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Responding to paradoxes then becomes a lot more challenging as tackling one paradox inevitably affects the other. Furthermore, paradoxes and tensions cascade across different levels of analysis, so decisions made at the (inter)organizational level also trickle down to the individuals working in these contexts (Gilbert et al., 2018). Jarzabkowski et al. (2022) provide an interesting study of how different paradoxes coexist and influence each other, and how actors are required to knot and reknot these paradoxes to move between disequilibrium and equilibrium of the system. It emphasizes the need to see paradoxes and responses to paradox not in isolation, but part of a larger system where different elements coexist (Schad &

Bansal, 2018; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). Schad & Bansal (2018) therefore also call for a systems perspective of paradox management in which research not only focuses on latent and salient tensions, but also engages with nested tensions and their complex interactions. Summarizing, paradox navigation is no easy feat - especially in the context of inter- organizational collaboration. And while we know increasingly more about what kind of strategies or approaches aid paradox navigation, a lot of this research has overlooked the importance of the individual actors in these situations. Ultimately, paradoxes are socially constructed and shaped by actors and their actions, which in turn influence these paradoxes. I was interested in exploring this perspective further, putting the individual at the centre of paradox navigation in complex inter-organizational collaborations. Hence, I now turn to practice theory to explore how a practice perspective can inform paradox theory.

## A practice perspective on paradox

In this dissertation I decided to complement paradox theory with a practice perspective. Although paradox theory informs us on how to understand and address competing demands while organizing collaboration, it does not provide a lot of insights on how and specifically by whom – which is where a practice perspective comes in. An emerging stream of strategy-as-practice for example has gained enormous momentum due to increasing discontent with how strategic management often left out the people who actually did the strategizing - yet it is due their actions that strategy or change takes shape (Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 1996). Practice theories include a rather broad spectrum of different theories, foci and histories (Langley et al., 2019; Nicolini, 2012; Orlikowski, 2002; Schatzki, 2002; Whittington, 1996), but fundamentally they encompass the explanation of our society through the result of social structure and individual agency. Practice theory helps understand social phenomena by looking at the everyday actions and behaviours of people, including what they usually say and do (Schatzki, 2002; Nicolini, 2012) - humanizing the phenomena we study. It helps us to understand how routine actions, behaviours and interactions in social contexts help shape organizational change - it poses a relational view of the world, where actors actions shape their environment, which subsequently spark new actions, etc. What practice theory is particularly good at is to unravel change in pluralistic contexts, as flows of activity can be studied as parallel, at their intersection or how these flows impact each other (Denis et al., 2007; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Hence, we can trace how change occurs across different levels of analysis.

So why does a practice perspective provide such a good fit with paradox theory? Lê & Bednarek (2017) provide four principles which indicate shared ontological underpinnings between these perspectives. First, a practice view perceives paradoxes and the responses to them as products of social construction, emerging within structured social activities (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Paradox scholars examine paradoxes at both local and structural levels, viewing them as inherent to larger systems and locally constructed (Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014). The practice perspective further deepens this understanding by considering how paradoxes and their responses are mutually socially constructed through everyday actions (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Second, a practice perspective posits that responses to paradox are constructed through "mundane" and everyday practices and activities. Instead of investigating responses to paradox as single actions or decisions, a practice perspective frames such responses as bundles of localized practices and activities - which highlights the constant state of becoming or flux, in which actors respond to paradox through everyday practices (Abdallah et al., 2011; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Third, the practice perspective suggests that these localized activities and practices are consequential for broader dynamics in the system, hence influencing navigation of different paradoxes (Knight & Paroutis, 2017). While practices are locally enacted by individual actors, they may have far reaching consequences for the system as a whole (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). Responding to one paradox through enacting different practices, will inevitably influence other paradoxes, also at different levels of the system (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). And finally, it endorses a relational perspective where various paradoxes and their opposing poles are perceived as interconnected and mutually shaping each other. Not only the paradoxes themselves are interconnected, but also the responses to paradox are - rather than being single activities in time, responses spur one another over time (Smith, 2014; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Hence, a practice perspective provides interesting synergies to unravel paradox emergence and subsequent navigation over time in pluralistic contexts such as inter-organizational collaborations (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019; Jarzabkowski et al., 2018; Langley, 1999).

## Research context

To unravel how actors organized emerging inter-organizational collaborations and navigated the subsequent emerging paradoxical tensions, the decision was made to use the context of "the last mile". The United Nations SDG 11's objective is to make cities and human settlements more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

(United Nations, 2017). Over half of the world's population is currently living in and around cities and this number will dramatically grow towards 2050 (United Nations, 2017). This raises issues around topics such as healthcare, transportation, construction or safety, and will hugely impact existing sustainability challenges. A particular issue is the increasing amount of goods and services, which must be delivered to consumers and organizations in inner cities, called the last-mile, or the final stretch of the supply chain. Last-mile deliveries are inefficient, polluting, costly, and complex to organize, as organizations fail to collaborate to bundle goods and services or use environmentally friendly delivery methods. Thus, an increasing number of trucks congest and pollute inner cities, causing an unsafe and unhealthy environment for inhabitants. Through smart organizational designs and bundling of goods and services, efficiency of the last mile deliveries can be improved, and aid in attaining economic business objectives, such as lower costs or increased service levels, as well as broader social and environmental objectives (figure 1.2). Last-mile collaborations generally consist of end consumers who provide demand and set expectations, suppliers who deliver goods or services, a "hub" which is responsible for efficiently coordinating and bundling the deliveries from suppliers to customers, and municipalities busy with the development of their urban areas. While already widely known in the context of retail deliveries for the delivery of parcels, there are also plenty of other contexts which adopt this new way of organizing – for example in healthcare, construction, or within the public domain.

While there is great potential in these last-mile initiatives to address a wide variety of societal issues, organizations and subsequent collaborations still struggle to develop these concepts to their full potential. There often are a lot of different actors included in these collaborations with a lot of different perspectives and interests, it remains challenging to orchestrate such initiatives as a collective as they are often regionally bound and lack a clear orchestrator, financial margins in such supply chains generally are quite tight and after initial funding runs out a lot of them fail to stand on their own legs. Hence, there are a multitude of tensions at play in these emerging collaborations as actors try to organize them, such as the persistent tension between making societal impact versus making a business case, pursuing individual goals versus pursuing collective goals, or how to navigate the short term survivability of the concept while scaling up and addressing issues for the future (to name a few). Hence, making these new forms of organizing particularly challenging, yet a very relevant context to pursue this research endeavour to unravel what makes such collaborations tick.

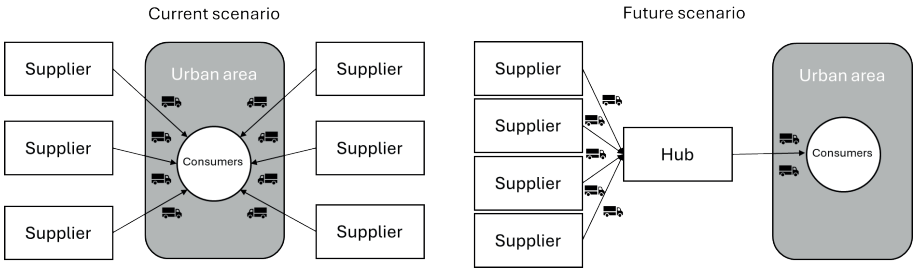



**Figure 1.1** Organization of last-mile logistics collaborations

## Research Design

My dissertation draws on three qualitative studies to unravel the intricacies of how actors organize inter-organizational collaborations and navigate subsequent tensions. Qualitative research is ideal to investigate the how and the why in unfolding social phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I used inductive case study approaches, as case studies are particularly useful to understand the dynamics occurring in a specific setting, which can then be used to build theory (Locke, 2001; Yin, 2003). By using an inductive approach I was able to develop new theoretical insights based on the emerging findings of the data. Although I used slightly different approaches for all three studies - see more on this below - all studies had a longitudinal element to them, which allowed me to trace change over an extended period of time (Langley, 1999; Pettigrew, 1990). Longitudinal or process studies are far better capable of explaining change as opposed to variance research, as these studies are able to explain how phenomena emerge, develop, change and possibly terminate over time (Langley, 1999, 2007). Hence, such an approach is an ideal fit with the research question, as it allows for an up-close and detailed account of how actors contribute to the emerging stages of inter-organizational collaboration.

My research was part of a larger research consortium called "Sustainable Supply Chain Management in Healthcare: Living Labs" and funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), which took place between 2019 and 2024. The aim of the project was to investigate innovative last-mile logistics collaborations in the healthcare industry, and it included work packages such as logistics, wellbeing, modelling and organizing inter-organizational collaboration. The total project took place over a period of four years. Two cases were involved in the research consortium from the start, CareHub and MediHub, and therefore played a big part in this research. For these two cases I have been in the field for almost three out of the four years,

collecting data as the two collaborations unfolded. I have collected different types of data for the different chapters in this dissertation. Data sources consisted of semi-structured interviews, documents and observations from these two cases, as well as two other cases - BuildHub and RetHub, which I collected data for in parallel for chapter 2. Furthermore, for chapter 3 I also collected a rich dataset of diary data, in which daily updates, stories, challenges, procedures etc. were written down over a period of time. In total I collected a large body of data which was used in different forms. Table 1.1 shows the different types of data I collected for the four different cases, and table 1.2 shows how I have used these different data sources across the different chapters.

In chapter two I conducted a multiple-case study of all four cases, which included two longitudinal cases and two retrospective cases. I was inspired by the approach proposed by Leonard-Barton (1990), who used the synergy between retrospective and longitudinal cases. Retrospective multiple case study designs are useful to increase generalizability and to recognize patterns of processes looking back but lack depth to gain a better understanding of cause and effect (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). Meanwhile, processual and longitudinal cases are ideal to trace change over time and provide a close-up view on how decisions and change are being shaped but can be difficult to generalize since the research is bound to a specific context (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019; Langley, 2007). Therefore, by combining both approaches, they create synergies which foster both depth and breadth (Leonard-Barton, 1990). For this chapter we collected data from CareHub, MediHub, BuildHub and RetHub, consisting of 51 interviews, 35 observations and 104 documents. In chapter three I conducted an in-depth single process study of CareHub, to investigate how change evolved over time (Langley, 1999). I again collected a rich body of data, which included 53 interviews, 14 observations, 73 documents and 496 pages of diary data. This rich data set allowed me to accurately follow this case over time and unravel how tensions and practices evolved across inter-organizational levels. In chapter four we conducted a single longitudinal case study of CareHub for which we used 30 interviews, 10 observations and 32 documents from our initial data set. I used different cases for chapter 2, but I used the case of CareHub throughout all three studies. While this meant I re-used some of the data for the different studies, I made sure to only use the relevant data for the different analysis to make sure to leverage as much unique data as possible. Table 1.2 again shows how the data was used across the chapters.

Interviews and observations were recorded with consent of the respondents, and when this was not possible detailed notes were written down. Afterwards, collected

data were transcribed verbatim using software or by myself. Also, in terms of data management, I have systematically implemented research data management practices to ensure the integrity, accessibility and reproducibility of my research. This includes carefully planning data collection by logging and tracking every step in an Excel file, adhering to ethical guidelines for data handling such as informing respondents data usage, asking for their consent and guaranteeing anonymity, and finally by ensuring that all data are securely stored, were stored using standardized formats and properly backed up on a secure password protected server – all according to a data management plan.

The overall analysis process was mostly the same for all three chapters. I started off with identifying important events of the different cases and creating a timeline to portray the evolution of the different cases (Langley, 1999; Poole et al., 2000). Furthermore, extensive summaries were written of the cases to give voice to the participants of the studies and were used throughout the analysis to iterate between emerging findings and the narrative (Langley, 1999). Next, I started coding the data in an iterative manner - moving between data and emerging concepts and discussing this with the research team. I made sure to put the actor at the centre of the analysis to unravel how tensions affected them, and how they experienced and navigated these tensions over time by enacting different practices. I started to group and connect different codes and labels over time and through different cycles of analysis. As with the nature of inductive studies, this was a bottom-up process, where over time I was iterating between the findings and the literature to explore possible theoretical fit. When this fit was found, I advanced the analysis to relate more directly to the theoretical framework, which ultimately led to the design of different conceptual models.

**Table 1.1** Overview of collected data for this dissertation

| Cases | Data details | Interviews |
|---|---|---|
| **Case A**<br>**MediHub** | Data collection period: November 2019 – November 2022<br>Interview duration: between 45 and 110 minutes<br>Interview rounds: three main rounds<br>Observation duration: between 35 and 94 minutes<br>Observation frequency: monthly<br>Observations and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim | Project manager (3)<br>Director facility university (1)<br>Director supply chain hospital (1)<br>Manager supply chain hospital (1)<br>Manager warehousing hospital (1)<br>Manager procurement university (1)<br>Manager procurement university AS (1)<br>Manager facility university AS (1)<br>CEO logistics service provider/hub (2)<br>Municipality representative (1)<br>Project officer university (1)<br>Project officer university AS (1)<br>Account manager supplier 1 (1)<br>Account manager supplier 2 (2)<br>Account manager supplier 3 (1)<br>Researcher project (1)<br>**Total: 20** |
| **Case B**<br>**CareHub** | Data collection period: November 2019 – November 2022<br>Interview duration: between 35 and 160 minutes<br>Interview rounds: four main rounds (r)<br>Observation duration: between 50 and 90 minutes<br>Observation frequency: monthly during start stages<br>Observations and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim | Community hub manager (6)<br>Coordinator wellbeing (2)<br>Project leader wellbeing (1)<br>Researcher social domain (1)<br>Volunteer (2)<br>Research manager (7)<br>Community concierges (9)<br>Program managers (4)<br>Logistics consultant (2)<br>Suppliers (4)<br>Director home care (2)<br>Healthcare worker (5)<br>Innovation manager (4)<br>Project leader home care (2)<br>Municipality representatives (1)<br>Consultant social domain (1)<br>**Total: 53** |
| **Case C**<br>**BuildHub** | Data collection period: October 2021 – July 2022<br>Interview duration: between 60 and 160 minutes<br>Interview rounds: ongoing<br>Observation duration: 85 minutes<br>Observation rounds: -<br>Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim | Program director municipality (3)<br>Site manager (1)<br>Manager hub logistics (1)<br>Coordinator supply management (1)<br>**Total: 6** |
| **Case D**<br>**RetHub** | Data collection period: March 2021 – January 2022<br>Interview duration: between 70 and 90 minutes<br>Interview rounds: ongoing<br>Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim | Municipality project manager (1)<br>Logistics hub representative (1)<br>Research manager (2)<br>**Total: 4** |
| **Total** | | **83** |

| Observations | Documents | Diaries |
|---|---|---|
| Periodic progress meetings (17)<br>Supplier meetings (1)<br>Innovation meeting (1)<br>Board presentations (1) | Yearly reports (2)<br>Meeting minutes (17)<br>Supplier reports (2)<br>Presentations (5)<br>News statements (2)<br>Research reports (4)<br>Board updates and presentations (2) | |
| **Total: 20** | **Total: 34** | |
| Periodic progress meetings (10)<br>Research meetings (3)<br>Innovation meetings (1)<br>Brainstorm meetings (1) | Periodic meeting presentations (8)<br>Progress reports (6)<br>Press releases (21)<br>Meeting minutes (25)<br>Other (14) | Diaries neighborhood 1 2021 (137 pages)<br>Diaries neighborhood 1 2022 (125 pages)<br>Diaries neighborhood 1 2023 (19 pages)<br>Diaries neighborhood 2 2021 (85)<br>Diaries neighborhood 2 2022 (120 pages)<br>Diaries neighborhood 2 2023 (10 pages) |
| **Total: 14** | **Total: 74** | **Total: 496** |
| Progress presentation (1) | Yearly progress reports (3)<br>Business model overview (1)<br>Contractual models (2)<br>News statements (4)<br>Presentations (3)<br>Scenario analysis report (1)<br>Cost and service allocation report (1)<br>Academic papers (5) | |
| **Total: 1** | **Total: 22** | |
| | Municipality council report (1)<br>Progress reports (3)<br>Research reports (3)<br>Academic papers (5)<br>News statements (9) | |
| | **Total: 23** | |
| **35** | **153** | **496** |

**Table 1.2** Usage of different data across three empirical studies

| | CareHub | MediHub | BuildHub | RetHub |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Chapter 2* | Interviews 21/53<br>Observations 14/14<br>Documents 25/74 | Interviews 20/20<br>Observations 20/20<br>Documents 34/34 | Interviews 6/6<br>Observations 1/1<br>Documents 22/22 | Interviews 4/4<br>Documents 23/23 |
| *Chapter 3* | Interviews 53/53<br>Observations 14/14<br>Documents 74/74<br>Diaries 496/496 | | | |
| *Chapter 4* | Interviews 30/53<br>Observations 10/14<br>Documents 31/74 | | | |

## Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation consists of three chapters in which I empirically investigate the research question: How do actors navigate emerging paradoxical tensions while initiating inter-organizational collaborations to address societal challenges? Each chapter focuses on a different angle to answer this question and uses different elements of my data set. Figure 1.1 visually shows how the multilayer paradox perspective is investigated. Table 1.3 provides a summary on the characteristics of the different studies. I briefly elaborate the different chapters:

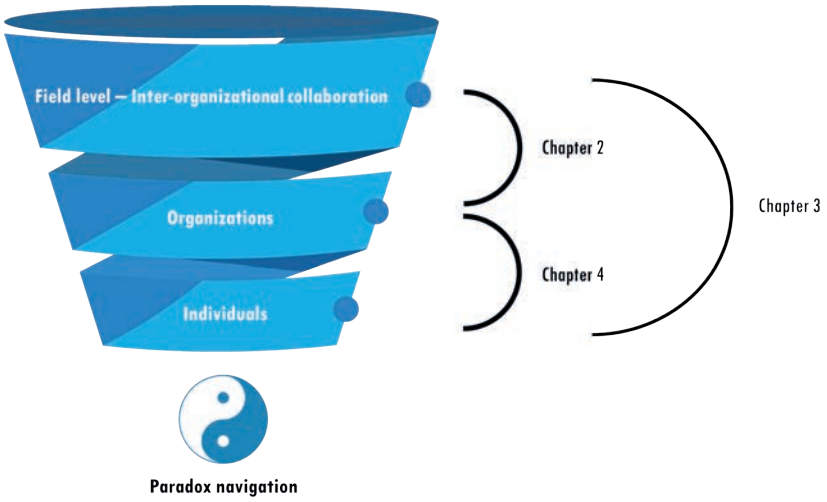



**Figure 1.2** Overview of how different multilayer tensions are addressed across the different chapters

**Chapter 2.** The first study takes a broader perspective to how actors navigate the business-society paradox, by comparing four different inter-organizational collaborations, which set out to address different challenges for the last mile. In this research I was curious as to why such collaborations often struggle to get off the ground and why actors keep running into similar issues, which prevent them from effectively addressing the challenges they set out to tackle. I show how this is not always a conscious process, especially during the emerging stages of collaboration, which are more prone to uncertainty and ambiguity. By combining paradox theory with a practice perspective, we show how actors' bundles of practices favouring either the business or societal pole give rise to two different orientations of emerging vicious cycles, which inhibit collaboration. We show how initial practices in these orientations led to slipping points, which led to subsequent practices that further fuel the vicious cycle in either of the two orientations and inhibit progress. When paradoxical poles were emphasized too much, the ongoing enactment of practices exacerbated the one-sided orientation towards a paradoxical pole. Tipping points emerged, which either led to termination of the collaboration or sparked mitigating practices, which helped to navigate back to equilibrium. I show how escalation of vicious cycles can under certain conditions be beneficial in that it can provide productive instances to help actors recalibrate and navigate the back to equilibrium.

**Chapter 3.** In the second study, I was interested in how people working at the coal face of such emerging inter-organizational collaborations were affected by the decisions made at strategic level while still figuring out their own emerging work and purpose. Hence, for this study I zoomed in on how such individuals were positioned in the inter-organizational collaboration, how they were impacted by inter-organizational decisions, and how they found their way over time. I conducted a longitudinal case of an emerging inter-organizational collaboration, and collected different types of qualitative data, among which diary data, which allowed me to accurately trace how individuals were impacted and dealt with different tensions. By combining paradox theory with a boundary work lens this study provides two main contributions. First, by identifying different tensions and tracing these over time, I was able to show how tensions become nested, or interrelated across inter-organizational levels: - Paradox navigation on the inter-organizational level sparked different intertwined tensions on the level of the individual. Second, by using the boundary work perspective, this study shows how different practices are enacted to foster collaboration between inter-organizational actors, but can also lead to identity tensions as these individuals make sense of their own role and navigate the competing demands imposed on them. We show how this intricate process plays out over time, and how actors' boundary work practices are ultimately able

to successfully deal with persistent tensions that are imposed on them from the collaboration.

**Chapter 4.** The prior studies provided insights into how actors dealt with tensions across different levels of analysis by enacting different practices. But they also raised additional questions, as I observed how some actors in emerging inter-organizational collaborations were able to effectively navigate tensions, while others were not. Why was this the case? Therefore, the fourth chapter questions why different actors develop the ability to navigate paradoxical tensions in such emerging settings. By conducting a process study of an emerging collaboration, I was able to follow how emergence of collaboration was a balancing act between periods of stability and change. Whether an actors could navigate tensions was dependent on their agency, which in turn was linked to them being able to be reflexive about tension, (i.e. are they aware of the tension and do they understand it), and the constraints of their situation. My analysis showed how different periods of stability and change sparked shifts in actors' situatedness, which sparked different strategies they could employ to navigate paradox: giving agency, restricting agency, crafting agency, relinquishing agency and recovering agency. How these strategies were enacted was highly relational: an actor's change in agency and subsequent ability to navigate the paradox is often the result of how they enacted their own strategy in relation to others' strategies. Thus, I provide a more fine-grained take on paradox navigation in dynamic settings, and how inter-organizational collaborations emerge.

**Chapter 5.** The final chapter of this dissertation reflects on the findings of the three studies, elaborating on my research question of how actors navigate emerging paradoxes in emerging inter-organizational collaborations. This chapter brings together the insights from all three studies and converges on several theoretical implications which can be drawn from these joint insights. Furthermore, I elaborate on the managerial implications of my work, and reflect on some of the challenges of the research process, the boundary conditions from the research I have conducted, and several potential areas of future research which address these boundary conditions.

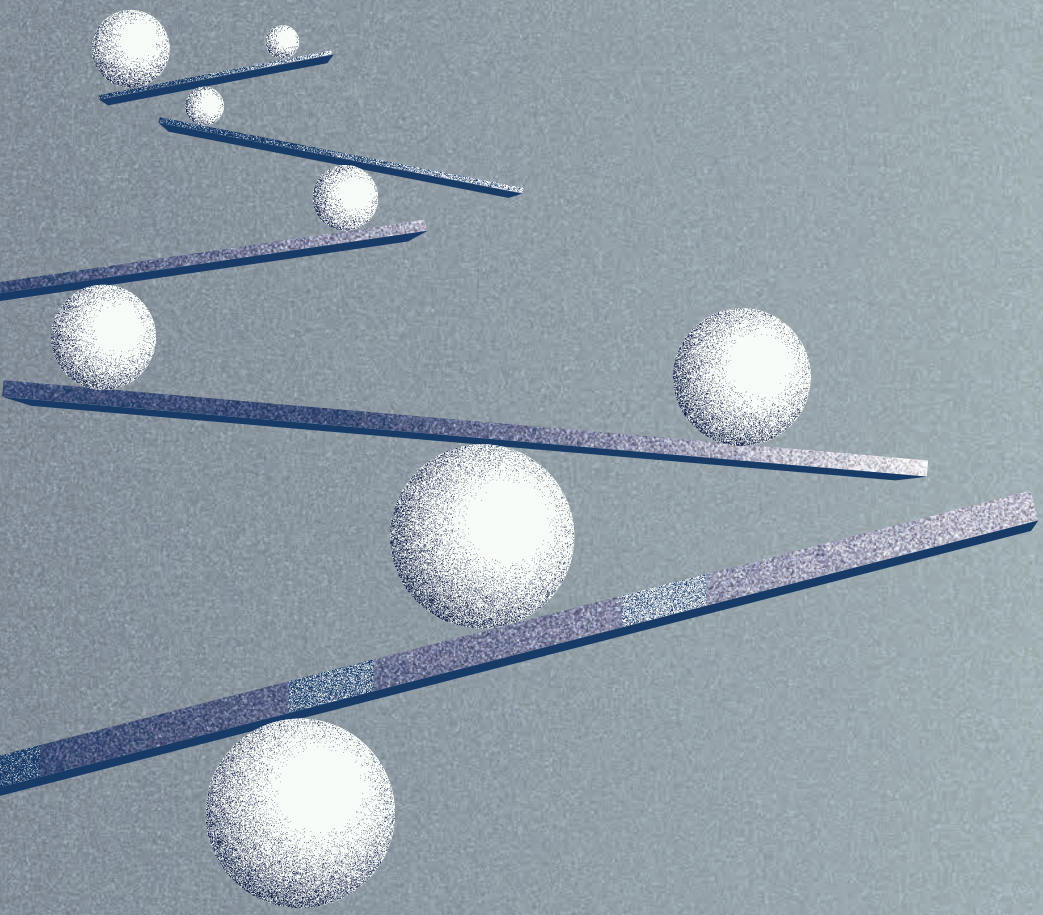
## Declaration of contribution

As the author of this dissertation, I declare that I have conducted the majority of the work on the different chapters that lay before you. I therefore take full responsibility for the content of these chapters, as well as any potential mistakes. Simultaneously, I also acknowledge the input from my (co)promoters Kristina Lauche, Vera Blazevic and Gerrit Willem Ziggers throughout our fruitful and productive collaboration, without which this dissertation would not have been possible. All chapters have had similar research approaches and involvement from the research team.

Chapter 1 and 5 were independently written by me. My (co)promoters kindly provided feedback to these chapters to improve them. For chapter 2, 3 and 5 I independently conducted the majority of the work, which included the initial theoretical framing, the design of the research question and the collection of the data. My (co)promoters provided feedback along the way to sharpen these parts over time. During the initiation of the research project my (co)promoters were also involved in some of the data collection of one of the cases (CareHub). Furthermore, the majority of the (initial) data analysis has been conducted by myself, after which we often held collaborative sensemaking sessions with my (co)promoters to further refine our insights and make relevant connections. I independently wrote the findings and discussion sections, where I was given constructive and extensive feedback throughout the chapters, which I used to iterate between the front end and the back end of the chapters to align these sections and produce more refined versions of the different drafts.

**Table 1.3** Summary of three empirical studies in this dissertation

| Chapter | Research question | Theoretical perspective(s) | Research design | Conferences |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chapter 2.<br>Navigating the Business-Society Paradox in Inter-Organizational Collaboration: Emergence and Mitigation of vicious cycles | How do actors' practices contribute to the emergence and mitigating of vicious cycles while navigating the business-society paradox in inter-organizational collaboration? | Paradox theory<br>Practice theory | Multiple case study of 4 cases<br>longitudinal (2)<br>retrospective (2) | 13th International Process Research Symposium: Rhodes (2022)<br>38th EGOS Colloquium: Vienna (2022) |
| Chapter 3.<br>Individuals' Boundary Work Practices in Navigating Nested Tensions in Emerging Inter-Organizational Collaboration | How do actors in emerging inter-organizational collaborations use boundary work to navigate nested tensions between competing demands? | Paradox theory<br>Boundary work | In-depth processual case study | 37th EGOS Colloquium: Amsterdam (2021)<br>39th EGOS Colloquium: Cagliari (2023)<br>14th International Process Research Symposium: Crete (2023)<br>40th EGOS Colloquium: Milan (2024) |
| Chapter 4.<br>A Dynamic Agency Perspective on Navigating Paradox in Emerging Inter-Organizational Collaboration | How and why actors' level of agency changes over time as they attempt to navigate the competing demands between stability and change?<br>And<br>How this does influence their actions in navigating demands while initiating inter-organizational collaboration | Paradox theory<br>Agency | Longitudinal case study | 12th International Process Research Symposium: Online (2021)<br>15th International Process Research Symposium: Cyprus (2024) |



# Chapter 2

## Navigating the Business-Society Paradox in Inter-Organizational Collaboration: Emergence and Mitigation of Vicious Cycles

This manuscript has been conditionally accepted at Strategic Organization journal.

Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the following conferences:

Sande, L.F.L. van de, Lauche, K., Blazevic, V. & Ziggers, G.W. (2022). Vicious paradoxical cycles in organizing inter-organizational collaboration: A multiple case study on last-mile initiatives. 13th International Process Research Symposium: Rhodes (2022, June 25 - 2022, June 28).

Sande, L.F.L. van de, Lauche, K., Blazevic, V. & Ziggers, G.W. (2022). Vicious paradoxical cycles in organizing inter-organizational collaborations: a multiple case study on last-mile initiatives. 38th EGOS Colloquium: Vienna (2022, July 7 - 2022, July 9).

## Abstract

Inter-organizational collaborations are increasingly seen as a way to effectively address societal challenges, yet they present their own demands for actors involved that can inhibit the collaboration's development. Based on a multiple case study of four collaborations aimed at developing liveable cities, we investigate how actors navigate the business-society paradox and deal with emerging vicious cycles that paralyze the collaboration. We combine paradox theory and a practice perspective to unravel how actors' practices contribute to the emergence, sustaining and potential mitigation of vicious cycles. We identify how bundles of practices and slipping points lead to business and societal dominant orientations, how tipping points can foster mitigating practices to work through tensions and (un)successfully restore equilibrium during collaboration, and how escalating vicious cycles may offer unique opportunities to navigate paradox. Our findings have implications for research on paradox theory and inter-organizational collaboration.

**Keywords:** Inter-organizational collaboration, paradox, societal challenges, vicious cycles

## Introduction

Societal challenges such as natural disasters (Jarzabkowski, et al., 2022), poverty (Sharma and Bansal, 2017) or providing living wages (Schrage & Rasche, 2021) are increasingly complex for single organizations to address (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016). Therefore, organizations increasingly seek collaboration across organizational boundaries as a way to address these issues (Jarzabkowski, et al., 2022). To realize the potential of such collaborations, organizational actors are usually required to navigate paradoxical tensions, such as the business-society paradox of addressing societal issues while being commercially viable (Sharma & Bansal, 2017; Smith et al., 2013). These activities include contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously, persist overtime and require a 'both/and' approach (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Hahn, Figge, Pinkse and Preuss, 2018). Failing to do so may evoke vicious cycles when collaborating with other actors, and risks not realizing the desired impact (Couture et al., 2023; George et al., 2024). In this paper, we investigate how actors in an inter-organizational collaboration become trapped, and then extricate themselves from a vicious cycle triggered by the business-society paradox.

Work on paradox theory has shown how difficult it is to navigate the business-society paradox for individuals and organizations (Pamphile, 2022; Smith & Besharov, 2019). Collaborations impose additional challenges on actors compared to traditional organizations, such as the governance and alignment of the diverse and potentially large number of actors (Grimm & Reinecke, 2023; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022), or the need to collaborate and compete at the same time (Stadtler and Van Wassenhove, 2016). This increased complexity presents challenges that can result in vicious cycles that inhibit progress and paralyze the collaboration (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017). Vicious cycles are defined as an amplifying loop in which tensions between paradoxical poles, such as business and society, are perpetuated or exacerbated, mostly by defensive or simplistic responses to paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011), making a bad situation worse (Lewis, 2000; Tsoukas and Cunha, 2017). Actors get stuck in recurring challenges (Ungureanu et al., 2019), unable to find solutions, which in the worst case can lead to the termination of the collaboration (Zuzul, 2019). Prior studies exploring inter-organizational contexts show how decision dysfunctions contribute to the emergence and continuation of vicious cycles (Ungureanu et al., 2019), or how actors get stuck in governance 'traps' over time, hindering them to critically reflect and collectively handle them (Couture et al., 2023).

While we know what happens within organizations and inter-organizational collaborations as vicious cycles emerge (Es-Sajjade et al., 2021; Smith & Lewis, 2011;

Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003; Ungureanu et al., 2019), we yet know relatively little about how this process unfolds over time, and how actors contribute to the emergence and mitigation of vicious cycles. Taking a practice perspective can help us to understand how paradoxes and vicious cycles play out by attending to how diverse actors navigate the paradox on an ongoing basis (Lê and Bednarek, 2017). It allows us to focus on how actors' everyday and seemingly "mundane" practices (Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017), which are both visible and invisible, bring life to vicious cycles. Several studies have started to combine paradox theory and the practice perspective to leverage this strength. Pradies, Tunarosa, Lewis and Courtois (2021) show, albeit on an individual level, how supporting actors can help focal actors to understand paradoxical tensions and raise different practices to transition from vicious to virtuous cycles. Also, a practice perspective has shown to be highly appropriate for pluralistic settings, such as inter-organizational settings with diverse actors (Deken et al., 2018). However, the current literature on inter-organizational collaboration and paradox (e.g. Sharma & Bansal, 2017; Jay, 2013) and in particular the research which also uses practice and process approaches (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2022) does not provide much insight into how actors' actions contribute to the emergence of vicious cycles and their mitigation over time. By unearthing this phenomenon we acquire a better understanding of how actors sustain vicious cycles, and how their practices can prevent inter-organizational collapse by mitigating them. Hence, we set out to answer: *How do actors' practices contribute to the emergence and mitigating of vicious cycles while navigating the business-society paradox in inter-organizational collaboration?*

To answer this question, we conduct an inductive multiple case study (two longitudinal, two retrospective cases) of inter-organizational collaborations that focus on solving societal issues to foster liveable cities, in particular by organizing sustainable last-mile deliveries of goods and services to clients in city centres. These collaborations aim to tackle societal issues (e.g. congestion or pollution), but at the same time also design a sustainable business case for all actors in the collaboration - sparking tensions. We contribute to paradox theory through a practice lens by examining how actors, through the enactment of practices, deal with the business-society paradox. First, by building on the practice perspective we show how, through the enactment of different practices over time, a vicious cycle unfolds as actors try and fail to navigate paradoxical tensions during collaboration. We therefore contribute to the current literature on paradox theory and inter-organizational collaboration by disentangling how this socially constructed process plays out. Second, we show how after reaching a tipping point a vicious cycle can be mitigated by working through issues and perseverance. Prior studies

on this topic illustrate the climax of a vicious cycle as a finite state where a process or collaboration ends (e.g. Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003), however we find that it may also provide room for actors to re-calibrate and jointly move towards solving long-standing challenges.



## Theoretical background

### A practice perspective to navigate the business-society paradox

Organizational life is riddled with paradoxical tensions, which are 'contradictory yet interdependent elements that appear simultaneously and persist over time' (Schad et al., 2016: 10). These contradictions may seem logical individually, but inconsistent or even absurd when juxtaposed (Smith & Lewis, 2011). For example, when looking at the business-society paradox, a sole emphasis on the business pole implies a focus on increasing short-term economic performance for individual organizations, for example through business logic (Hahn et al., 2014), predominantly integrating social interests when it meets economic objectives (Kramer & Porter, 2011; McWilliams & Siegel, 2011). A sole emphasis on the society pole implies a focus on long-term societal impact (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014), based on a moral logic to make a positive change (Hahn et al., 2016), accepting that economic benefits may come down the line (Rivoli & Waddock, 2011). Both processes are distinct yet also interrelated: too much emphasis on business objectives may lead to overlooking opportunities to explore and branch out to new areas of sustainable solutions (Hahn et al., 2016), or result in mission drift where actors lose sight of their social objectives (Ebrahim et al., 2014). Conversely, when focusing too much on social objectives, societal impact may be achieved in the short term, but without financial support it is challenging to build on these ambitions in the long term (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014). While these objectives are contradictory, a paradox perspective allows actors to navigate these tensions and pursue both (Carmine & De Marchi, 2023) - moving from an 'either/or' to a 'both/and' approach (Hahn et al., 2014).

Research shows that if actors employ active responses to paradox, such as accepting or "embracing" tensions (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; Lewis, 2000), paradoxical thinking (Hahn et al., 2014) or through humour (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017) this fosters virtuous cycles: an amplifying loop through active responses to paradox which makes a good situation better, as it enables synergy between the paradoxical poles (Smith & Lewis, 2011). On the contrary, vicious cycles are defined as an amplifying loop in which tensions between paradoxical poles are perpetuated or exacerbated, mostly by defensive or simplistic responses to paradox, turning a bad situation into an even

worse situation (Smith & Lewis, 2011). For instance, Sundaramurthy & Lewis (2003) explain how a rising focus on control may give rise to more distrust among actors, which in turn give rise to defensive responses which restricts collaboration and information flow - emphasizing more need on control. Hence, the negligence of one pole can result in depletion of the other, leading to disequilibrium in the system (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). Once a path is chosen, actors tend to use increasingly simplistic responses, leaving them unable to piece together the puzzle (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003; Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017). Once change is put into motion, albeit through the smallest of disturbances, it will continue to move into that direction until the 'system' is either balanced or destroyed (Weick, 1979, p. 72). If such changes go unchecked, deviations become amplified and a vicious cycle will result - worsening an already problematic situation and potentially leading to system collapse (Masuch, 1985; Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017).

Yet, while we know why vicious cycles emerge, we know surprisingly little about the role of actors and their practices, i.e. the "sayings" and "doings", in how they unfold over time. A notable exception is provided by Pradies et al. (2021), who use a practice perspective to show how vicious cycles can be broken and transformed into virtuous cycles for organizational actors. Due to the similarities in their ontological underpinnings, the practice perspective is useful in explaining and understanding paradoxes in different pluralistic contexts (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Both the practice perspective and paradox theory assume phenomena to be socially constructed, and responding to paradox consists of the enactment of everyday activities and practices (Lê and Bednarek, 2017; Jarzabkowski, Bednarek and Lê, 2018). Paradoxes are constantly in a state of becoming - shaped by actors' ongoing enactment of bundles of practices and sparking responses to deal with the paradox (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Therefore, this perspective allows us to dig deeper into how vicious cycles unfold over time: by following how actors enact different bundles of practices as they try to navigate the business-society paradox in inter-organizational collaborations. Thereby, we answer the call from Tsoukas & Cunha (2017) and Lê and Bednarek (2017) to better understand how vicious cycles unfold in more complex multi-actor settings. We now delve deeper into inter-organizational collaboration to examine which unique challenges arise in these settings.

## Challenges in navigating paradox in inter-organizational collaboration

Inter-organizational collaboration is increasingly used as a means to address complex societal challenges as it allows organizations to bundle knowledge, resources and expertise to design solutions no single organization could produce on its own (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; George et al., 2024). But mobilizing heterogenous

organizations also pose their own unique challenges (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). Approaches of how single organizations navigate paradox cannot automatically be copied to multi-actor contexts (Cunha and Putnam, 2019):

First, inter-organizational collaborations consist of a variety of heterogeneous actors, and as the number and diversity of actors increases, it is challenging to align the different goals, identities and values of participating actors (Smith and Besharov, 2019; Ashforth and Reingen, 2014). For example, actors may collaborate and compete at the same time on different topics between business and societal goals (Manzhynski & Figge, 2020), or struggle to align diverging perspectives (Grimm & Reinecke, 2023). Second, unlike in a single organization with designated decision makers, orchestrating multiple organizations as a collective is a lot more troublesome (Reypens, Lievens and Blazevic, 2021; Huxham and Vangen, 2000). It is not always clear who is allowed to make which decisions for whom (DeFillippi & Sydow, 2016), and different strategies may be required to mobilize different types of actors (Reypens et al., 2021). This becomes increasingly challenging when more dominant actors push for example business objectives, leaving less powerful actors pursuing societal objectives with less opportunities to promote their case (Savarese et al., 2021). Finally, tensions do not emerge in isolation but are nested across different layers of the collaboration and intertwined around multiple issues (Sheep et al., 2017). Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) show for example how responses to navigate organizing paradoxes can simultaneously shape belonging and performing paradoxes. Engaging with or ignoring the business-societal paradox may therefore fuel other paradoxes at different levels, such as the paradox between collaboration and competition which are often present in collaborations (Stadtler & Van Wassenhove, 2016) - highlighting the interdependence of inter-organizational systems and the complexity to deal with tensions across organizational boundaries (Schad and Bansal, 2018; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022).

Consequently, collaborations remain challenging to organize and develop to their full potential (van Wijk et al., 2020; Zuzul, 2019). Numerous studies have highlighted the high potential of inter-organizational failure due to the complexity of organizing them (e.g. Zuzul, 2019; Grimm & Reinecke, 2023; George et al., 2024) - a disturbing insight when also recognizing the need for collaboration to address the pressing societal issues we collectively face. A potential explanation could be the negligence or overemphasis of one paradoxical pole leading to a disequilibrium in the system, which may spur vicious cycles in the collaboration (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). Also, decision dysfunction factors such as procrastination, indecisiveness or denial can contribute to maintaining and reinforcing vicious cycles (Ungureanu et al., 2019), while Sundaramurthy & Lewis (2003) dive deeper into what makes vicious cycles emerge by examining reinforcing cycles of collaboration and control.

These previous studies explain what happens as vicious cycles unfold, yet we know surprisingly little on how actors' practices contribute to the emergence and possible mitigation of vicious cycles as they unfold in inter-organizational collaborations. Vicious cycles do not appear out of nothing, nor are they an accumulation of simply different factors - they are shaped by the ongoing enactment of bundles of practices as actors try to navigate and are affected by the paradox (Lê & Bednarek, 2017; Pradies et al., 2021). A practice perspective has already helped to explain for instance temporal coordination (Hilbolling, Deken, Berends and Tuertscher, 2022), issue selling (Lauche & Erez, 2023) or strategizing (Deken et al., 2018) in complex inter-organizational contexts. However, the current literature on inter-organizational collaboration and paradox (e.g. Sharma & Bansal, 2017; Jay, 2013) and in particular the research which also uses practice and process approaches (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2022) does not provide much insight into how actors' actions contribute to the emergence of vicious cycles and their mitigation over time. Hence, a practice perspective reveals not only what happens within these collaborations, but also how it happens and by whom. Taking this perspective helps us in unearthing how actors contribute to vicious cycles emerging in collaborations as they try to navigate the business-society paradox, and about their role in potentially mitigating them (Lê & Bednarek, 2017; Hahn et al., 2014).

## Methodology

**Research Design:** We conducted an inductive comparative case study of four cases to build theory on the emergence of vicious cycles in collaborations, as case studies help to understand the dynamics occurring in a specific setting and to build theory (Yin, 2003). We first followed two longitudinal cases of inter-organizational collaborations in the context of liveable cities, designed to address societal challenges in a business friendly and economically sustainable way (MediHub & CareHub in table 2.1). We gained access as part of a research project that both initiatives were associated with. Furthermore, we conducted research on two retrospective cases (BuildHub and RetHub in table 2.1). To ensure comparability, all cases clearly pursued business and societal objectives in similar empirical contexts, were reasonably sized with over 10 heterogeneous actors, had a similar design involving customers, a hub, suppliers and a municipality. In all four cases, we observed that the collaborations ultimately ended up prioritizing either business or societal objectives, although they had set out to pursue both. The inherent tensions resulted in actors getting stuck in recurring challenges, and unable to effectively address the opposite objective - sometimes with severe consequences which we would later frame as vicious

cycles. We followed the emergence of these recurring challenges over an extended period of time and observed practices in vivo (Pettigrew, 1990). The benefit of combining both longitudinal and retrospective cases was that it provided interesting synergies we could exploit to build theory (Leonard-Barton, 1990). The processual, longitudinal cases of CareHub and MediHub were ideal to trace change and decisions over time, but more difficult to generalize as the research was bound to specific contexts (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, Chalkias and Cacciatori, 2019; Langley, 2007). The retrospective case studies of BuildHub and RetHub on the other hand lacked depth to gain a better understanding of cause and effect (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003), but were useful to increase generalizability and to recognize process patterns. Taken together, these cases therefore nicely complemented each other as comparing and contrasting the different characteristics of cases provided both depth and breadth to our analysis - increasing generalizability and trustworthiness of our findings (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019; Leonard-Barton, 1990).

**Research context:** Our research focuses on the context of liveable cities, where the goal is to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Over half of the world's population is currently living in and around cities and this number will dramatically grow towards 2050 (United Nations, 2017). This raises issues, such as healthcare, transportation, construction or safety, and will hugely impact existing sustainability challenges. A particular issue is the increasing amount of goods and services, which must be delivered to consumers and organizations in inner cities, called the last-mile, or the final stretch of the supply chain. Last-mile deliveries are inefficient, polluting, costly, and complex to organize, as organizations fail to collaborate to bundle goods and services or use environmentally friendly delivery methods.

Thus, an increasing amount of trucks congest and pollute inner cities, causing an unsafe and unhealthy environment for inhabitants. Through smart organizational designs and bundling of goods and services, efficiency of the last mile deliveries can be improved (figure 2.1), and aid in attaining economic business objectives, such as lower costs or increased service levels, as well as broader social and environmental objectives. Last-mile collaborations generally consist of end consumers who provide demand, suppliers who deliver goods or services, a "hub" which is responsible for efficiently coordinating and bundling the deliveries from suppliers to customers, and municipalities who wish to develop their urban areas. Figure 2.2 provides an overview of the different contexts of last-mile collaborations across the four cases.

**Table 2.1** Overview and characteristics four last-mile cases

| Case | Horizon | Location/ industry | Initiator(s) | Core actors | Motive |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Case A MediHub** | **Longitudinal 3 years** | The Netherlands Public | Academic universities & academic hospital | Academic hospital<br>University<br>University of applied science<br>Logistic service provider<br>Municipality<br>Suppliers<br>**Total: 14** | Increasingly busy, unsafe and polluted campus area through inefficient delivery of goods |
| **Case B CareHub** | **Longitudinal 3 years** | The Netherlands Healthcare | Home care organization | Home care provider<br>Community center<br>Suppliers<br>Project management<br>Municipality<br>Regional government<br>University of applied science<br>Wellbeing groups<br>**Total: 20** | Rising healthcare cost, fewer nursing homes and decrease in healthcare personnel, combined with fragmented service/ good deliveries |
| **Case C BuildHub** | **Retrospective 11 years** | Sweden Construction | Municipality | Municipality<br>Transportation companies<br>Consolidation hub<br>Contractors<br>Developers<br>Suppliers<br>**Total: 50+** | Long term construction project planned, posing issues for livability of inner city due to enormous volume of construction materials |
| **Case D RetHub** | **Retrospective 18 years** | United Kingdom Retail | Municipality | Municipality<br>Logistics service providers<br>Suppliers<br>Retailers<br>**Total: 100+** | Old and narrow city centers caused a lot of congestion, and air quality was rated among some of the worst in the UK |

| | Goal | Main challenges | Vicious cycle direction | Navigating cycles | Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Set up consolidated goods delivery to campus of three initiators in city center in collaboration with logistics service provider | • Logistics service provider quickly focused on business case<br>• This drew attention from obtaining societal goals<br>• Inability to construct business case led to ongoing frustrations<br>• Collective actors struggling to focus again on societal objectives | Overemphasis on business | In process of navigating tensions | Ongoing |
| | Provide an integrated service of home care, wellbeing and logistics services to vulnerable clients in neighborhoods | • Enthusiasm and drive led to a lot of early success and interest<br>• The success fueled additional need for growth and scalability<br>• Business case remained an issue, despite success in practice<br>• Inability to construct business case almost led to demise of CareHub | Overemphasis on society | Successfully navigated tensions | Ongoing |
| | Set up a new consolidation center with external partner to sustainably bundle and deliver goods to construction sites | • Logistic service provider hired under ambiguous contractual conditions<br>• Allowed service provider to focus on pursuing own financial gain<br>• Municipality not able to push through own societal objectives<br>• Ultimately had to completely redesign BuildHub model | Initially overemphasis on business | Successfully navigated tensions | Ongoing |
| | Set up bundling for goods delivery of retailers in city center in collaboration with large logistics service provider | • Logistics service provider hired for 10 year contract and ambiguous conditions<br>• Limited suppliers/retailers joined - were unable to make business case<br>• Municipality determined to make this work – funded initiative over years to achieve sustainability goals<br>• Lack of financial incentive service provider to innovate ultimately led to demise of RetHub | Initially overemphasis on society | Unable to navigate tensions | Stopped |

Yet, many of these collaborations still struggle to scale up to their intended potential. The logistics industry is generally characterized by low margins. Last mile settings pose additional challenges, such as the need for a large number of participants to break even, and a more systemic approach to fairly distribute costs and commercial and societal benefits across the supply chain. This requires a delicate balancing act between business and societal objectives. A lot of new initiatives are being started, often with the help of public funding, and show promising results in terms of tackling safety, congestion or emissions. Yet many cease to exist when funding runs out and no business case has been made. Hence, inner city logistics presents an interesting context to analyse how actors navigate these tensions between business and societal objectives, encounter vicious cycles and seek to mitigate them.

Hence, last-mile collaborations, in particular those that aim to function as a business collaborative without ongoing support from public funding or philanthropic sources, present a uniquely suitable context for studying how actors navigate, on a day-to-day basis, the paradoxical tensions between business and societal objectives. Actors may rely on traditional economic, or business, activities which are well established in supply chain contexts, and try to make a sound business case without necessarily prioritizing or achieving societal impact. On the other hand, temporary funding and absence of the need for a short term business case may be used to explore innovative approaches to achieve societal impact, but over time risk overlooking and leveraging business opportunities. A delicate balancing act is required for these collaborative efforts to flourish and pursue both objectives.

**Data collection:** Data were collected from multiple sources, such as interviews, observations and documents (table 2.2). For the two longitudinal cases, we followed their development from their inception in 2019, interviewing key actors from the start and using snowball sampling to gain access to interviews later on. Actors are individuals who represent their organization in the collaboration and may or may not have sufficient agency to initiate change. We interviewed actors from different organizations ranging from those involved in setting the strategic direction to those carrying out operational tasks (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019; Lumineau and Oliveira, 2018). We started with open questions about the collaboration and its objectives, followed up with how actors enacted and experienced the collaboration. As we recognized the role of business-society tensions, due to ongoing conflict between the two objectives or the inability to reach one or the other, we increasingly refined our interview guide to suit this approach (Locke, 2000). Multiple rounds of interviews were executed over three years (table 2.2). The first author conducted observations

during periodic strategy meetings, research meetings or brainstorming sessions. These provided us with valuable data regarding progress, emerging tensions, relations between actors and practices (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019). Finally, we collected a large number of documents, such as periodic reports or presentations, showing how projects had evolved.

For the retrospective cases, we first contacted lead researchers of the projects and planned an informal meeting to discuss the cases and a potential fit. They were well connected actors, and therefore able to get us in contact with key actors involved in the collaboration (Lumineau & Oliveira, 2018). For the interviews we used the questions we had developed during data collection of the longitudinal cases, as data collection for the retrospective cases started around 1.5 years after the longitudinal cases. During interviews we focused our attention on how business-society tensions had evolved over time and what actors did and said to shape the tensions - so starting with the genesis of the collaboration and comparing these insights with the current situation. This allowed us to also take a temporal element into account (Langley, 1999). As the two retrospective cases had been operational for quite some years, we were able to collect a rich body of documents over an extended period of time, further informing our analysis and providing us important insights to triangulate data.

**Data analysis:** we used four steps to analyse the cases: writing thick chronological descriptions, inductive coding and temporal bracketing, zooming in and out on individual cases and finally a cross comparison of cases.

*Step 1 – Writing thick chronological descriptions:* our first step was to structure the data for the four cases and construct thick descriptions of their progression (Langley, 1999). We used an open mind for the interviews, documents and observations to construct chronological narratives of how cases developed from inception until the end of 2022. We wrote memos on topics and events of interest to track our thought process and re-examined these throughout the analysis process. During this step, we noticed how some cases faced similar issues on either business or societal issues, preventing them from pursuing both.

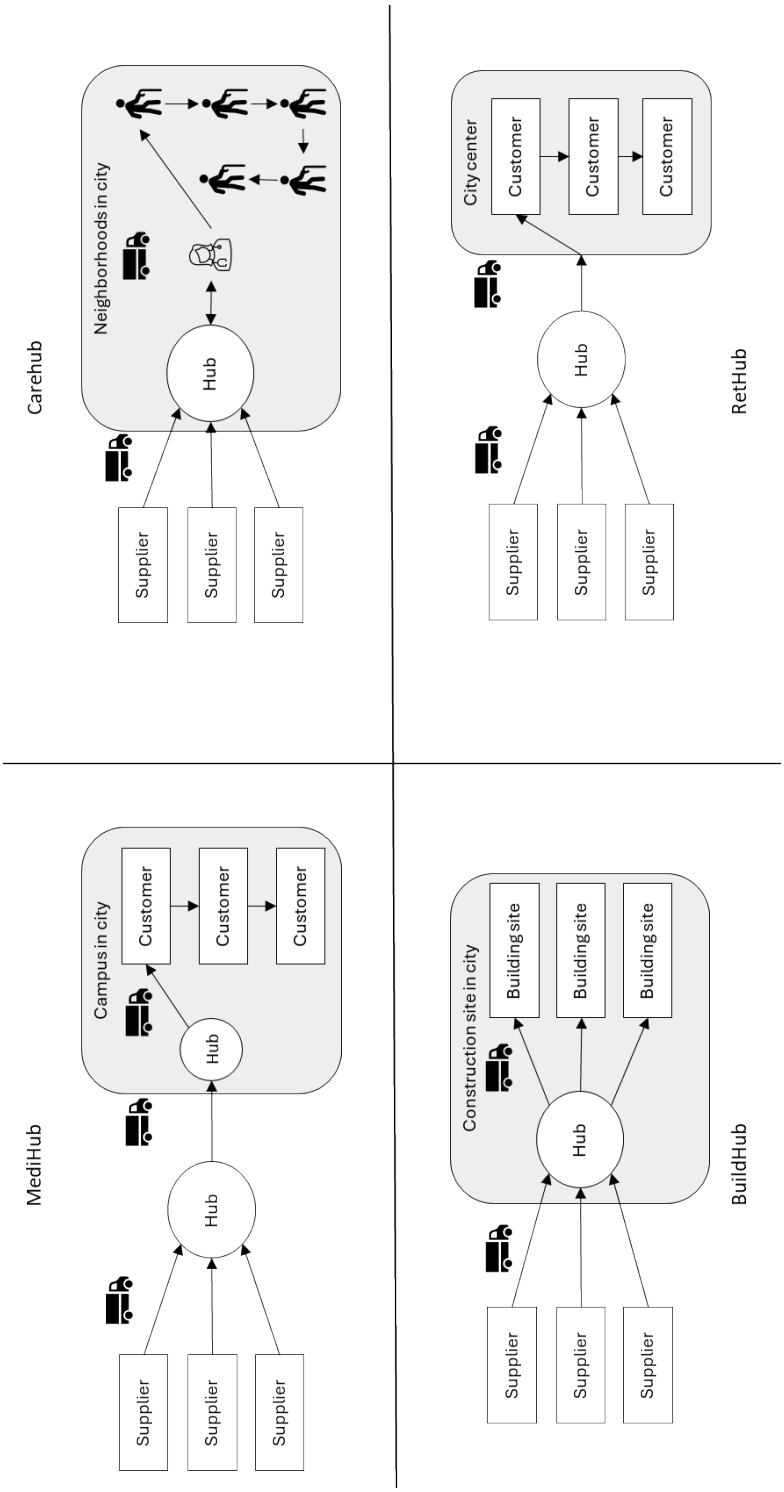



**Figure 2.1** Organization of different last-mile settings across four cases

*Step 2 – Inductive coding and temporal bracketing:* we used these descriptions as input for our inductive coding, where we identified clusters of similar activities, ideas and processes. We looked at what happened (events, decisions, conflict, etc.), by whom (individuals, project level, their roles) and how (what did they do, think or aspire), and assigned codes (Pettigrew, 1990). We made use of notes throughout our coding process to produce a trail of our thoughts and ideas as we progressed through our analysis. As we engaged more with our data, we increasingly found evidence for the paradoxical nature of business and societal objectives. As we read more about paradox theory, the literature confirmed our hunch and we pursued and embraced this theoretical perspective. Furthermore, we found how actors, through their "doings" and "sayings" engaged with the paradox, and therefore both contributed and were affected by these tensions (Lê & Bednarek, 2017) (e.g. prioritizing own business interests practices emphasizing and worsening business tensions). We used temporal bracketing to specify different periods over time and inductively derived the emerging tensions actors faced and the practices they enacted during these periods.

*Step 3 – Zooming in and zooming out per case:* for a comprehensive analysis, we iterated between zooming in and zooming out for every separate case (Schad & Bansal, 2018), analysing the data by zooming out to the challenges on the inter-organizational level (e.g. actors collectively were unable construct a business case, create clarity, etc.), and then zooming in on specific tensions, actors or practices to identify and understand the relation between each other on a micro level and vice versa (e.g. actors pursuing individual objectives, steering away from discussing societal objectives) (Lumineau & Oliveira, 2018). This method helped to trace tensions over time, keeping the temporal story intact (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019). For example, zooming out allowed us to take a step back and identify what kind of challenges and tensions the different cases encountered. MediHub for example showed increasingly salient tensions favouring the business pole, where we observed how collectively actors were stuck in business oriented issues, but ultimately were able to steer back to pursuing societal objectives. Next, by zooming in, we tried to identify the main drivers of this process. This is where we were able to connect distinct practices to different phases of the emergence of the vicious cycle favouring business objectives, and to identify "connectors" which drove the change from one phase to the next. This iterative approach showed the strength of combining paradox theory and the practice perspective, as we could accurately analyse what actors actually did when they faced contradictory demands between business and society (Lê & Bednarek, 2017). We identified how and why actors got stuck in either business or societal dominant orientations of a vicious cycle. We

compared raw data with codes and additional insights and resolved issues through discussion between the authors. This allowed us to further refine the different practices for the cases, and how they impacted each other over time as actors engaged with the tensions.

*Step 4 – Cross comparison of cases:* We compared how vicious cycles had emerged across cases to examine whether our emerging theory could be generalized (Leonard-Barton, 1990). The cases made for interesting comparisons (see table 2.1): two cases emphasized business objectives and two favoured societal objectives; three cases were successful while one was discontinued. Our main findings relied on the longitudinal cases, for which our rich data allowed us to trace how vicious cycles emerged over time as actors emphasized or ignored either business or societal objectives by enacting bundles of practices. We cross-validated and complemented the findings with the two retrospective cases, which provided us with useful additional insights due to the retrospective data (Leonard-Barton, 1990). Our comparisons showed how different bundles of practices initiated and sustained a vicious cycle in business and societal dominant orientations. But also the importance of two types of "connectors" which linked different bundles of practices together and resulted in a shift between phases. We first identified slipping points, which were extended instances in time where actors (un)consciously slipped from initiating cycles to sustaining cycles - becoming persistently stuck by favouring one of the two poles. Second, we identified the importance of tipping points: critical points after a prolonged sustainment of vicious cycles in collaborations which led to either cycle escalation, and discontinuation of collaboration, or instigated a multifaceted process of cycle navigation. We found how these points led to different degrees of reflectivity on tensions - if actors became aware of the severity and complexity of the issues - and the subsequent need and manifestation of different practices to navigate out of the vicious cycle. Finally, we integrated these insights in a single model.

## Findings

In this section we elaborate on how actors initiated collaboration, how they contributed to emerging vicious cycles and attempted to mitigate them. Although all four cases started with pursuing both business and societal objectives, our analysis showed how particular practices emphasized either of the two poles resulting in a vicious cycle. We identified a business-dominant orientation in MediHub and BuildHub, and a societally-dominant orientation in CareHub and

RetHub. The business-oriented collaborations initiated a vicious cycle by bundles of practices of self-serving manoeuvring, perpetuated by fracturing collective efforts and mitigated by breaking out of the previously created entanglement. The societally-oriented collaborations started by quickly building momentum, sustained a vicious cycle through pursuing societal purpose single mindedly, and mitigated it by manifesting their vision.

### Business dominant orientation

In MediHub and BuildHub the emphasis shifted early on to a business dominant orientation (see appendix 1 for additional details).

***Initiating inter-organizational practices - self-serving manoeuvring:*** MediHub was set up as an experimental research consortium consisting of three campus organizations as customers and initiators (universities X and Y, and a hospital), several suppliers, a new logistics hub, the municipality and several research universities.

They wanted to design the sustainable transportation of goods to their campus to improve safety, congestion and emissions, while making these solutions financially viable and scalable. Although MediHub started off very promising in October 2019, by zooming out to the challenges during the projects' emergence, it became evident that it was difficult to pursue both business and societal objectives. We identified bundles of practices of *self-serving manoeuvring* that led to a vicious cycle including *prioritizing own business interests* and *deflecting responsibility.*

The three campus organizations formed a project team to bundle the delivery of goods, in close collaboration with the hub. They met regularly and invested considerable time and effort to connect suppliers to the hub. However, during early meetings at the end of December we witnessed how the hub owner started prioritizing his own business interests *(observation, 11-2019/12-2019)* to increase revenue and volumes, instead of actively engaging with other partners:

> *It could be that the [research] project will explore that the last mile set-up could be better. But I cannot concentrate on that. I am a business guy, I have to concentrate on my business. If researchers have another idea about how it should work, they can come to me. But I am not going to change, I already started one and a half years ago. (interview, owner hub, 12-2019)*

**Table 2.2** Overview data collection

| Cases | Data details | Interviews |
|---|---|---|
| **Case A MediHub** | Data collection period: November 2019 – November 2022<br>Interview duration: between 45 and 110 minutes<br>Interview rounds: three main rounds (r)<br>Observation duration: between 35 and 94 90 minutes<br>Observation frequency: monthly<br>Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim | Project manager (3) (r1, 2, 3)<br>Director facility university (1) (r1)<br>Director supply chain hospital (1) (r1)<br>Manager supply chain hospital (1) (r1)<br>Manager warehousing hospital (1) (r2)<br>Manager procurement university (1) (r2)<br>Manager procurement university AS (1) (r2)<br>Manager facility university AS (1) (r2)<br>CEO logistics service provider/hub (2) (r1, 3)<br>Municipality representative (1) (r1)<br>Project officer university (1) (r3)<br>Project officer university AS (1) (r3)<br>Account manager supplier 1 (1) (r2)<br>Account manager supplier 2 (2) (r1, 2)<br>Account manager supplier 3 (1) (r2)<br>Researcher project (1) (r2)<br><br>**Total: 20** |
| **Case B CareHub** | Data collection period: November 2019 – November 2022<br>Interview duration: between 35 and 160 minutes<br>Interview rounds: four main rounds (r)<br>Observation duration: between 50 and 90 minutes<br>Observation frequency: monthly during start stages<br>Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim | Program manager 1 (1) (r1)<br>Program manager 2 (2) (r3, 4)<br>Municipality representative (1) (r3)<br>Manager innovation (3) (r1, 2, 3)<br>Research manager (4) (r1, 2, 3, 4)<br>Director home care (2) (r2, 4)<br>Coordinator home care (1) (r2)<br>Coordinator wellbeing (3) (r2, 3, 4)<br>CEO supplier 1 (1) (r1)<br>CEO supplier 2 (1) (r2)<br>Manager supplier 3 (1) (r2)<br>Community concierge (1) (r3)<br>**Total: 21** |
| **Case C BuildHub** | Data collection period: October 2021 – July 2022<br>Interview duration: between 60 and 160 minutes<br>Interview rounds: ongoing<br>Observation duration: 85 minutes<br>Observation rounds: -<br>Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim | Program director municipality (3)<br>Site manager (1)<br>Manager hub logistics (1)<br>Coordinator supply management (1)<br><br><br><br>**Total: 6** |
| **Case D RetHub** | Data collection period: March 2021 – January 2022<br>Interview duration: between 70 and 90 minutes<br>Interview rounds: ongoing<br>Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim | Municipality project manager (1)<br>Logistics hub representative (1)<br>Research manager (2)<br>**Total: 4** |
| **Total** | | **51** |

| | Observations | Documents |
|---|---|---|
| | Periodic progress meetings (17)<br>Supplier meetings (1)<br>Innovation meeting (1)<br>Board presentations (1) | Yearly reports (2)<br>Meeting minutes (17)<br>Supplier reports (2)<br>Presentations (5)<br>News statements (2)<br>Research reports (4)<br>Board updates and presentations (2) |
| | **Total: 20** | **Total: 34** |
| | Periodic progress meetings (10)<br>Research meetings (3)<br>Innovation meetings (1)<br>Brainstorm meetings (1) | Periodic update reports (2)<br>Meeting minutes (10)<br>News statements and flyers (8)<br>Communication reports (2)<br>Progress reports (3) |
| | **Total: 14** | **Total: 25** |
| | Progress presentation (1) | Yearly progress reports (3)<br>Business model overview (1)<br>Contractual models for suppliers and customers (2)<br>News statements (4)<br>Presentations (3)<br>Scenario analysis report (1)<br>Cost and service allocation report (1)<br>Academic papers (5) |
| | **Total: 1** | **Total: 22** |
| | | Municipality council report (1)<br>Progress reports (3)<br>Research reports (3)<br>Academic papers (5)<br>News statements (9)<br>**Total: 23** |
| | **35** | **104** |

Prioritizing his own business interests clashed with the complex problem involving multiple actors: volumes could only be increased if campus organizations and suppliers renegotiated existing contracts to include the delivery via the hub. As the hub lacked economies of scale this delivery option was initially more expensive, making suppliers unwilling to participate and in turn hindering increased volumes.

As the project team was still experimenting with how to develop the collaboration, the hub owner's push to prioritize his own business sparked tensions between him and the project team, distressing their moving forward. It provided a seemingly insurmountable barrier early on: *"it's all about price, price, price [...] it's all we ever hear from our suppliers, [the hub] is just too expensive!" (vignette observation, manager 2 university Y, 3-2020)*. The situation created more salience for the business objectives and diverted from tackling societal issues. We observed how this early uncertainty and lack of mandate led to none of the actors being able, or willing, to take up the initiative - actors started to deflect responsibility. For example, the project team pointed to the hub to lower their prices:

> *Manager 1 hospital: The only way we can make this work is if the hub lowers its prices and creates transparency – we can't expect to make a business case with these rates! (vignette observation, 3-2020)*

Yet, the hub owner wanted the project team to attract more suppliers:

> *Zero emission transport is the future, but it's expensive. I've invested in an electric truck, and I have to put a driver on it. I need a minimum of 20 suppliers [from customers] to break even. We can't go back to using diesel trucks for this, can we? (interview, owner hub, 12-2019)*

But suppliers required affordable prices from the project team as a condition to participate:

> *We're working with very tight margins in our industry. Sustainability is a high priority, but we can't pay more – we will have to charge this to our customers. (interview, supplier 1, 3-2020)*

There was no collective effort to navigate business and societal objectives. Instead, practices of self-serving manoeuvring combined with deflecting responsibility created an environment where the focus shifted away from pursuing societal

objectives and towards the business pole. Actors felt frustrated and were unable to extract themselves from the situation.

***Sustaining vicious cycle – Fracturing collective efforts:*** The next phase started in August 2020, when we zoomed in on why a different bundle of practices emerged that reinforced the vicious cycle. We identified a 'slipping point' of *muddling along* that reinforced the vicious cycle as actors continued to enact self-serving manoeuvring practices for an extended period of time without progressing the collaboration. As they muddled along, similar questions were being raised but not answered (e.g. how to connect more suppliers?, how can we make a business case?, where do we start?). The enthusiasm present at the start - *"we are just going to start experimenting and see where the project would take us [...] we will learn as we go" (interview, research manager, 4-2020)* - died down. Actors skipped meetings more frequently. They proposed solutions but then forestalled them: *Project manager: "[sigh] I feel like we are running around in circles, we're not getting anywhere..." (vignette observation, 1-2021)*. This inertia gave rise to new bundles of practices of *fracturing collective efforts,* by *putting off decisions, venting frustration* and *exploiting existing arrangements,* fuelling the vicious cycle favouring business objectives.

Actors collectively did not know how to progress, which led to putting off decisions. While objectives remained quite broad - such as "developing a sustainable and liveable campus"-, actors struggled to pursue a more collective way forward without a clear mandate to make decisions. Their lack of clarity and focus led them to defer addressing the intended issues. For example, during a brainstorming session they listed different areas of interest, such as increasing suppliers with the hub, building logistics or looking into lockers for storage on campus (*document brainstorming, 4-2021*). Despite this long list of ideas, no concrete points on *how* to mobilize resources were discussed. A researcher reflected on this:

> *They keep getting stuck on the same issue with the hub. How long has it been? Months? We now have this overview but we still keep talking about the same thing over and over. They're not making any decisions (interview, research officer, 5-2021)*

Our observations showed that when difficult decisions had to be made or issues were raised, these discussion often ended in the line of *"it's tricky, we have to think about that…" (e.g. vignette observation, 02-2021),* but no concrete plans were made and similar issues would return during the next meeting.

As tension rose during meetings, actors also started venting their frustration about each other and their lack of progress, showing the deadlock of the vicious cycle. Instead of tackling issues head on, they got caught up in emotional conversations, diverting them from collective problem solving. Over time these practices started to dominate the debate:

> *Project manager: Okay, but what do we want? Do we want to continue [with the hub], or…what are our options? [silence] – Manager 1 hospital: I don't know, but last week he [hub owner] called me about a tender we did not communicate with him, he was furious!! [...] This was way out of line, you can't do business like this!!. – Project manager: Ok, [...] yeah… it's difficult, we need to take a look at that. (vignette observation, 5-2021)*

This quote shows how the project manager tried to discuss a pressing issue, but how the frustration of the hospital manager deflected the topic and instead vented her frustration about the situation. This practice of venting frustration became dominant across several meetings (e.g. meetings 2-2021 until 5-2021), with very little action to break out of this vicious cycle. Also the hub owner made several confrontational phone calls to the project team members about the lack of progress, further alienating the different parties. It became increasingly difficult to find common ground.

Meanwhile, the hub owner exploited existing arrangements for his own interests during negotiations. Earlier in the collaboration, informal agreements had been made on how the growth and addition of suppliers would work in theory, as the project team would connect suppliers with the hub. But adding suppliers was difficult due to the lack of an integrated approach. However, the hub owner still wanted the project team to keep their promises, even though this was not possible, partially, due to his own decisions. He attempted on numerous occasions to revert back to these promises and make the project team to somehow grow the project and seized his influence during talks:

> *Manager 2 university Y: We had a meeting last week at [hub] actually, with [owner hub] to talk about how to move forward […] he acts like he is the only party we can do business with, he got very upset when he found out that we did not include him in a tender about [products]. He almost demanded to be included as he figured [hub] would be the one to be included in all the new tenders. (vignette observation, 5-2021)*

Exploiting existing arrangements further paralyzed the collaboration. These combined practices fuelled each other and further emphasized the business pole of the paradox. The hub owner kept exploiting existing arrangements as no new suppliers could be connected, which led to resistance from the project team as they were unable to tackle this issue alone. Actors kept putting off critical decisions and vented their frustration as no decisions were made. In the end tensions ran so high that they stopped talking to each other. Solely focusing on business objectives opened the door for fracturing collective efforts, dragging them away from designing a sustainable campus and the societal pole.

***Mitigating vicious cycle – Breaking out of entanglement:*** After a few explosive talks mid-2021, communication between the project team and the hub owner stopped. The subsequent extended break in interactions of several months actually turned into a tipping point, allowing actors from the project team to slowly crawl out of the vicious cycle. The cooling down period helped to cease the emotional debate that had gradually persisted during negotiations. We observed no talk about the hub owner and the upscaling issues during this time (*observations, 9-2021 until 4-2022*). The team focused again on core issues: developing a sustainable campus. We zoomed in on how actors tried to mitigate the vicious cycle through bundles of practices of *breaking out of entanglement,* including *reemphasizing collective interests, instigating small wins,* and *turning around collaboration arrangements*.

The extended break in interactions opened up the first step in the mitigation of the vicious cycle, as it allowed actors in the project team to re-emphasize their original collective interests and acknowledge the societal pole of the paradox. We observed during the first few meetings how the atmosphere lightened up: a sort of calm came over the project team as they were no longer preoccupied by the hub, allowing them to look at the collaboration from a fresh perspective and to re-focus on the initial societal objectives. By zooming out and zooming in, we traced this shift to a single "aha moment" when they discussed future campus deliveries:

> *Director university X: Should it really matter how our current or future hub organizes the last mile? I mean, as long as it is organized in a sustainable way, that should do the trick for us. Manager 2 university Y: hmm, actually we just want a sustainable way of transporting our goods, and as long as it does not hinder us it shouldn't really matter how (vignette observation, 9-2021)*

This seemingly trivial comment was an important recalibration moment for the project team, who had been stuck in the day-to-day struggles in the previous phase. This reflection set two things in motion. First, the project team questioned if the current hub was actually the best partner for such a scheme - as they had been reluctant to stop collaborating with the hub:

> *Director university X: On the one hand we can say, alright we did a good job, we have six suppliers with [hub], but I mean, what if we had chosen another partner? [...] I wouldn't mind stopping our collaboration and figure that out… (vignette observation, 10-2021)*

Leaving this locked-in situation relieved a lot of pressure of having to work with just one hub organization. The second new impulse was to consider the sustainable campus from a broader perspective, such as sustainable deliveries on the campus itself between organizations. These two realizations helped to mitigate the vicious cycles through instigating small wins. They decided to branch out with smaller projects aimed at making a direct impact on their campus, such as cooled deliveries by bike, the further exploration of storage lockers, or building logistics:

> *We were contacted by [contractor] on exploring building logistics opportunities for [building area], and it sounds very promising. They have a lot of data at their disposal and are willing to share that with us for research purposes. [...] it would be nice to get something off the ground again (interview, project manager, 10-2021)*

These small wins did not necessarily create a big impact yet on campus, but did rejuvenate the spirit of the project team to build momentum and continue with their initial goals: developing a sustainable campus by predominantly working on such new initiatives *(e.g. meeting minutes, 2-2022)*. The final step to break out of the vicious cycle and proactively work towards the societal pole was to turn around collaboration arrangements. They, for example, continued the above mentioned initiatives to slowly grow and create a more sustainable delivery method of parcels on campus. Also, the project team started making changes to their own organization. For example, they launched an operational project group to build momentum:

> *Our project team has been erected to take the load of the shoulders of the [management] group [...] it's a big project, and we're now in a phase of exploring the opportunities [...] so we're going to look at for example*

> *how to align the IT systems or how do we deal with delivery addresses on campus, that kind of stuff (interview, team leader university X, 5-2022)*

This also restructured how they worked as a project team, for example, how they organized their meetings. Previously, meetings were rather unstructured with a lot of room to ad-hoc decision making, which had also fuelled the vicious cycle. Now this changed:

> *Director university X: I feel like we haven't been very effective, we mostly talk about what we have been doing. I think we can use our time more productively and look at how we can turn this around [...] I talked with my secretary and will make sure that I can attend these meetings more regularly. (vignette observation, 2-2022)*

Meetings became less frequent and more focused on concretely strategizing on future direction. Concrete issues, such as procurement or aligning suppliers, were delegated to the project team. Furthermore, the presence of the director helped to make decisions, such as all suppliers should be using "a" hub for their deliveries rather than their own one (*document final report, 6-2023*), moving away from only using their own hub. These rejuvenating momentum practices allowed actors to recalibrate towards their societal objectives. Instigating small wins and expanding strategic options enabled them to break out of the vicious cycle and tackle societal opportunities on their campus.

## BuildHub

We now briefly compare our findings with BuildHub. In the beginning of 2013, the municipality organized a sustainable delivery scheme for a large construction area in the city centre in collaboration with a new hub operator, project developers and suppliers. This newly contracted hub would efficiently bundle construction material at the outskirts of the city, sustainably deliver them to the construction site, and waste would be efficiently recycled - to deal with issues of congestion, safety, emissions and inventory. The municipality wanted to fairly distribute costs and benefits among participants as they did not plan to make money. Yet, our interviews showed how the hub operator prioritized their own business interests by increasing their own revenue, at the expense of the municipality's sustainability objectives - sparking tensions. The hub operator drove as many trips as possible, which resulted in more money compared to bundling goods, but also increased congestion and emissions:

> *I think with this set up with a private [hub] company managing the logistic solution, there is a conflict of maximizing profit. It's not really surprising: if you earn money to drive a truck from A to B, you'd think it's normal that you want to do that as much as possible. […] I think that these economic drivers send the wrong signals. (interview, site manager)*

The hub also deflected responsibility when the municipality tried to address these issues. Issues such as damages, invoice issues or missing orders were often brushed aside.

> *We discussed [sustainability issues] over and over again with them, but they simply would not do anything about it (interview, program director)*

The contract did not specify these topics, as it had been set up at the beginning of the collaboration with limited knowledge on how the set conditions would play out in practice. Hence, it became difficult to pursue societal objectives and discussions reverted to business objectives, which initiated a vicious cycle.

From 2013 to 2017, frustration grew among the municipality and suppliers as the negotiations with the hub operator muddled along and fostered a passive state in the collaboration despite their continuous attempt to discuss the cost and quality issues during meetings. The hub operator exploited existing arrangements by reverting to the contractual terms, which had not included sustainability:

> *Every time we were saying: "you have to develop this and that", but they didn't - [manager hub operator]: "No, no, no. We can't do that because we have a contract here, and it doesn't say anything about that." (interview, program director).*

The hub operator's actions effectively paralyzed the municipality's efforts on sustainability topics, creating further delays. This inability to initiate change also showed on the operational level: team coordinators did neither receive clear responsibilities nor a mandate to implement change or deal with issues effectively. The team coordinator said: *"it sometimes felt like we worked at a kindergarten" (interview),* due to the hub operator's chaotic mismanagement. Consequently, exploiting existing arrangements sparked ongoing issues between the suppliers and the team coordinators:

> *It was difficult for [coordinators], if a supplier told them "you have to do this", they did not know how to do it or they weren't allowed to do it. And*

*then after some time the suppliers start thinking you can't do anything (interview, site manager).*

These frustrations added to the already existing financial and societal issues. The inability to tackle the municipality's desired objectives led to actors venting their frustration during meetings:

*The hub often said No to changes, but when they agreed to a change, they wanted to get a lot more money for it [...] they insisted on it costing them a lot. I always had these discussions, they were really tough situations and towards the end often led to arguments as we constantly complained (interview, program director)*

With no improvements in sight, the meetings turned increasingly tense. Small issues became big ones as the debate about costs, sustainability and coordination of the hub became more emotional, shown by an increase of fierce discussions and further amplifying tensions favouring the business pole.

Tensions ran high - and contrary to MediHub where tensions were timely navigate - ultimately escalated in 2017 when the municipality found out that, on top of everything, the hub operator had overcharged them and the suppliers by 20%. With this sudden confrontation the vicious cycle spiralled out of control and almost led to a fistfight during a meeting. The municipality decided to terminate the contract with the hub prematurely as trust had vanished - also from the suppliers in the municipality as the municipality had been the one responsible for hiring the hub operator. They acknowledged *"it was a great embarrassment for the municipality" (interview, program director).* Like MediHub, the municipality initiated an extended break in interactions to capture the lessons learned from the escalation. They took time to emphasize the collective interests, improve the collaboration and provide stability:

*We have been learning a lot due to how we are doing it today, you of course have a different kind of contact [...] We had a lot of talks with the new companies, asking them "how should we do the procurement process?", "what kind of requirements do you have to collaborate?", "how could you manage this and that?"(interview, program director)*

In 2018, the municipality then turned around collaboration arrangements by re-establishing themselves as orchestrator and appointing a new hub operator contractually under their control that shared their non-profit objectives. They mandated hub coordinators to make decisions and solve operational issues. The

municipality also lowered the price for bundling activities at the hub and provided free transport to the construction areas for suppliers, but increased the prices for direct deliveries, leading to less congestion and emissions (*document presentation*). Although the new measures came at a cost, they enabled the municipality to pursue a healthier balance between business and societal objectives: their new bundling activities created societal impact, and through fair prices and efficiency they were able to break even financially albeit at lower margins. Although the vicious cycle had escalated, the municipality was able to navigate the paradox back towards equilibrium.

## Societally dominant orientation

In this section we discuss how actors in CareHub and RetHub approached the tension between business and society (see appendix 2 for additional examples).

***Initiating inter-organizational practices - quickly building momentum:*** CareHub was initiated in October 2019 by a homecare organization. It was set up as an experimental research consortium with several suppliers, the municipality, a community centre, various other wellbeing and volunteer organizations, and several universities. The aim was to provide an integrated service for vulnerable clients by combining home care, wellbeing, and logistics. The cornerstone of the new approach was a new role: a community concierge per neighbourhood who would combine these services to provide better tailored care to clients and reduce personal issues such as loneliness while also improving economic efficiency and reducing congestion. CareHub sought to develop this innovative concept but had difficulties to navigate the societal goal in conjunction with business objectives. We identified bundles of practices of *quickly building momentum*, such as *leveraging available resources* and *sidelining business issues*.

At CareHub actors from the different organizations collectively got the project up and running by quickly leveraging available resources. They formed a project team and soon hired a program manager. Although there was no clear project structure or strategy yet - "*we are just going to get started and see where the project takes us!" (interview, manager home care, 11-2019* -, our interviews showed how actors individually mobilized resources around a clear and tangible idea: providing a high quality service of home care, wellbeing and logistics for vulnerable citizens. The home care organization provided funding, set up a project structure, hired the first community concierge to provide deliveries and services, and even organized a car for deliveries:

> *You really see what can happen if you put your mind to it. We were like, step 1, ok, we need a car for deliveries. So we asked around and within a few days, "whoppa!", we had a partner who could provide a car. Ok, what's next? [haha] (interview, manager home care, 11-2019)*

The suppliers asked around in their internal network for partners who could join the concept:

> *Well, frankly, we simply decided on a certain neighbourhood for [CareHub] to focus on, and asked clients if they would like to join. […] Nothing really changed for us, besides us not having to do the deliveries ourselves, and the clients potentially would get something out of the extra visits, so we might as well try it. (interview, supplier 1, 4-2020)*

The new concierge started delivering goods such as medicine and meals and getting feedback for the project team, and the project manager translated the vision into concrete milestones and trajectories. We observed an atmosphere of pioneering, openness and purpose with many early successes in January 2020 (*document presentation, 1-2020*). The concierge made bundled deliveries and had created a very meaningful job, local and regional governments expressed serious interest, and vulnerable citizens responded overwhelmingly positive. Hence, the societal pole of the paradox was strongly emphasized. Yet, our observations and interviews also showed that the project team was sidelining business issues, which created drawbacks later on. Due to its early success, CareHub received numerous grants to continue experimenting and provide a proof of concept. The challenge was to make the business case for prevention: Combining home care, wellbeing and logistics required upfront investment but would in the long term reduce the need for expensive care in the future. The team was aware of this challenge but did not know how to address it:

> *It's the chicken and egg story. We need to make a business case, but to make the business case we also need more time and funding to measure and implement our findings. [...] But it's tricky, we are just beginning to make an impact. (interview, manager home care, 11-2019)*

Since the project team did not know how to tackle these financial issues and there was enough momentum to continue, this remained a topic that only occasionally popped up, even when a new project manager was installed to strategize how to scale up CareHub:

> *Project manager: the current challenges lie in how we can close the business case [...] Community hub manager: in the long term we worry about how we can finance this, especially the proportion between care and logistics. [...] I would be interested to see the possibilities in efficiency, but not really sure where to start (vignette observation, 12-2020)*

Although tensions emerged as actors built momentum and were sidelining business issues, these remained relatively latent - they did not yet address the financial implications of their actions. There still was sufficient funding from the municipality and home care provider, and with the early successes and momentum actors in the project team focused on more ad-hoc topics to grow the project. It diverted their attention away from dealing with the business objectives, which instigated a vicious cycle.

***Sustaining vicious cycle - Pursuing societal purpose single mindedly:*** By zooming out, we observed how actors at CareHub collectively created something truly innovative that successfully addressed pressing societal issues. Zooming in on how the actors dealt with underlying latent tensions showed that their one-sided focus on the societal pole also gave rise to a slipping point of escalating commitment and a vicious cycle: the early success raised expectations from the municipality and themselves that CareHub as a concept would grow, which led them to invest even more time and effort to push the societal pole. There were many topics: the mayor visiting, designing branded clothing for the concierges, designing a new app etc, which raised numerous unanswered questions *(meeting observation, 12-2020)*. All of this required attention and hence, they were unable to invest resources in developing a viable business model - despite this being a prerequisite for future success and scalability to different neighbourhoods, and for the municipality's long-term support. This led to a point in February 2021 where the vicious cycle favouring societal objectives further escalated while neglecting business objectives. We identified how bundles of practices of *pursuing societal purpose single mindedly,* such as *idealizing success, overextending resources* and *omitting key actors,* further drove escalation of the vicious cycle.

The team was so engaged in the project that they increasingly pushed the societal pole of the paradox by idealizing the societal success of the project, overestimating how the ongoing success would inevitably continue with the support of the municipality, despite financial concerns. However, the project team required a proof of concept to get the municipality on board in the long term to fund the project - and expectations were growing. Yet, there was confidence in the municipality's future involvement:

> *We have a lot of contact with the municipality already [...] They already finance a lot of services for us, so we are basically already partners. [...] and it helps that we also initiate long term collaborations with insurance companies, and that is really quite unique for neighbourhood care; they made an agenda for four years with us, and they only do that with a handful of organizations. But that is because we are large, there is trust, there is a vision. Everybody also says: "you are really far, you have a vision", that's something they want to get on board with. (interview, home care manager, 4-2021)*

The municipality strengthened this through serious interest:

> *This [concept] really is something new, something fresh. [...] a concept, an idea like this, is needed to deal with the day-to-day issues we see every day in our neighbourhoods (interview, municipality representative, 5-2021)*

Actors in the project team shared this sentiment. But the future role of the municipality in the collaboration remained unclear and they made no concrete agreements on how to support that project financially.

The initial success seemed to compensate for the missing proof of financial viability. The project also grew and acquired more partners and neighbourhoods. We observed how the project team started overextending their resources, as more work needed to be done with the same amount of people. In interviews, project members voiced frustration and disbelief about moving from deadline to deadline, with sometimes barely enough funds to keep the project running. The home care organization had to step in with temporary funding. The team focused mostly on ad-hoc operational issues instead of more long-term financial planning:

> *I feel like most of my time involves solving operational issues with the neighbourhood concierges, or contacting suppliers when orders were wrongly delivered for example. This is not what I was hired to do. [...] It's frustrating that I don't have sufficient time to actually focus on organizing the project [...] We simply miss the manpower. (interview, project manager, 11-2021)*

This stretch in capacity left two major issues: first, the project team was unable to effectively plan and strategize for the future of CareHub, and second, they had

even less time to address the business case. Quantifying the projects' impact and creating a new accounting system for benefits along multiple values turned out to be very complex.

The vicious cycle favouring societal objectives, which had remained latent up until that point, climaxed when the project team was suddenly confronted with the business pole after the summer of 2021: the latest funding round had ended and the municipality suddenly announced they were no longer going to support CareHub financially. The business pole was suddenly right in their face and the entire project was halted:

> *It's such a devastating blow. They told us: "We didn't make any agreements on us being a strategic partner. We can't justify this to the council or mayor if we don't know what it's going to cost and what we'll get out of it." [...] The negotiations have been so intense. I must admit, sometimes I thought "let's just pull the plug". (interview, research manager, 12-2021)*

This became a tipping point: the project team's expectations clashed with the reality of the municipality's decision, leaving them in disbelief. The combination of idealizing societal successes with overextending resources had increasingly drawn them away from pursuing the business pole. Also, the critical role of the municipality had remained unclear. The sudden climax forced them to attend to the other pole of their paradoxical demands. The project team went into crisis mode to search for funding. The home care provider helped out for day-to-day operations, but the development of the project stopped. Intense negotiations with the municipality ensued behind closed doors.

The situation further escalated when the project team omitted key actors. Suppliers, members of the community hub and the concierges indicated they were left in the dark about the future of CareHub, while they still had to continue the day-to-day activities and solve ad-hoc issues with suppliers to prevent them from leaving:

> *We have been in close contact with the suppliers, we of course see them every day, but they are also growing increasingly concerned. [...] We have been reassuring them things are going to be alright and about the continuation of the contract as they haven't heard anything either from the project team… (interview, community concierge, 2-2022)*

These actors were critical to keep the project alive: without suppliers or concierges CareHub would be impossible to run. The sudden confrontation with the business pole in combination with the lack of communication fostered an environment riddled with uncertainty. If the vicious cycle would not soon be navigated, key actors might leave, paralyzing CareHub.

***Mitigating vicious cycle - manifesting vision:*** Zooming out for this phase, we found the escalation paralyzed the collaboration while the project team scrambled to find solutions for the financial situation during the latter half of 2021. By zooming in on this process, we identified bundles of practices of *manifesting vision,* including practices of *reflecting on business-oriented issues, leveraging previous success* and *concretizing business viability,* with which actors navigated the tensions back to equilibrium. Yet, this was not easy, as the municipality had serious doubts about CareHub:

> *I realize we have reached a turning point of "until when are we going to continue"? Do we want to keep investing as a municipality? And when do we reach the point "wow, now it's getting really expensive". Look, if you say you want to start in a new neighbourhood and you need €50.000, we will be able to find that, but if you structurally need €3-400.000 per year it's going to be complicated. (interview, municipality representative, 6-2021)*

We distinguished three steps in mitigating the vicious cycle. First, the sudden confrontation with the business pole first triggered reflection: how had it come to this point? Although they had been aware of the need of creating a business case, they had taken the financial support from the municipality and the ongoing success of CareHub for granted. Now, they were forced to make the financial requirements explicit. Even though this was sometimes difficult, they first had to get to the core of the issue to move forward:

> *I was flabbergasted actually and can't blame the municipality for feeling the way they did and pulling out. I also found out there had been no financial planning for the entire project, there was hardly a long-term goal, no foundation. Without these things you simply can't expect to safely scale up (interview, community hub manager, 3-2022)*

The team realized they had not done enough financial planning and they needed a new organizational form to make more informed decisions and create a sustainable

business plan. These insights informed the second step in the mitigation process: to leverage previous successes during negotiations. Their drive, commitment, and successes, which had previously been their "downfall", were now used to convince the municipality about their common objective to provide better quality care for vulnerable citizens:

> *Eventually we turned things around and asked the municipality: "ok but what do you find important in your city? What are the issues?" We then used this to position CareHub directly in terms of the needs of the municipality to show what we could offer. I really think this helped them to see "aha, there's something there" (interview research manager, 6-2022)*

This alignment between CareHub and the municipality also came in the form of a policy report in which a researcher and project team members linked the needs of the municipality to the successes and possibilities of CareHub *(document, 11-2021)*. The report linked addressing loneliness, connecting and strengthening the social cohesion and infrastructure in the neighbourhood to CareHub, and how the hub and the community concierge could play a key role in achieving this. It listed future issues of the healthcare sector such as staff shortages, aging population and rising healthcare costs to emphasize why a concept such as CareHub was urgently needed.

The manager and director of the home care organization reached out to influential actors within and around the municipality to promote CareHub's impact and convince them of its viability - despite lacking a concrete business case. These combined efforts created a new momentum in the collaboration, which finally opened up opportunities to take the third and final step in mitigating the vicious cycle: concretizing business viability. Rather than the loose vision and ideas on making a business case prior to the sudden confrontation with the business pole, they now attempted to make this a lot more concrete, which was made possible through the renewed urgency, understanding and momentum they had created. Although it was impossible to calculate everything, they designed a more concrete proposal:

> *We went back to the core of CareHub - "what are we? - which was prevention, the social element of it. We used that to design the business case by bringing it all down to a price per visitation of a client per year. So you have some cost covered by logistics, and then whatever remains,*

> *we can cover with the extras we provide as a CareHub service through for example prevention (interview, director home care, 4-2022)*

This fixed price per client allowed them to cover the current operational costs and would provide more income as the scale of CareHub grew. This provided a reasonable basis for the negotiations with the municipality. They also created a new organizational form by setting up a non-profit foundation, which provided more stability and facilitated integration of future neighbourhoods:

> *The foundation reduces the concept's fragility - it provides stability. Previously concierges were more or less loosely connected to existing teams. We can now take a more integrated approach with these teams as a real entity. (interview, manager community hub, 3-2022)*

As a result, these combined practices led to new subsidies and guarantees from the municipality to continue the collaboration in the beginning of 2022, as they convinced the municipality to further explore the idea behind CareHub based on assumptions about fixed costs. The benefits, for now, outweighed the uncertainties. Hence, manifesting vision practices allowed the project team to finally acknowledge the need and mobilize the required resources to concretize the business pole, thereby timely navigating the vicious cycle back to equilibrium.

### RetHub

We now briefly look at RetHub to compare and contrast our findings from CareHub on how actors contributed to an emerging vicious cycle. RetHub was initiated in May 2004 by a municipality as one of the first initiatives in Europe to address increasing congestion, inefficiency and air pollution of a busy city centre. The collaboration consisted of a logistics hub, a multitude of retailers, and the municipality as the customer, and tried to bundle goods for inner city shops at the edge of the city and deliver them sustainably to the shops. A research consortium accompanied the project. While the scheme was reasonably successful in pursuing their societal objectives, there were ongoing tensions regarding the business pole, as it remained difficult to make a sustainable business case.

Here, we also identified how actors leveraged available resources: first, the municipality had signed a long-term contract with the hub operator to start experimenting, after which they launched a 15-months free trial period *(document)*, and arranged an electric vehicle:

> *When it first started, we had just diesel vehicles. [...] We then quickly moved away from diesel to electric vehicles. And that was to build on not just the reduction in congestion, but the reduction in emissions (interview, municipality representative)*

Their aim was to quickly get the collaboration going. But although the municipality was quite driven, they had limited experience on the topic, which led to sidelining business issues. They were dependent on the hub operator to organize the logistics. The municipality wanted the suppliers to join voluntarily. However, the contract with the hub did not include specifics on how to operationalize this in terms of costs and environmental benefits for retailers.

> *We didn't drill down to the level of detail on calculating and conveying carbon emissions savings, and I don't think we actually promoted it that well either. (interview, municipality representative)*

While the municipality pursued long-term societal ambitions, there were no clear obligations for the hub operator to work towards these objectives. Hence, of the few suppliers that joined, a majority left early on due to high prices, having their own transportation and fragmented customer groups/product categories *(document report)*. Furthermore, no sustainable business case was designed. Despite being confronted with challenges, the municipality focused more on the potential impact of the scheme, initiating a societally oriented vicious cycle.

Documents showed that numerous funding rounds had been acquired, and even though no business case was made and suppliers did not actively join the scheme, the municipality was committed to making it work - hinting at escalating commitment. They already invested a lot of time into the project, new funding opportunities were on the horizon and the contract with the hub operator was still running. Although a second city joined the scheme in 2011 to increase their volumes and revenue, it remained challenging to add more suppliers or break even financially. The municipality lacked the knowledge to come up with a solid plan, but was determined to continue.

They started to idealize success, as they kept funding the project through subsidies to foster learning, despite making only small improvements. Only the subsidies and municipality investments kept the scheme afloat, and only few suppliers joined the scheme. Although the scheme had been operational for seven years without breaking even, a report in 2011 stated:

> *On average the number of deliveries to participating outlets has been reduced by 76 percent, exceeding the target set at the start of the project. [...] The Council is working towards the target of reaching a break-even point for scheme operation within four years (document)*

The municipality extended the hub operator contract, again with unclear conditions and sustainability criteria on how to measure and scale the scheme. Instead of taking a collaborative approach, the municipality omitted key actors in growing the collaboration. For example, more suppliers would increase revenues and make the scheme financially more attractive. Yet, suppliers were not actively involved or aware of the scheme:

> *Sometimes shops did not even know they were part of the project, because their headquarters made these decisions for them(interview, researcher)*

There was limited engagement to convince them to join. As funding through steady external funding and municipality expenses still was not an acute issue, the collaboration continued and the tensions favouring societal objectives remained latent - yet increasingly emphasizing the vicious cycle.

This changed around 2016 when the council of the municipality announced that they were unsure if they were going to fund RetHub for another round, as it was still not financially viable. Similar to CareHub, RetHub was also suddenly hit by this business pole, making the latent tensions between the business and societal pole salient. They had been paying over half the costs now for years. The municipality scrambled to design ways to add more suppliers as they realized they were key in the survivability of the scheme.

Unlike CareHub, they reflected on business-oriented issues with suppliers. Yet without a thorough analysis of the different characteristics of their suppliers, this reflecting was quite broad:

> *Congestion had already been a major issue [in city centres], but over time we found that emissions also became increasingly important for suppliers [...] so they tried to use that as well in the discussions with suppliers (interview, researcher)*

Yet, the suppliers were very diverse, so these messages did not resonate with them. It was also difficult for them to leverage previous success, as they had been stagnant

for some years. However, they still initiated a communication campaign in 2016 to inform suppliers about the benefits and details of the scheme, by spreading flyers, going door to door, or organizing events:

> *It was challenging for marketing materials because, you know, if we were promoting a message, we needed to be promoting the right one (interview, municipality representative)*

Unfortunately, it was 'too little too late', as barely any new suppliers joined. They did not have any concrete leverage or unique selling point which could convince suppliers to join - hence also preventing them from concretizing business viability. So the municipality board decided to pull the plug and ended the scheme around 2017 - leaving the vicious cycle. The project had stayed alive through their continued belief in societal objectives, but after 14 years both cities were still responsible for covering around 60% of the scheme's costs. Ironically, the hub operator continued with the scheme after the municipality stepped out and, with only minor changes in their internal bundling efforts and a different hub, was able to turn it into a viable scheme - indicating that the vicious cycle indeed could have been reversed.

Based on our findings, we propose a conceptual model of how actors navigate the business-society paradox and how their actions contribute to the emergence and mitigation of a vicious cycle (presented in figure 2.3). Societal challenges prompt actors to engage in inter-organizational collaboration to pursue both business and societal objectives, but the complexities of navigating both types of objectives may not be obvious at the start. As actors initiate collaboration, they can be drawn into their normal practices and thereby shift towards either pole of the paradox. If their normal practices are skewed towards a business orientation, their practices are likely to be characterized by self-serving manoeuvring. A single dominant actor can pursue their own interests if others deflect responsibility, which can create a vacuum in which tensions start to fester, instigating a vicious cycle towards the business pole and frustrating collective efforts. If practices are skewed toward a societal orientation, actors are likely to collectively overemphasize the societal pole by practices of quickly building momentum and rapidly mobilizing resources while sidelining important business topics. Over time these practices reinforce the tensions in either orientation. Actors may be aware of the other pole of the paradox, yet practices of the predominant orientation are likely to persevere and feed the vicious cycle.

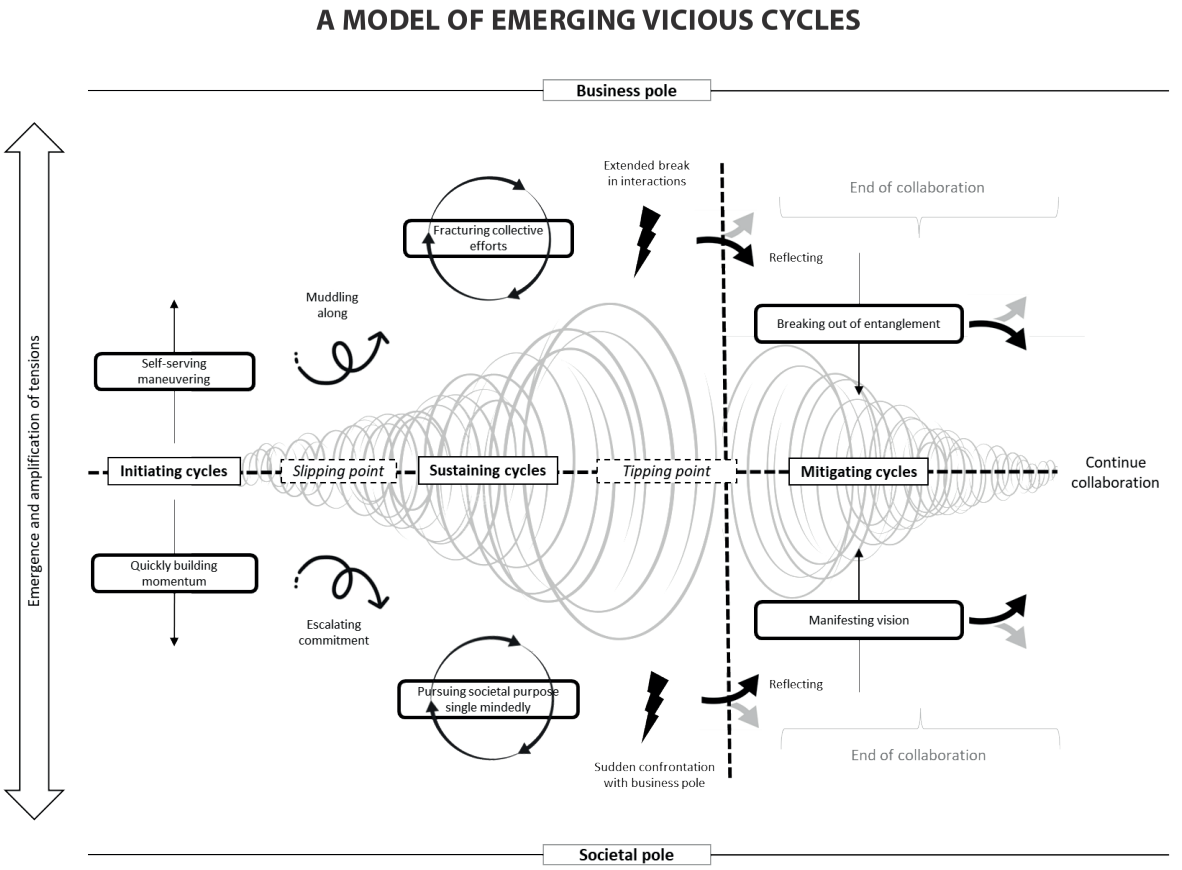



**Figure 2.2** Conceptual model of emergence and mitigating of vicious cycles

These amplifications can gradually lead to 'slipping points', a situation in which actors become locked in and are unable to break the vicious cycle. If the collaboration is characterized by a business orientation, muddling along and doing business as usual may lead to practices of fracturing collective efforts with a very narrow focus of intricate business issues. Such a situation can be exploited by a dominant actor for their own interests and further exacerbated by practices of putting off decisions and venting frustration. If the collaboration is characterized by a societal orientation, the slipping point can arise from escalating commitment towards the societal pole while overlooking the business pole. Actors may idealize their successes and overextend their resources while overlooking key actors who are crucial for developing the business pole. In both orientations actors can become increasingly drawn into one direction, leaving them unable to navigate the paradox.

Based on our observations, we stipulate that overemphasizing one paradoxical pole ultimately leads to a tipping point: After a vicious cycle has been allowed to continue for a prolonged time, tensions run so high that events or actions can lead to a significant, and sometimes irreversible, shift. In our data, such tipping points were triggered by an extended break in interactions, which prevented further escalation and allowed for practices of reflecting and reemphasizing collective interests. Such a turn may allow actors to instigate small wins tackling some of the issues that distracted them from the societal pole. Thereby the tipping point can become an opportunity to recalibrate the collaboration towards balancing business and societal objectives. If the opportunity is missed and actors are unable to break the vicious cycle, such a tipping point can also lead to terminating the collaboration. For collaborations with a societal orientation, the sudden confrontation with the business pole can also act as a tipping point that triggers reflections about business-oriented issues and a diagnosis of what was previously overlooked. In our data, we saw that practices of manifesting vision for which actors attempted to leverage their previous successes to convince others of the viability of their project. Such a reflection and analysis can lead to a better understanding of both poles and to more concrete propositions to align them. If actors are unable to utilize the tipping point for critical reflection, their original drive towards the societal pole is likely to be frustrated by unresolved business issues that will ultimately lead to terminating the collaboration.

## Discussion

We set out to understand how actors contribute to the emergence and mitigating of vicious cycles while navigating the business-society paradox in inter-organizational collaboration. Societal challenges are notoriously challenging to deal with by single organizations (Ferraro et al., 2015). One way to tackle their complexity is through initiating collaboration across organizational boundaries (George et al., 2024), which often give rise to paradoxical tensions between business and societal objectives (Sharma and Bansal, 2017; Smith, Gonin and Besharov, 2013), and are challenging to navigate (Besharov & Smith, 2019; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). While prior research has shown how emphasizing paradoxical poles (Smith & Lewis, 2011), defensive responses (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003), decision dysfunctions (Ungureanu et al., 2019) or cycle originators/perpetuators (Es-Sajjade et al., 2021) contribute to the emergence of vicious cycles, we know little on how these vicious cycles are "enacted into being". Our core contribution is to build on a practice perspective to unravel how vicious cycles emerge and are mitigated. We thereby move away from a descriptive and abstract representation of vicious cycles by putting mundane practices at the centre of our analysis (e.g. Le & Bednarek, 2017; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). This enables us to show how paradox emergence is riddled with intricate bundles of practices that result in paradoxical disequilibrium and that escalating vicious cycles may also provide fruitful opportunities to navigate paradoxes.

### A practice perspective on emerging vicious cycles

Our research makes several contributions by connecting paradox and a practice perspective. First, our model shows how cycle emergence in collaborations is a multifaceted process, consisting of different practices that pull actors away from paradoxical equilibrium. Earlier work combining these perspectives has predominantly focused on how actors enact practices to break out of a vicious cycle (Pradies et al., 2021), or how actors' practices can shift actors' responses to paradox (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Schneider et al., 2021). These papers often frame paradox navigation as a deliberate process (Smith & Besharov, 2019). We challenge this perspective by showing that the initial phases of collaboration are often unintentional, as actors are not fully aware of the paradox and act on incomplete information. Their practices have been shaped by an orientation towards either of the two paradoxical poles, without this being a planned approach. This can lead to disequilibrium, which does not necessarily equate chaos or disorder (Cunha & Putnam, 2019), and may even exhibit generative potential for navigating paradox later on (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). However, the uncoordinated enactment of bundles of practices can also hamper collaborative paradox navigation.

Our second contribution lies in identifying slipping points, which explain why bundles of practices move from initiating a vicious cycle to sustaining the cycle in collaborations. Prior work has shown how paradoxes unfold over time (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), requiring different responses at different times (Jay, 2013), sometimes consisting of multiple practices for navigation (Pradies et al., 2021). However, we do not know how one bundle of practices gives rise to another. By identifying slipping points we unearth how actors in collaborations 'slip' and get stuck in a vicious cycle. Our findings suggest that slipping points emerge once either of the paradoxical poles has been emphasized for an extended period of time. As actors ignore the paradox or are unaware of it, slipping points lead to an overemphasis of one paradoxical pole, which gives rise to subsequent bundles of practices, further locking actors into working towards one dominant pole. In both orientations, the dynamics were shaped by their respective previous 'business as usual' practices. Our insights build on prior work on vicious cycles, which explains how understanding and attempting to reverse the underlying attributes of vicious cycles is effortful and can create disturbances (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017). Although active shifts in responses to paradox are desirable (Jay, 2013), this is difficult when actors are unaware of the orientation they are currently in, and further complicated by the dispersed responsibilities in collaborations to provide an overview of the situation (DeFillippi and Sydow, 2016).

## Rethinking mitigation of vicious cycles

Our next main contribution concerns the mitigation of vicious cycles. Prior work has emphasized how factors of scarcity, plurality, and change make latent tensions salient (Schad et al., 2016). Simplistic responses to paradox can foster vicious cycles (Smith & Lewis, 2011). However, not much is known about how vicious cycles can be overcome (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017; Schad et al., 2016; Ungureanu et al., 2019), as once a threshold is crossed, organizations may not be able to regenerate themselves (Masuch, 1985). Our findings address this gap by identifying tipping points in collaborations. Tipping points occur after a prolonged period of sustaining the vicious cycle: tensions become particularly salient and actors may engage in reflections. Subsequent practices then either successfully navigate the vicious cycle, or lead to the termination of collaborative efforts. Our findings suggest that if a tipping point is too volatile, the collaboration may immediately end, as the disequilibrium of the system has already reached a point of no return. However, in line with work by Couture et al. (2023), we also show how tipping points may lead to productive situations where actors collectively may start to divert efforts to navigate paradoxes. Subsequent collective practices are crucial in leveraging tipping points.

Therefore, our second contribution lies in our insights into how the mitigation process itself takes place. Prior work on paradox shows how active responses such as splitting, acceptance or opposing are used to navigate paradox back to equilibrium (Lewis 2000; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), while defensive responses such as ignoring one pole may lead to further disequilibrium (Schneider et al., 2021) - as also shown by our prior findings on the emergence of vicious cycles. Our practice perspective provides insights into reversing vicious cycles in collaborations. We extend the work from Pradies et al. (2021), by showing how before mitigation can take place, tipping points first lead to stumbling and confrontation, which trigger reflection and attempts to understand the underlying issues and opposite pole. This sensemaking has already proven to be crucial in understanding paradox and taking well-informed action in collaborations (Jay, 2013; Stadtler & van Wassenhove, 2016). If such practices are lacking, it may become quite challenging to initiate mitigation. Subsequent practices are enacted to bring back collective momentum among actors to leverage available resources and initiate directed action towards the opposite pole - which in turn allows actors to enact practices to concretely tackle the underlying issues, which had caused them to slip into a vicious cycle in the first place, therefore slowly reversing the vicious cycle. Our insights therefore extend work by (Ungureanu et al., 2019) by showing the intricate process underlying cycle reversal in collaborations, which reaffirms joint collective efforts.

Third, our study offers insights into the opportunities which lay in disequilibrium of the system and subsequent escalation of vicious cycles. Earlier work has often emphasized the risks associated with emphasizing paradoxical poles (Smith & Lewis, 2011), and how it may lead to negative consequences (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Yet, recent calls been made to explore the potential in harnessing disequilibrium (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). Jarzabkowski et al. (2022) for example show how short periods of disequilibrium in collaborations can actually foster and unravel positive features of paradox, aiding in novel solutions. We extend these insights by showing how emphasizing a paradoxical pole (e.g. societal) for an extended period of time may actually lead to opportunities to design novel solutions but become fragile once a tipping point is reached as it becomes crucial to leverage these tipping points to actors' advantage. Yet, while escalation may occur and lead to negative consequences in the short term, our findings show how escalation of vicious cycles may actually foster a recalibration of collective efforts, where actors use the momentum and lessons learned during periods of disequilibrium to recalibrate - and therefore not necessarily lead to a finite end state which is often associated with the escalation of vicious cycles (Masuch, 1985; Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017). Hence, escalation may give rise to a new

phase of collaboration, "breaking out" of the vicious cycle, where the burdens and persistent tensions are overcome and provide a platform for further fruitful collaborative efforts.

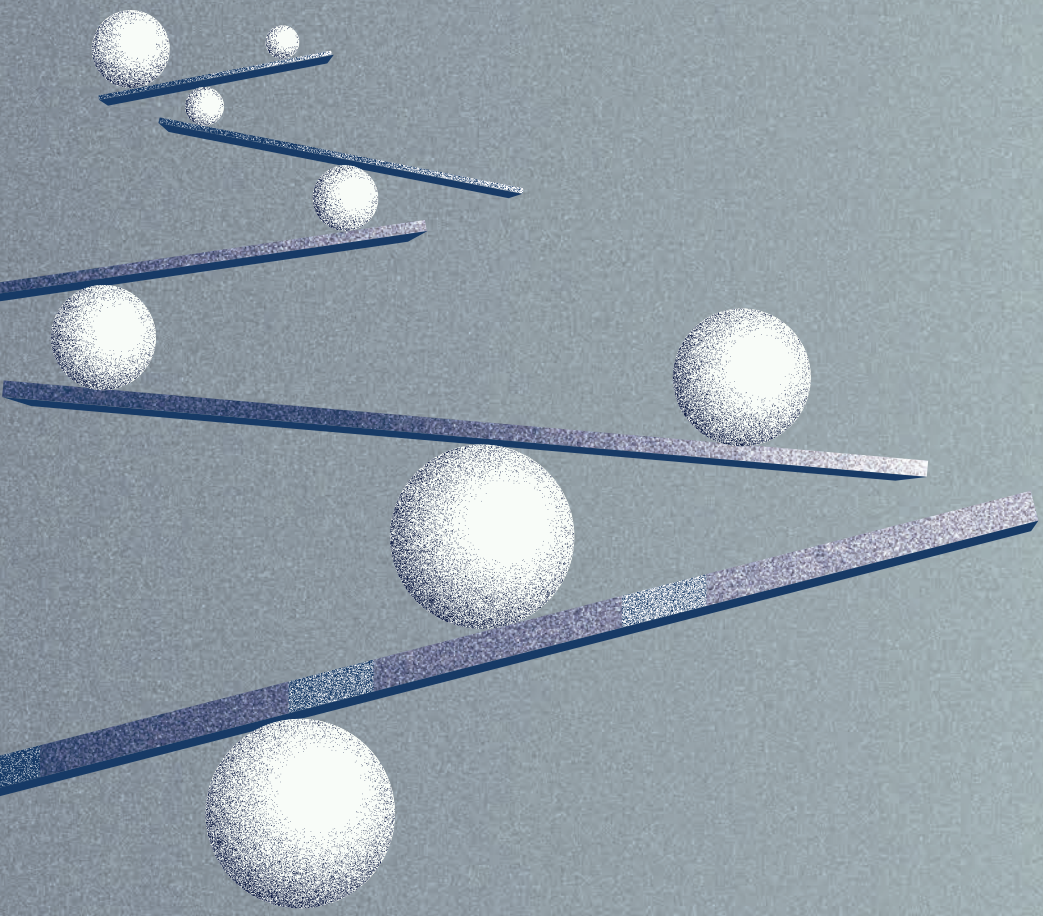
## Boundary conditions and future research

While we believe our study has several theoretical contributions, we acknowledge there are limitations to our findings, which provide opportunities for further research. Although we attempted to mitigate some of the limitations of longitudinal research and retrospective case study research by combining both, our results are bound to a specific context. Other contexts may provide different insights due to their heterogeneity of actors, variety of goals, temporal elements or urgency. Furthermore, our analysis showed how the enactment of different practices shaped two different orientations of how vicious cycles emerged, sustained and were mitigated. Future research could provide insights into different configurations of these elements and their trajectories, as we expect that different contexts could highlight different orientations. Next, our research investigates one vicious cycle over time per case with a relatively clear beginning and ending. Yet, it would be interesting to see how actors deal with subsequent vicious cycles - as these are inevitable will surface again (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017). Have they learned from prior failure or success to respond quicker to the emergence of a vicious cycle, or face similar pitfalls. Also, in our research we investigated how vicious cycles emerged as actors navigate the business-society paradox. Yet, research increasingly acknowledges the interconnectedness of paradoxes as being nested and knotted (e.g. Sheep et al., 2017). It would be of great value to deepen our understanding of how practices inform different paradoxes and subsequent vicious cycles. Finally, we want to stress the opportunities of combining paradox and a practice perspective as it provides a comprehensive lens to show how actors navigate paradoxes in complex and pluralistic settings through their day-to-day doings (Lê and Bednarek, 2017).

## Practical implications

This research also has several practical implications for actors in inter-organizational collaborations who try to address societal challenges. Navigating the competing demands of societal and business objectives is no easy task, especially in an inter-organizational context riddled with uncertainty. While experimentation is crucial for pursuing novel solutions, articulating clear (temporary) goals and responsibilities early on in the collaboration is vital to reduce ambiguity and spark tensions. To avoid getting locked in a one-sided orientation and vicious cycle, it is important to allocate sufficient financial resources and expertise early on to reduce

conflict on these topics early on. Awareness and reflection are key skills to pursue competing demands in these contexts. When coping with an overload of decisions and uncertainty, it becomes easy to follow the beaten path, as it may seem the only way forward. These risks can be mitigated by being reflexive about decisions, progression, successes and failures, to break out of these paths: taking into account both elements of the paradox over time, even though their relevance may shift over time. Temporarily implementing a pause can help to look back and create awareness about progress can aid this process. Once a vicious cycle does lead to a tipping point, actors are advised to first become reflexive of the underlying issues of the paradox, before slowly making momentum again after which they can concretely deal with these issues.



# Chapter 3

## Individuals' Boundary Work Practices in Navigating Nested Tensions in Emerging Inter-Organizational Collaboration

Earlier versions of this chapter were accepted and presented at the following conferences:

Sande, L.F.L. van de, Lauche, K., Ziggers, G.W. & Blazevic, V. (2021). Trojan horses or blessings in disguise? Leveraging the micro level in aligning value(s) in emerging inter-organizational collaborations. 37th EGOS Colloquium: Amsterdam (2021, July 8 - 2021, July 10).

Sande, L.F.L. van de, Lauche, K., Blazevic, V. & Ziggers, G.W. (2023). Trojan horses or blessings in disguise? Leveraging a new role in navigating tensions in emerging inter-organizational collaborations. 39th European Group for Organizational Studies Colloquium: Cagliary (2023, July 6 - 2023, July 8).

Sande, L.F.L. van de, Lauche, K., Blazevic, V. & Ziggers, G.W. (2023). Trojan horses or blessings in disguise? Leveraging a new role in navigating tensions in emerging inter-organizational collaboration. 14th International Process Research Symposium: Crete (2023, June 18 - 2023, June 21).

Sande, L.F.L. van de, Lauche, K., Blazevic, V. & Ziggers, G.W. (2024). Actors' Boundary Work Practices in Navigating Nested Tensions in Emerging Inter-Organizational Collaborations. 40th EGOS Colloquium: Milan (2024, July 4 - 2024, July 6).

## Abstract

Increasingly inter-organizational collaborations are initiated to address societal challenges, but the emerging stages of such initiatives are especially challenging to comprehend and organize. Hence, they are rife with paradoxical tensions, which become nested and cascade across the system – ultimately affecting the individuals who must do the actual work and simultaneously still make sense of their own work and role. We conduct a process study of an emerging inter-organizational collaboration where we follow how actors are impacted by these tensions, and subsequently attempt to navigate them. We combine paradox theory and draw on the boundary work literature to unearth how tensions cascade across the system and spark different tensions at two levels of the collaboration – the collaboration realm and the individual realm. Furthermore, we show how actors enact boundary work practices to navigate such tensions, and how this process unfolds over time. We show how this is a double-edged sword: on the one hand actors are impacted by (nested) tensions, which spark boundary work practices to navigate tensions in their emerging role. Yet, by doing so they also are able to provide unique value for the collective collaboration – indirectly navigating tensions on the level of the collaboration, showing the unique complexity in such emerging contexts. This work has implications for paradox theory, boundary work and inter-organizational collaboration.

**Key words:** nested tensions, boundary work, inter-organizational collaboration, emergence

## Introduction

Addressing societal challenges such as providing high quality yet affordable healthcare, requires actors to initiate inter-organizational collaboration to deal with the complexities and intricacies of these "wicked problems" (George et al., 2016; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). Yet, the diversity of organizations, different objectives and governance issues prove to be quite challenging to navigate (Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Couture et al., 2023). Consequently, collaborations are riddled with paradoxes, which Smith & Lewis (2011, p. 382) define as contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously but persist over time. While collaborations in general are dynamic and rife with paradox and subsequent tensions (Majchrzak, 2015; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022), emerging collaborations that address societal challenges can be even more volatile and messy due to the added complexity and uncertainty associated with these contexts (Beck & Plowman, 2014; Deken et al., 2018; Ferraro et al., 2015). While it is critical for organizations in these collaborations to navigate the system level tensions between competing demands, such as providing qualitative but affordable care (e.g. Gilbert et al., 2018), tensions ultimately cascade down the individuals working in these collaborations such as healthcare workers (Gilbert et al., 2018), who must then deal with these tensions. In emerging settings, the limited work structure and nascent content (Murphy & Kreiner, 2020; Reay et al., 2006) further amplifies these tensions. Also, managers on the system level might be unaware of the implications of their actions for the shop floor individuals (Hahn & Aragón-Correa, 2015). Hence, the question remains how tensions impact these individuals in inter-organizational settings and how they can deal with them to organize effective and impactful work.

Paradox theory provides some insight into how this phenomenon unfolds. Tensions do not exist in isolation but are often nested within and across levels, e.g. individual, organization or collaboration. Emphasizing or ignoring one tension can initiate or strengthen others as they are interrelated (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). Kreiner et al. (2006) for instance show how priests face strong occupational demands which in return spark identity during their day-to-day work. But tensions also migrate across organizational levels, as shown by Ashforth et al. (2011) who unravel how identities at the group level can enable or constrain identity formation at the individual level and vice versa. Hence, different levels within a system can face multiple tensions simultaneously (Sheep et al., 2017). Therefore, tensions also migrate across organizational boundaries (Henry et al., 2022; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022), before tensions will ultimately emerge at the individuals working in these pluralistic settings (DiBenigno, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2018; Schneider et al., 2021).

We propose boundary work as a useful lens to navigate the tensions at the boundaries between the organizations or groups participating in emerging collaboration. Boundary work is referred to by Langley et al. (2019, p. 704) as "purposeful individual and collective effort to influence the social, symbolic, material or temporal boundaries, demarcations and distinctions affecting groups, occupations and organizations", and thus grounded in practice theories (e.g. Nicolini, 2012), which are well suited to address pluralistic contexts (Deken et al., 2018). Practice perspectives provide insights into how the "sayings" and "doings" of individuals can aid in navigating tensions (Lê & Bednarek, 2017; Jarzabkowski & Bednarek, 2018). Actors use boundary work to initiate and foster collaboration at the boundaries of organizations to align competing goals or resolve coordination issues (Bechky, 2006; Quick & Feldman, 2014), but may also employ more competitive boundary work practices, which helps individuals to construct boundaries to foster the development of their work in emerging settings (Mikes, 2011; Reay et al., 2006). Thus, it is a useful lens to navigate nested tensions associated with the need for collaboration, as well as tensions within the emerging work practices of individuals.

While work on paradox theory has looked at how different tensions interrelate within an occupation (Kreiner et al., 2006), within a collaboration (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022) or how organizational tensions eventually reach the level of the professional (Gilbert et al., 2018), we still lack an understanding of how tensions in emerging inter-organizational settings migrate to the level of the individual. As increasingly more inter-organizational collaborations emerge to deal with societal challenges (George et al., 2023), we require to further our understanding of how tensions impact the individuals working in these emerging contexts (Bos-de Vos et al., 2019) - also as opposed to already more established settings (Ahuja, Soda, Zaheer, 2012; Beck & Plowman, 2014). By using a boundary work lens, we can unravel how individuals navigate different tensions that emerge while collaborating at the boundaries of different organizations and simultaneously construct their own work. Therefore, our guiding research question is: *How do actors in emerging inter-organizational collaborations use boundary work to navigate nested tensions between competing demands?*

To answer this question we conducted an inductive process study of an emerging inter- organizational collaboration in the healthcare sector, which set out to revolutionize care provision for vulnerable clients by integrating home care, wellbeing and logistics services. They introduced a new role: a community concierge, who functioned as a linking pin between these heterogeneous organizations.

The community concierges had to navigate the system level tension of providing qualitative but also affordable care, which was imposed on them by the project team, while simultaneously connecting and collaborating with these different organizations and constructing their own work and professional identity. With this study, we set out to make three contributions. First, we contribute to paradox theory by showing how in emerging inter-organizational collaborations tensions migrate from the system level, become nested and impact individuals working in these collaborations. Second, we contribute to the boundary work literature by showing how individuals enact different boundary work practices over time to deal with the tensions imposed on them in the collaboration and their emerging work. Finally, we contribute to the inter-organizational collaboration literature by showing how individuals in these emerging contexts are both affected by decisions made at the inter-organizational level, yet also provide critical input for the collaboration to navigate system level tensions in addressing societal challenges.

## Theoretical background

### Nested paradoxes in inter-organizational collaborations

Paradox theory has emerged as a powerful literature stream to understand and address the complexities of organizational life (Schad et al., 2016), by moving from an "either/or'' to a "both/and'' mindset when facing competing demands (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Research on organizational and individual responses to paradox have provided insights into how to navigate tensions between paradoxical poles. Whereas active responses to tensions, such as accepting and embracing tensions (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) or oscillating between poles (Smith, 2014), are key in navigating tensions and foster virtuous cycles, defensive approaches such as suppressing one of the poles (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003) may spur vicious cycles. While previously tensions have predominantly been explored in isolation, we see increasingly more work on nested tensions (e.g. Gilbert et al., 2018; Sheep et al., 2017). Although tensions such as collaboration vs. competition or business vs. society may appear distinct, they rarely exist in isolation, but emerge in multitude and across organizational levels, especially in pluralistic contexts such as during innovation processes (Sheep et al., 2017; Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009) or in addressing societal challenges (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). For example, Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) show how organizing, performing and belonging tensions coevolve and inform each other as individuals shift from defensive to active responses to paradox. Yet, the current research on nested tensions has attributed limited attention to two areas which may further our understanding of paradox.

First, there has been limited attention to how tensions unfold in inter-organizational settings, as organizational insights cannot automatically be copied to inter-organizational contexts (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). Inter-organizational collaborations are more difficult to govern due to the loose ties between these organizations and the lack of a single decision maker (Couture et al., 2023; DeFillippi & Sydow, 2016). Furthermore, collaborations exist of heterogeneous organizations which all have their own goals, identities and time horizons which are difficult to align to collectively move forward (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Ungureanu et al., 2020). Hence, inter-organizational collaborations are exceptionally rife with paradoxes, but except from work by Jarzabkowski et al. (2022), we know little on how tensions become nested in these settings while addressing societal challenges - which ties into our second point. We also lack insights on how individuals working in collaborations are impacted and deal with paradoxical tensions as they emerge and must be dealt with. Broadly speaking, we identified two kinds of tensions that individuals must navigate. First, pluralistic contexts and decisions from different levels in a system can impose tensions on individuals. Carmine et al., (2021) for example dig deeper into how individuals navigate tensions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Gilbert et al., (2018) show how performing tensions cascade down from the health ministry to the level of healthcare professionals. Second, there are tensions inherent to one's occupation, role or work, which are more internal. A valuable contribution here is made by Pamphile (2021), who identifies different relational mechanisms on engaging with tensions outside one's organizational boundaries to navigate tensions in actors' occupational role. Other research stresses the importance of identity work in navigating competing occupational demands (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Kreiner et al., 2006). Hence, when we look at how collaborations emerge, and how emergence impacts the individuals working in these collaborations, we must take different integrated perspectives into account, which we currently lack. To address how individuals navigate different tensions in these emerging inter-organizational settings we therefore turn to the literature on boundary work, to understand how actors' practices aid in navigating tensions across organizational boundaries and how this may lead to subsequent tensions within one's own work.

## Boundary work in inter-organizational collaboration

Boundary work is crucial in fostering different sorts of boundaries between diverse groups, occupations or organisations. Therefore, boundary work is highly relevant for the initiation and dynamics of inter-organizational collaboration, learning among organizations, but also demarcations of tasks or responsibilities and the dynamics in power relations among different entities (Bucher et al., 2016; O'Mahony & Bechky,

2008; Orlikowski, 2002). Because boundary work is closely related to practice theory, it involves the practices of individual and collective efforts to work on, at and through boundaries (Nicolini, 2012; Langley et al., 2019). As tensions are socially constructed and play out in day-to-day encounters, boundary work practices can inform us on how actors shape and are affected by these tensions (Lê & Bednarek, 2017). In emerging collaborations, actors enact boundary work practices to foster inter-organizational collaborations by working at the boundaries of organizations or occupations (Bechky, 2003; Henry et al., 2022; Quick & Feldman, 2014). Collaborative boundary work does not characterize boundaries as barriers, but as opportunities to work through issues to foster collaboration and align interests/responsibilities (Barrett et al., 2012; Quick & Feldman, 2014).

Specifically, actors can leverage unique positions in these collaborations and enact boundary work by "embodying" boundaries within their activities to foster collaboration in and between organizations (Langley et al., 2019). On the one hand, actors are able to absorb tensions they may encounter to enable collaboration in the first place (Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011). They need to acknowledge perspectives from different actors to foster opportunities for actors to articulate and negotiate differences (Laine et al., 2016) - allowing potentially divergent actors to overcome issues. On the other hand, actors can act upon their agency to initiate change, for example by actively influencing stakeholders, bringing stakeholders together and legitimizing their roles in novel fields (Kaplan et al., 2017; Levina & Vaast, 2005). They can continuously shift between these modes to foster collaboration between divergent groups and accommodate the divergent goals. Consequently, this perspective also acknowledges that actors may also face identity tensions as they struggle to combine the competing demands from the collaboration with one's professional identity (Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011) and must enact identity work practices to deal with these tensions - especially in inter-organizational settings (Ellis & Ybema, 2010). However, while these earlier studies have studied either the work at the boundaries or highlighted the challenges surrounding conflicting identities, we still lack a comprehensive overview of how both these elements are combined when enacting boundary work for individuals in emerging inter-organizational collaborations. Hence, by using a boundary work perspective, it allows us to understand and deal with the tensions between the boundaries of the organizations and individual, as well as the internal tensions faced by individuals - allowing us to answer the question: *How do actors in emerging inter-organizational collaborations enact boundary work to navigate nested tensions between competing demands?*

# Methodology

Our aim with this research was to gain a better understanding of how tensions in emerging inter-organizational collaborations ultimately impact individuals working in these collaborations and enact subsequent boundary work practices to deal with these tensions. We adopted an inductive qualitative process approach of a single case to investigate how this phenomenon evolved over time (Langley, 1999). We investigated the extreme case of CareHub that clearly exhibited this phenomenon, which was ideal for theory development on this topic (Yin, 1994).

## Research setting

We followed a case of an emerging inter-organizational collaboration in the healthcare sector in the Netherlands - CareHub - which set out to revolutionize care provisioning for vulnerable clients by integrating home care, wellbeing and logistics services. In general, these services were provided separately to clients, resulting in higher costs, inefficiency, extra visits resulting in more traffic and emissions around the neighbourhood, and a lack of transparency between the different organizations when additional care or attention for clients was required. Furthermore, the Dutch healthcare sector faced issues of increasing healthcare costs, a decline in skilled personnel, the need for vulnerable and elderly clients to live at home longer (as opposed to in an elderly home) and a rise in the cases of loneliness among vulnerable clients. Hence, there were a lot of opportunities for improvement. A consortium was organized with a home care provider, a community centre, suppliers, research institutes, the local government, and others and set out to attempt to organize a radically new and integrated way of dealing with these issues through inter-organizational collaboration. However, they did not know how, so started experimenting together to shape and scale the idea.

The main idea was that they introduced a new role: a community concierge, who could function as a linking pin between these heterogeneous organizations (see figure 3.1 for concierge's position in collaboration). When CareHub started, they did not know yet what this role should look like. The main idea behind CareHub was that the concierges could first get in contact with the vulnerable clients by delivering meals or medicine to their house (i.e. logistics services). As the clients became accustomed to the concierge, they tended to open up (literally and figuratively) and invited them into their house. The concierge drank a cup of coffee, talked and informed about issues with the vulnerable clients, and did small chores for them. This also allowed the concierges to assess the living situation and to get an insight into any care or wellbeing needs this vulnerable citizen may have. They could

fix small issues or requests themselves, and in the other cases they had to signal and inform other organizations such as a community hub, home care provider, a physician, etc. who then could come by and deliver the service (i.e. wellbeing/home care services, among others). This allowed for an integrated and client-centred service which reduced overall healthcare cost, loneliness and neighbourhood traffic. Also it improved the health and the sense of control of clients over their life, and provided insight into any issues these clients may have had, which previously might have been overlooked or ignored. Vulnerable clients were often reluctant to share concerns with "professionals", but as the concierges were more like a neighbour next door, people felt comfortable sharing issues or concerns with them. There was a strong focus on prevention of healthcare costs with this new collaboration: investing in this concept in the short term through the work of the community concierges, to prevent severe and costly issues in the long term.

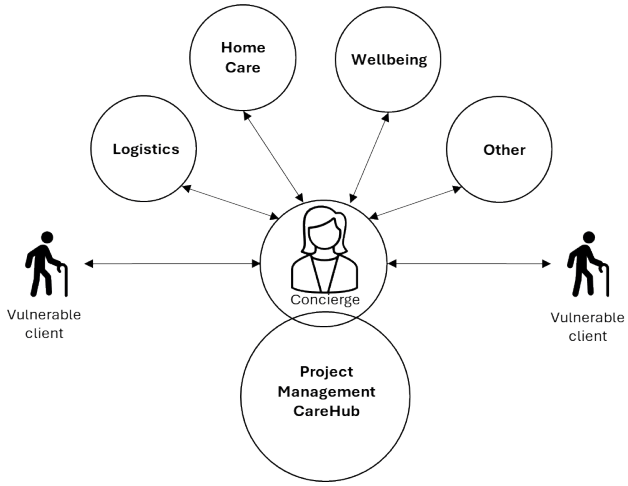



**Figure 3.1** Schematic overview of concierge network in CareHub

However, the concierges were also responsible for multiple challenges simultaneously, complicating their work. First, they were responsible for fostering collaboration between project management and the other organizations in the neighbourhood through collaborative boundary work practices in their everyday work. Second, they had to navigate the competing demands imposed on them by project management, for example between the need for efficiency and the desire to provide quality care. And third, by enacting boundary work practices between the different organizations and navigating the associated tensions that

produced, they experienced identity tensions while also working on constructing their own work. They enacted identity work practices to cope with these competing demands. Hence, we argue this was a strong case to identify how tensions moved from the inter-organizational to the individual level, and how concierges had to enact boundary work practices to both work at the boundaries of organizations they worked with, and deal with internal identity tensions.

## Data collection

By using qualitative longitudinal data we were able to follow the development of the collaboration and community concierges over an extended period of time. We collected data for over 40 months, from its inception in December 2019 up until April 2023. We used a variety of data (table 3.1). First, semi-structured interviews were conducted across three interview rounds at different stages of the collaboration, as well as informal interviews and talks with participants. We made sure to include actors from different organizations as well as different levels within these organizations which worked directly with the concierges (Lumineau & Oliveira, 2018). Interviews involved questions on actors' day-to-day activities, project growth, successes and their challenges. As the study developed and shifted to paradox theory and boundary work, we refined our questions every round to gain a better understanding of the tensions and boundary work practices that emerged over time (Nicolini, 2009). The interviews were recorded and carefully transcribed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, the first author conducted various observations at periodic meetings, research meetings and an innovation session between December 2019 and February 2022, which helped to better understand how challenges, priorities and strategies evolved over time. Third, archival data relevant to the project and industry were collected. These included documents such as progress reports, meeting minutes, presentations and news items. Documents complemented the interview and observational data and offered insights into the positioning of the project in a broader context as well as useful longitudinal insights to triangulate data. Finally, we were fortunate to collect diary data from the community concierges from February 2021 - February 2023. The concierges used an app to log their day-to-day activities in a digital diary - both for CareHub's project management to identify important developments, and us as researchers. The diaries were used to register regular tasks such as deliveries or client visits, but also included rich insights into what challenges they encountered, what they did to deal with these, small victories, who they worked with etc., providing a rich data source to follow the development of the project and the work of the concierges through their perspective (Rauch & Ansari, 2022).

**Table 3.1** Overview empirical data collection

| **Interviewees** | **Sector** | **Interviews** |
|---|---|---|
| Community hub manager | Wellbeing | 6 |
| Coordinator wellbeing | Wellbeing | 2 |
| Project leader wellbeing | Wellbeing | 1 |
| Researcher social domain | Wellbeing | 1 |
| Volunteer | Wellbeing | 2 |
| Research manager | Research | 7 |
| Community concierge (1st period) | Project management | 4 |
| Community concierge (2nd period) | Project management | 5 |
| Program manager 1 | Project management | 1 |
| Program manager 2 | Project management | 3 |
| Logistics consultant | Logistics | 2 |
| Supplier 1 | Logistics | 1 |
| Supplier 2 | Logistics | 2 |
| Supplier 3 | Logistics | 1 |
| Director home care | Home care | 2 |
| Healthcare worker | Home care | 1 |
| Healthcare worker | Home care | 4 |
| Innovation manager | Home care | 4 |
| Project leader home care | Home care | 2 |
| Municipality representative | Government | 1 |
| Social consultant | Government | 1 |
| *Total interviews* | | *53* |
| **Observations** | | |
| Management meetings | | 5 |
| Research meeting with industry partners | | 5 |
| Innovation session | | 1 |
| Project events | | 3 |
| *Total observations* | | *14* |
| **Documents** | | |
| Periodic meetings presentation | | 8 |
| Progress reports | | 6 |
| Press releases | | 21 |
| Meeting minutes | | 25 |
| Other | | 14 |
| *Total documents* | | *74* |
| **Diaries** | | |
| Diaries 2021 neighbourhood 1 (50 weeks) | | 137 |
| Diaries 2022 neighbourhood 1 (52 weeks) | | 125 |
| Diaries 2023 neighbourhood 1 (10 weeks) | | 19 |
| Diaries 2021 neighbourhood 2 (50 weeks) | | 85 |
| Diaries 2022 neighbourhood 2 (52 weeks) | | 120 |
| Diaries 2023 neighbourhood 3 (8 weeks) | | 10 |
| *Total diary pages* | | *496* |

## Data analysis

The analysis of our data consisted of four steps. First, we wrote thick descriptions of the evolution of the case study and constructed timelines on how the case developed over time. Second, we used inductive coding to code the relevant events while maintaining temporal interconnectedness (Pettigrew, 1990). Third, we used zooming in and zooming out as proposed by Nicolini (2009) to further our understanding of how tensions migrate across the collaboration, and how actors enacted boundary work to navigate these tensions. Finally, we used these insights to construct a process model of our findings.

First, based on the collected data and the identification of relevant events (Langley, 2007), we wrote a thick case description of how the collaboration had evolved. This was a first attempt to structure the large body of data for further data analysis (Langley, 1999). The case description was often used throughout the data analysis to check and validate insights. In parallel, we went through the data to construct timelines on how the collaboration had developed over time. To maintain temporal interconnectedness we again focused on the important and relevant events to structure these timelines – see figure 3.2. To inform our analysis on how the collaboration impacted the concierges and informed each other, we created a timeline for both concierges (individual realm) and the collaboration (collaboration realm) to show the two groups of actors developed and interacted with each other.

Second, based on the events we inductively coded the data and connected pieces of data to these events to maintain a chain of evidence. Here we further identified and explicated the tension between efficiency and providing quality care and between collaboration and self-reliance, as we found that the decisions made at the level of the collaboration directly affected the concierges, but our data also hinted at instances where actions of the concierges helped to navigate tensions at the collaboration level. We found our first examples and hints on the nestedness of tensions. Based on this initial coding we used temporal bracketing to structure these events into sequences, which included bundles of events and practices which indicated the “start” and the “end” of a certain string of events (Pettigrew, 1990; Langley, 1999). This allowed us to better understand how tensions evolved over time and how the concierges responded to that by enacting different boundary work practices.

Third, we used zooming in and zooming out, as proposed by Nicolini (2009) to further analyse these sequences. Zooming out allowed us to determine the interconnectedness between the collaboration and the work on the concierge

level. Furthermore, it showed us how tensions and decisions at the level of the collaboration affected the concierges. By constructing this overview, we were able to identify and map how different tensions evolved and became interwoven at different levels of analysis. Next, for the zooming in process, we took a closer look at the aggregation of different tensions between the collaboration and concierges. This provided a more comprehensive understanding of how different tensions aggregated and impacted concierges and what boundary work practices they used to deal with these tensions. Also, this allowed us to sharpen the instances where the concierges actually helped navigate the system level tensions. We iterated between zooming in and zooming out to construct the evolution of tensions over time and the subsequent boundary work practices by the actors.

## Findings

We identified four distinct evolutionary periods in the emerging collaboration. Figure 3.3 illustrates how tensions in the collaboration and individual realm became nested and evolved in these four periods, and how concierges conducted boundary work between organizations to deal with these tensions. The model shows how the collaboration realm triggers boundary work practices in the individual realm for actors to navigate identity tensions within their own work, but also how these practices may aid in actually navigating tensions in the collaboration realm. Our analysis focussed on two sets of nested tensions in the inter-organizational realm that affected the concierges in the individual realm (See table 3.2 and A1, B1, etc. in figure 3.3).

**Table 3.2** Overview different tensions across the collaboration

| Identified tensions | Type of tensions | Level |
|---|---|---|
| Efficiency – providing quality care | Performing | Collaboration realm |
| Self-reliance – collaboration | Organizing | Collaboration/individual realm |
| Getting work done in time – taking time for client | Performing | Individual realm |
| What one must be – what one wants to be | Belonging | Individual realm |

The first tension between 'efficiency' and 'providing quality care' in the collaboration realm, which was predominantly managed by the project team, led to tensions between 'taking sufficient time for clients' and 'getting work done in time' for concierges. When the project team focussed more on efficiency to reduce costs and increase revenue, this meant concierges had less time to do their work, while they felt like they needed more time to do an impactful job. This triggered identity

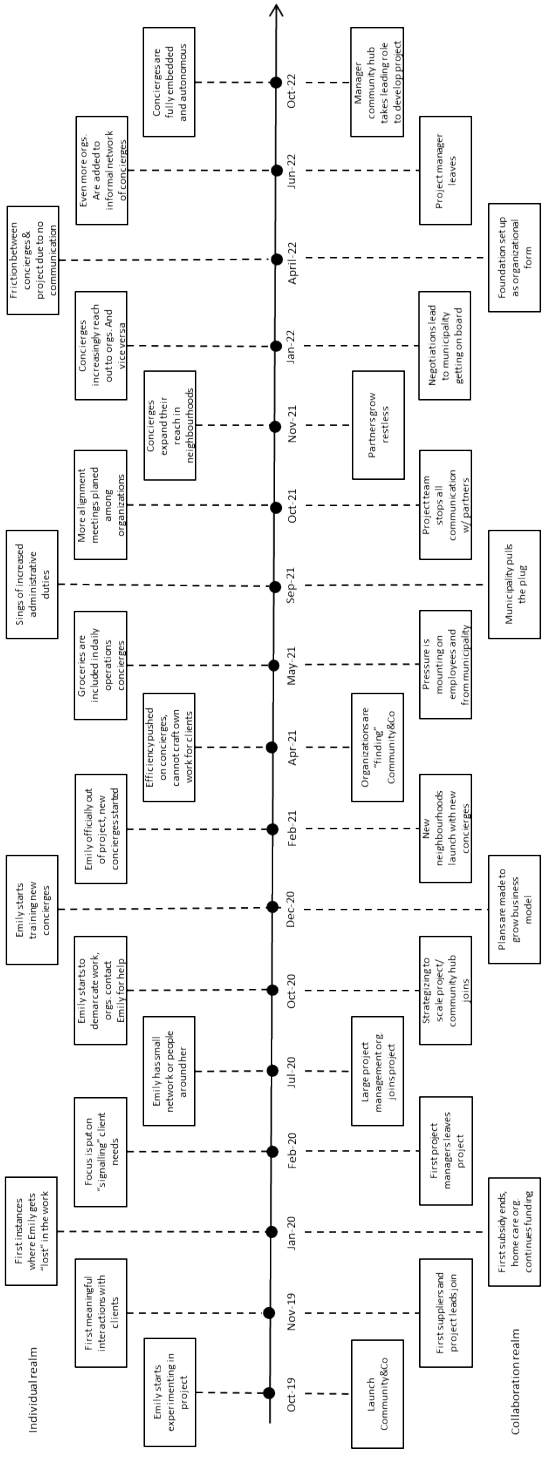



**Figure 3.2** Timeline of events and evolving practices in the collaboration realm and the individual realm

tensions in concierges between 'what one wants to be' and 'what one must be'. The second tension between collaboration and self-reliance in the collaboration realm manifested itself in two ways. First, it informed the efficiency and providing quality care tension, as to become more efficient they would require more collaboration with new organizations. Second, it also directly affected the concierges, as they valued the work they could do themselves (e.g. self-reliance), but were increasingly required to seek the help of others to navigate the demands placed upon them from the collaboration realm. We identified how concierges enacted two sets of practices in enacting embodied boundary work each period to deal with tensions: practices that helped them to deal with "embodying" their role and deal with the associated identity tensions (B1, etc.), and practices which the concierges enacted across organizational boundaries in their external network to navigate the tensions between self-reliance and collaboration and subsequently navigated these tensions in the collaboration realm (C1., etc.). In the following section we break down how this process unfolded.

## Period 1: What are we? - Experimenting without constraints (Oct 2019 - Apr 2020)

*(A1) Tensions in the inter-organizational realm trickle down to individual realm:* CareHub started off with the plan to integrate home care, wellbeing and logistics as a service to vulnerable clients by experimenting and finding out "what are we?", funded by the municipality and a healthcare organization (see figure 3.4 for overview). Initially there was just an idea of a "social hub" through which organizations could connect in the neighbourhood, and the introduction of a new role, the community concierge. A project team formed, consisting of a manager and director of the home care organization, a project manager, a logistics specialist, a project leader for the wellbeing organizations, and the first concierge was hired: Emily. Although there was a basic understanding of the need to make a viable, yet complex, business model later on in the project, the project team deliberately decided to keep these tensions latent and set conditions for the concierge to experiment. During this stage the project team was predominantly self-reliant: as the project team did not know what such a new concept should, or could, look like, they basically gave Emily complete freedom to figure out how she would structure and enact her role - as long as it fitted the initial idea of the social hub and an integrative approach on logistics, home care and wellbeing services to the vulnerable clients: "*Now it is pilot 0, as you can say. We are a living lab, we are trying and learning by trial and error. How does it work, what do we encounter? Based on the experiences we develop a plan for a new phase, a new pilot" (interview, home care*

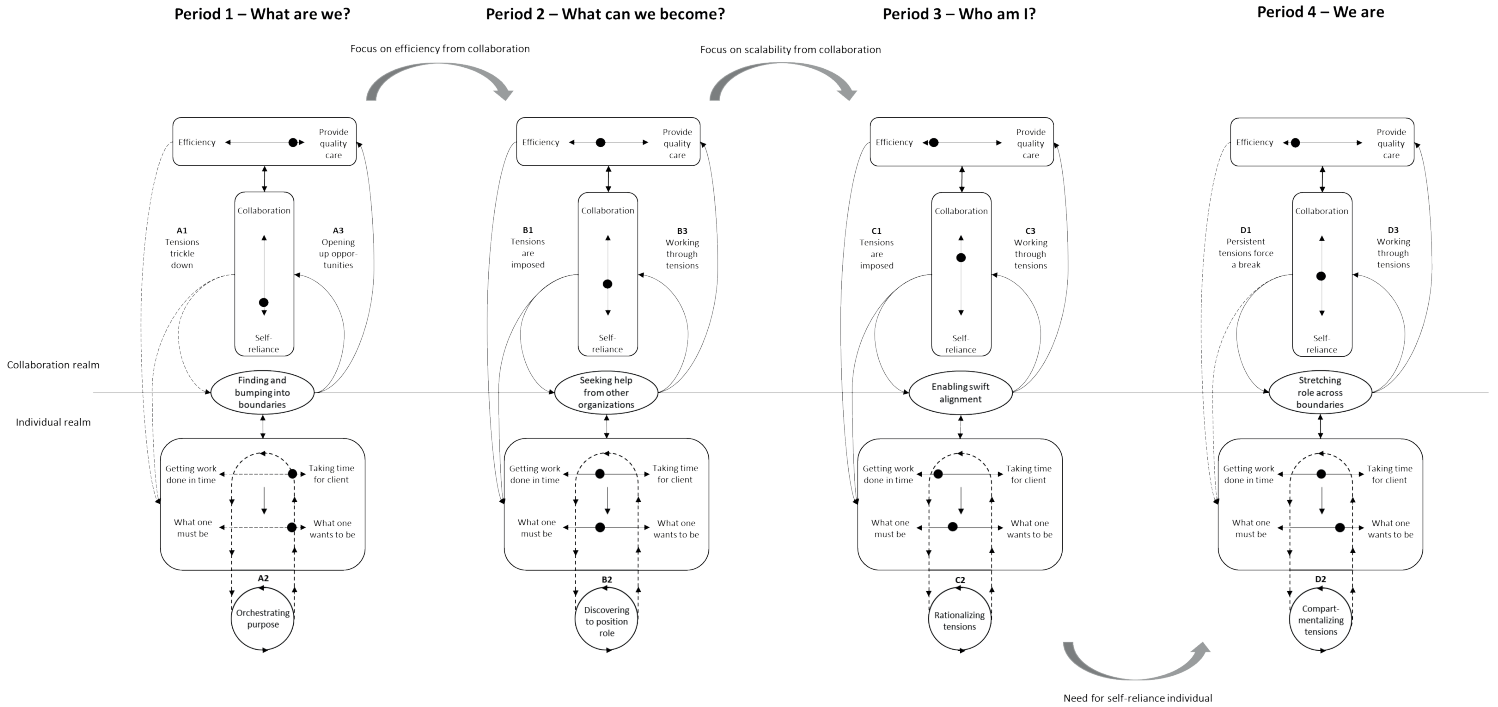



**Figure 3.3** Conceptual model of how individuals enact boundary work practices to navigate nested tensions

*manager)*. The project team sought to develop CareHub and to make it scalable in the long run by trying to connect organizations based on Emily's input. They found two suppliers, a pharmacy and a meal delivery service that were eager to team up and experiment. At this stage, the focus was not yet on efficiency, but rather on how, with Emily's help, they could design CareHub to deliver a new way of providing quality care.



Emily herself had no prior experience in the healthcare sector, but had a high intrinsic motivation to make a difference for clients. She was provided with a car and started to do medicine and meal deliveries. Within a month she paid visits to 44 addresses of which 21 involved high quality interactions, where she was invited in and able to truly connect with people to see how they were doing. As the project team in the collaboration realm wanted to experiment during this phase, they set minimal restrictions on Emily's work – this void of opportunities trickled down to the individual realm and negated any tensions in Emily's work early on, and also showed the interrelatedness between the individual and collaboration realm. Emily was tasked to start exploring what kind of organizations were present in the neighbourhood for potential collaboration, but was still heavily reliant on her own way of structuring her work - which was also more important during this stage: *"interviewer: how do you combine deliveries now? Who makes those decisions? Emily: Me, I am the only one doing that, manually checking the list of deliveries and see if I can combine anything".* Furthermore, the absence of efficiency opened up opportunities for Emily to provide the best possible care by taking plenty of time during client visits to do little chores, talk to them or connect with their family members. There was an immensely positive response from the clients as they truly felt heard. There was a lot of room for Emily to take sufficient time to take care of clients and to construct her work around how she wanted to do so - preventing her from experiencing any tensions during this period, and mainly shaping her own work.

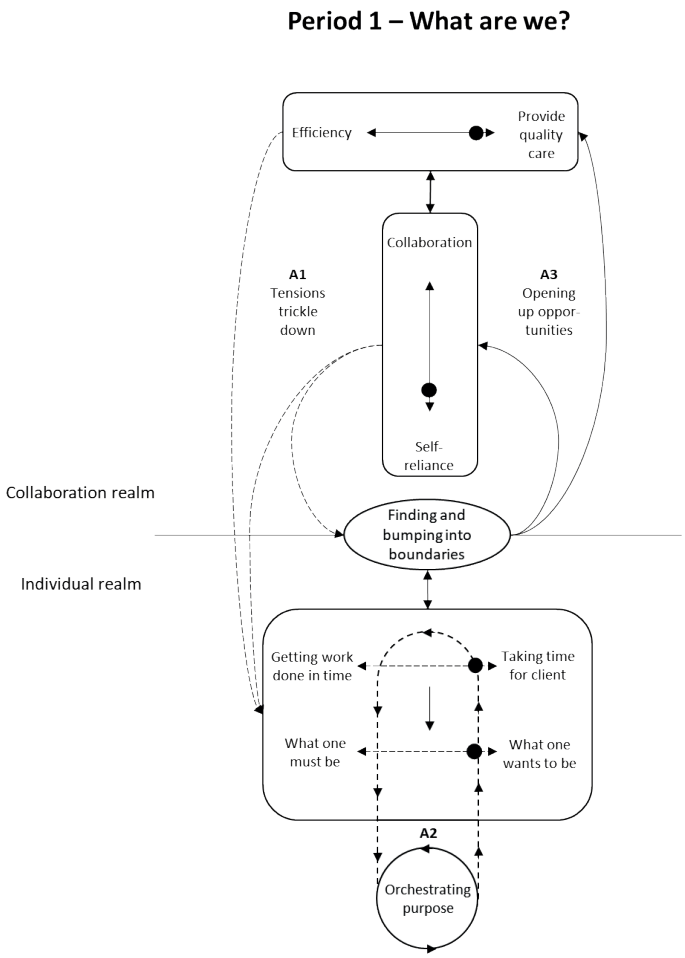



**Figure 3.4** Overview period 1 of how individuals navigate tensions

*(A2) 'Embodied' identity practices in individual realm - orchestrating purpose:* Emily and CareHub were not occupied yet with demarcations in roles, tasks and responsibilities among professionals and organizations - Emily was given complete freedom to structure and find her role by the project team. She *orchestrated purpose* while enacting her role, which meant she structured her work as she personally saw fit and emphasize the "taking time for client" and subsequent "what one wants to be" poles. Hence, she could take considerable time for the clients to provide quality care and construct her work, which subsequently manifested in opportunities to construct an identity of who she wanted to be – and tensions remained latent during this period. Our interviews showed various instances of Emily orchestrating her purpose: she made ample time to visit clients, for example by having coffee,

transporting them to a community centre, doing small chores, going grocery shopping, visiting them after working hours or having dinner with them. She went above and beyond to please clients: "*There's a little woman and she's fairly frail. I slowly got to meet her [...] Now I'm there every week doing groceries for her. I like to take her to a fish restaurant. Well, she never goes out and she wants to do something in return for the things I'm doing for her [...], It's my job, but anyway, she is very happy with it, so I don't want money or anything else. I now go to the restaurant and eat with her. [...] I like to go with her. [...] It's very fulfilling, this job" (interview, Emily)*. The combination of a lack of awareness of the current demarcations in work and responsibilities, and at the same time the freedom to do as she pleased, therefore resulted in situations where she did work just because she felt like it was the right thing to do, even though this might very well be a task for a (certified) professional. There appeared to be no limitations during this period. Although Emily extensively invested time in her clients, she was able to do so as the project team placed no restrictions upon her, and she gained a sense of purpose from the tasks themselves. This was also what gave her a sense of fulfilment from her work, and it strengthened the development of her professional identity: *"And the [heavy] load in your head [...] this is also part of the job. Everything you hear and see and think about and how to do better [...] How? How can I help? What do they need? Sometimes they know, but a lot of times they don't know. [...] that's where I come in."(interview, Emily)* She was able to do as she pleased, and strongly enacted the "taking time for the client" and "what one wants to be'' pole by orchestrating purpose, yet at the expense of sometimes losing herself in her work.

*(A3) Collaborative boundary work between individual and collaborative realm - boundary venturing:* Another important task of Emily was to enact collaborative boundary work with other home care, wellbeing and logistics organizations, outside the existing project team, to better understand the needs of the vulnerable clients and grow CareHub. The underlying tension to be navigated here was on the one hand being self-reliant, but on the other hand the need for collaboration to scale up. However, the experimental character which was set up by the project team resulted first in the need for self-reliance, as Emily first had to figure out what her work could become and how CareHub could fit in the network of neighbourhood organizations. Emily did not require to actively pursue collaborative efforts, but did need to map the neighbourhoods' existing organizations to build on later. This was rather complicated at first, as there were basically no formal plans on what her role should look like and how other organizations could be aligned with her work. We labelled the boundary work practices during this period as *boundary venturing,* which meant Emily enacted her work among the existing organizations and her

clients without much reflexivity, reaching out to organizations in an unstructured manner. Emily was yet unaware of the boundaries of other organizations, lacked experience in constructing these boundaries and was not imposed to make decisions on how to navigate the self-reliance-collaboration tension. While venturing across organizational boundaries, she quickly experienced challenges in doing so: "*We tried to contact physicians, but unfortunately only a few responded. Yesterday we talked to a doctor's assistant [about a possible collaboration] and at first she was a bit sceptical, but afterwards she was enthusiastic. So it starts sometimes with resistance, but most of them are enthusiastic and open minded and willing to help out. Everybody has his part. But above them, there's nothing [no coordination organization/ system in the neighbourhood]. So it's pretty hard to make a connection with the other services people need" (interview Emily).*

Also not all other organizations were enthusiastic about Emily and CareHub - they figured Emily would be taking over their job: *"I don't see the added benefit of this new role, from how I see it we already do that kind of work?" (home care worker, observation)*. They were afraid concierges were going to take over their work. Also, Emily was just on her own, which made it more difficult to set up a network while venturing among the existing boundaries, and to be seen by different organizations as a legitimate and beneficial role (and CareHub as an organization). She struggled to position her new role among the existing professionals and organizations, and regularly found herself on the terrain of others: "*but it's tricky, because sometimes you find yourself on the terrain of a social worker, and you have to find your way. That is the tricky part of this role" (interview, Emily).* She also found herself crossing these boundaries more than once, and being challenged about it, as it was not her place to do this work - for example the home care manager mentioned during an observation: "*she visited one of our clients some time ago, and he was sitting upright in bed. He told Emily he was in such a lot of pain and would like to lay down - so she helped him. But what she didn't know was that our home care worker had put him upright on purpose that morning as he is having trouble breathing"(observation, home care manager).* Hence, she interfered in work from other home care organizations while venturing among the existing boundaries. She did find some organizations to collaborate with, such as neighbourhood teams, who were responsible for coordinating and facilitating people in need of help, and a community centre which already had a lot of experience in the neighbourhood working with different home care and wellbeing organizations. However, as Emily was just a single actor among the many existing organizations and initiatives, this collaboration was only ad-hoc and lacked a structural component to really embed her work - sparking the first tensions between having been self-reliant and the need for collaboration.

Surprisingly, our analysis showed an additional layer of nestedness, as Emily's boundary work practices to navigate the tensions in her own work also provided opportunities to work through tensions at the level of the collaboration realm. Emily had been able to rapidly construct a new role and had spent a lot of time visiting new clients also resulted in opportunities for CareHub to validate that their idea could make an impact. Because Emily's visits helped to identify hidden issues, the project team realized that identifying health- or loneliness related issues early on and addressing them enabled them to prevent long term issues for these clients, thus emphasizing the 'providing quality care' pole in the inter-organizational realm: *"That is one of the things in the background we hope to do better in the front stage by more prevention, less loneliness, happier people" (interview, home care manager)*. Although the project team had been aware of this element at the beginning, they had not expected the response to be so overwhelmingly positive - both from the clients, but also from their partners and the citizens. The success resulted in the interest and enthusiasm from various organizations such as the municipality and other care organizations in the Netherlands that wanted to know more. On the one hand, this success was promising, but on the other hand it also raised questions if the current interpretation of the CareHub concept would be viable on a larger scale. If deployed on a larger scale, the community concierge would need to collaborate with multiple other organizations and self-reliance would no longer be feasible. While Emily's practices at this stage made her role fulfilling and led to a high level of care for the clients, the concierge still lacked a strong network to provide an integrated and sustainable service to the clients.

### Period 2 - What can we become? - Planning for formalization (Apr 20 - Feb 21)

*(B1) Tensions in inter-organizational realm imposed on individual realm:* The next period was introduced by a new senior project manager with experience in scaling up complex collaborations from heterogenous fields. The project team realized that the current arrangement was not scalable in its current form with its strong emphasis on 'providing quality care' – more emphasis on the 'efficiency' pole was required . The project team also felt that the project was evolving too much into an "Emily" project, as she had become the face of the project to clients and other organizations. This could pose challenges for scaling up to different neighbourhoods: *"We've drawn a lot of lessons from phase 1, what went well, and what might not have gone so well. So we have to make some changes in order to grow in the next phase. This business model is becoming really crucial now" (interview, research manager*). This new focus showed the complexity and nestedness of tensions in the collaborative realm: to navigate the tensions between efficiency and quality care,

they had to move from self-reliance to increased collaboration by bringing in more organizations to CareHub, to generate more revenue and impact. The new project manager had written a vision document titled "*the right care with the right logistics*", which was almost a copy of what Emily and CareHub had been experimenting with: a hub, which could coordinate logistics, home care and wellbeing services through a new role to quickly identify the needs of the vulnerable clients, and then pass this on to the hub and/or home care and wellbeing organizations in the neighbourhood. The project team was quite thrilled to start this new chapter and find out "what can we become?" (see figure 3.5 for an overview).

The project team required a viable business model and revenue streams to further expand the project. Also, CareHub needed the local municipality's support as the main beneficiaries of CareHub's services. For this, the municipality in turn required a proof of concept for financing such a scheme, which meant connecting more suppliers to increase the revenue from deliveries and efficiency - it could no longer solely focus on providing the best possible care. This change in focus was partially realized by imposing restrictions on Emily's work by reducing her role to just "signalling", which meant shortly visiting clients, assessing any immediate issues, and moving on to the next client. Any more substantial issues would have to be relayed to other service providers, hence the focus shifted towards efficiency now: "*it has been incredibly valuable during the first period to get all this feedback from Emily, learning as we go. But sometimes she does three stops per hour, that is not going to work from an economic point of view" (informal conversation, project manager)*. However, the project team still lacked such a network of service providers as well, which meant together with Emily they would have to expand their reach and focus on collaboration. The plan was made to start with two new neighbourhoods, four new concierges and six suppliers. The community centre would take over the operational coordination of the concierges and the project team would focus on project growth. In the meantime Emily had to continue experimenting and growing CareHub, as well as her own work – despite the new restrictions and conditions which were imposed on her work. In February 2021, Emily had had contact with around 90 clients.

*(B2) 'Embodied' identity practices in individual realm - discovering to position role:* The new demands of efficiency and collaboration imposed by the project team manifested themselves in the individual realm as a shift towards 'getting work done in time' and to 'what one must do' to adhere to the demands from the collaborative realm. The decreased time Emily now had to help her clients seriously altered what she was able to do and how she experienced her work - highlighting the

nestedness goal and identity tensions. She had become used to her freedom during the first period, and the possibility to take time for each client and making them feel comfortable, thereby creating the role she envisioned herself. As the restriction in time limited Emily's freedom to pursue her role and visits became shorter and more formal, she started to face identity tensions as she could no longer perform the role she had constructed: "*I find it really difficult now to not contact certain people and simply ask them how they are doing. I am struggling with that quite a lot right now you know. But I have to let it go, and let others [organizations she contacts through signalling] take that over … I should not do that." (interview, Emily)*. She also became more aware of the benefits of her role among the already existing organizations and professionals - she *discovered how to position her own role,* which meant that by bumping into organizational and professional boundaries in the previous period, getting acquainted with the existing actors and getting a taste on how they could collaborate, she started to re-design her own tasks and niche. This also helped her to deal with the identity tensions between her desires for the concierge work and the increased need for efficiency and subsequent restrictions in time. For example, she realized how the logistics element of her role, e.g. delivering medicine and meals, provided her with opportunities to identify client needs and help clients in ways no other organization could: "*The first time I came along, the door opened a bit, and they did not know me. So they briefly looked, grabbed the package, and quickly closed the door. The second time the door opened a bit further, they said hello, and we had a short chat. The third time the door stayed open for even longer and I could ask if I could come by next time" (interview, Emily).* Also, she profiled herself as a "neighbour" who came by to simply deliver some necessary items and lend a sympathetic ear - not someone with an agenda: *"I am connected to (health)care in an accessible way, so also someone with care-avoiding behaviour can accept me into their home"*. Home care professionals came by to provide medical or care related assistance, and community centre volunteers only on demand or when something went wrong. But Emily was someone who came by once or twice a week to deliver items and just have a short chat. This allowed her to build personal relationships and talk about issues the clients would not normally share with others or provide them with just that little extra tailored attention. She knew all kinds of different quirks of her clients: *"I visited this woman, imagine [chuckles], that if I called, it took a very long time for her to answer the phone, simply because she had so much difficulty walking, it took forever to reach her phone. And then [when she answered] she was all "ugh", "ugh", "phew", "I'm going to take a rest, hold on.", and we had a laugh" (interview, Emily)*. So despite Emily facing alterations and subsequent tensions in her work in terms of time and content, by discovering to position her own professional role she managed to navigate the associated identity tension by focussing on her niche.

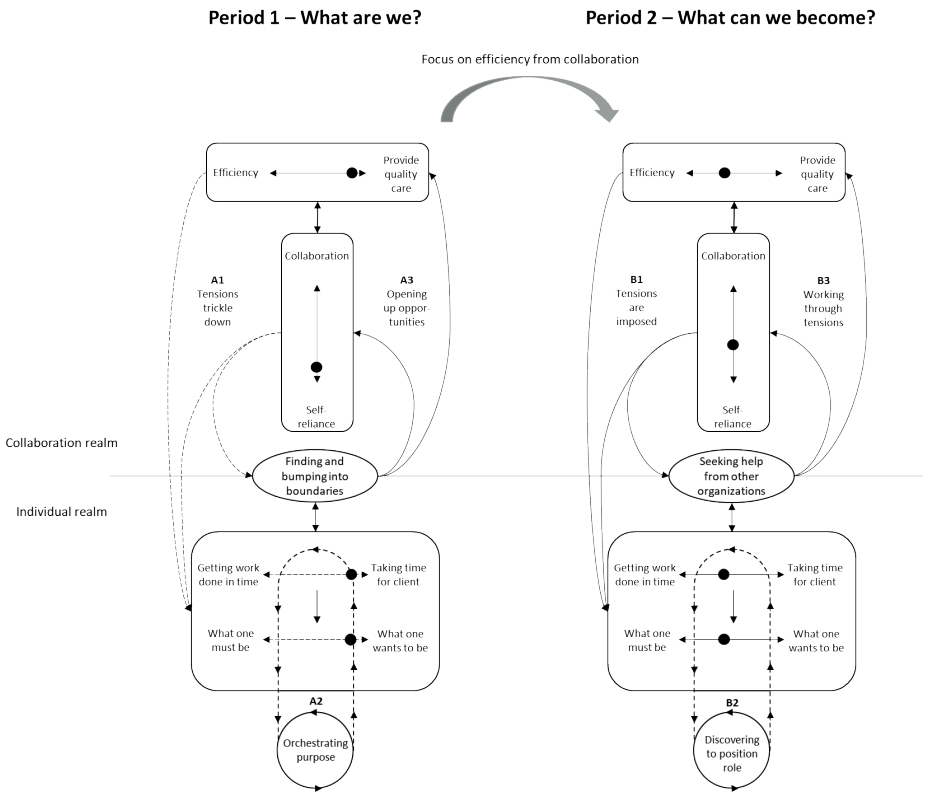



**Figure 3.5** *Shift from period 1 to period 2*

*(B3) Collaborative boundary work between individual and collaborative realm - seeking help from other organizations:* As the project team decided to focus on the growth and needed to move from being self-reliant to fostering additional collaboration with new partners, this also sparked similar tensions for Emily as she had to move from being self-reliant in her work, to looking for collaborative opportunities. To deal with this increasing tension, Emily *sought help from other organizations,* where she started to more proactively reach out to organizations to look for common ground and possible synergies in their collective efforts. During this period Emily recognized that she could not do everything on her own. Although fulfilling, the work became too much to handle and she needed to enact boundary work at the boundaries of other organizations to provide better and customized help to her clients. One striking example of the complexities she encountered: "*Someone called me because she was worried about another person who was delusional, and I wanted to know if that person was in the [client] system. I contacted the social team, who did not know about her. I called home care, who did not know her. I needed to know who her physician was. The woman*

*who called me also did not know. So then I contacted the pharmacy, who then contacted the social team and made an action plan for her. After which they contacted me again. (...) Afterwards, I figured out that she was actually known at [community hub]" (interview, Emily)*. Although she had wanted to do as much as possible herself, the clients' needs and heterogeneity of tasks was simply too much. She sought help increasingly more from organizations around her, as she got an understanding of what and who was out there: *"I come across new people every time. In an hour I'm going to visit someone who has become very lonely due to the covid restrictions. This has become very bad, but apparently there is someone who assesses if someone is able to keep living at home or if something else has to be arranged. That's then that very specific expertise you come across" (interview, Emily)*. Once Emily was aware of certain expertise with a new actor, she could use them to connect them to clients in the future. Emily tried to find and discuss ways of how her new role could extend and benefit the work home care and wellbeing organizations were already doing: *"Previously there really was no feedback from the other organizations on how to collaborate with Emily. It's like I can ask you a question about ballet, you wouldn't know what is what. So [together with Emily] we made a list of what she could do. And then they were like, ooh can they also do that?" (interview, director home care)*. She also found a good match with the community centre, who already had been operational for a number of years and had more experience and an existing network to draw upon. It started off with ad-hoc encounters in the prior period, but now they increasingly knew how to find each other, as the community centre realized Emily visited people who previously were invisible for their network and thus created opportunities to help these people: "*over time I came over more and more [at the centre], and we increasingly found each other. We started discussing cases together and I found we had a lot of overlap. [...] After a while I was also able to contact volunteers [from community centre] there myself and link them to cases" (observation, Emily)*. At the end of this period they had weekly meetings to coordinate clients. Emily also sought help from volunteers, who were connected to the community centre to help clients with groceries or fixing light bulbs or broken fences, which in return freed up time for her to do other work. She also reached out more concretely to physicians in the neighbourhood, who confirmed the issues of loneliness among the elderly. We also identified the first instances where other organizations began reaching out to Emily instead of the other way around, indicating that her added value was being noticed; "*I had contact on and off with home care. So they also gave me addresses where I did not visit before to deliver meals or medicine, but where I could be of value to address loneliness. And I also got such requests from the general practitioner*" *(interview, Emily)*. So although there was no formal collaboration among these other organizations yet, due to Emily's efforts to seek help at the boundaries of organizations in the neighbourhood, there were more instances where collaboration was explored. This

allowed Emily to remain semi-self-reliant, yet at the same time slowly moving towards a more collaborative approach - hence starting to navigate this tension.

As Emily continued to enact both boundary work practices, she made more and more connections with organizations in the neighbourhood. Hence, in the collaborative realm, they also noticed an increase in the intent of organizations to collaborate with CareHub - making them less dependent on just Emily and their own project team. This created new opportunities for collaboration and growth allowing the project team to work through the efficiency and provide quality care tension. The new project manager was able to continue planning for the upscaling of CareHub to the new neighbourhoods she had envisioned, and to hire more concierges in the process. Furthermore, it allowed the project team to show to the municipality that CareHub was viable and growing. With the help of the municipality they would be able to make this a success - but simultaneously also highlighted an emphasis on the efficiency pole, as the current form of CareHub was still not financially viable and therefore would require additional collaboration with even more organizations in the neighbourhood. But this also posed a risk to CareHub as a stronger emphasis on efficiency would potentially take away the added benefits of the project, as the concierges were able to provide a service no other professional could provide and were able to identify hidden issues from clients. If tensions concerning time restrictions and identity formation would be even more emphasized, the added benefit for the project team would also potentially disappear.

### Period 3 - Who am I? - Constraining work at the expense of growth - (Feb 21 - Aug 21)

*(C1) Tensions in the inter-organizational realm imposed on individual realm:* Period three started when CareHub launched the two new neighbourhoods with four new concierges in February of 2021, in close collaboration with the community centre (see figure 3.6 for an overview). All the planning and experimenting from period one and two was put into practice under the new project manager. The project team was focussed on developing the project, as they needed to increase the number of partners in the project and to prove to the municipality that this was a viable and sustainable concept. However, the project team soon realized that it remained quite difficult to create enough revenue from just logistics to make a business case - more focus on efficiency was required: *"Ideally, we would have liked to provide the logistics element of CareHub cost-neutral, so more suppliers could join [...] but then you do need enough volume to fill up the truck. The trick is to fill up that car as much as possible" (interview, logistics broker municipality)*. With the municipality they also looked into opportunities to create revenue from the preventive capabilities of the concierges'

work: if the concierges identified issues at an early stage and connected clients with the required organizations to help, this would prevent costly health related issues in the future. But this was difficult to quantify and would have required involvement of the municipality as well as complex restructuring of the national insurance schemes. Hence, in the meantime, they decided to increase revenue from logistics, and thus efficiency, which again were imposed on the concierges: *"if you look at the big logistics companies, if you look at their business model, they must race to become profitable. Of course we do not want that, but it says something" (interview, project manager)*. They focussed on increasing suppliers and deliveries by the concierges, proposed time slots to give concierges a set time to deliver goods and signal the needs of clients and looked at opportunities to increase/diversify the tasks of the concierges, for example by letting them pick up urine samples to bring to the general practitioner. Originally, such tasks were done by skilled and more expensive home care employees who sometimes had to make separate trips to do these smaller tasks. Now the team explored whether the concierges could take over some of these mundane tasks to reduce costs.

Emily felt she could not identify with the new direction of CareHub and wanted to try other things, so she decided to leave the project in February of 2021. Following in her footsteps, the four new concierges started with a lot of enthusiasm and were tasked to further develop CareHub, but also continue developing and positioning the role of the concierges. They worked closely with the community centre, which was the physical space where they operated from, and whose owner coordinated and facilitated their work – diary data shows for example how they had meetings with the wellbeing coordinator, community centre manager or project coordinators several times per week, sometimes even several times per day. The concierges started doing deliveries, but also explored opportunities in the neighbourhoods to attract new suppliers and to convey their message. They were given training by Emily and other experts to better prepare them for the challenges of doing their work (e.g. keeping professional distance), which gave them somewhat of a foundation to start enacting their new role and got them up to speed. But they still had to do a lot of experimenting as the additional focus on efficiency by the project team, combined with the new need for scaling and opportunities for initiating collaboration had changed the situation compared to Emily's work. These additional constraints and expectations led to quite some struggles in the new concierges finding their way around the different organizations and finding purpose in their work, which reverted the concierges to wondering "who am I?" in all this - as opposed to the collective effort that had persisted during the first two periods.

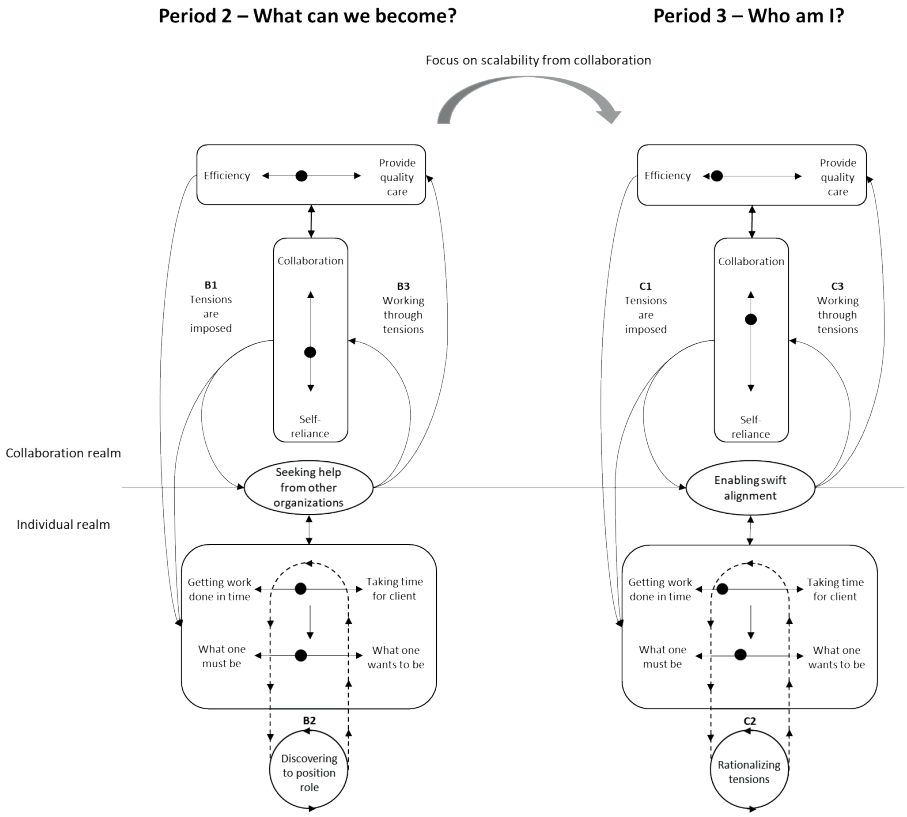



**Figure 3.6** Shift from period 2 to period 3

*(C2) 'Embodied' identity practices in individual realm - rationalizing tensions:* The nested nature of the tensions between the collaborative and individual realm, the stricter time slots, increased deliveries and increased expectations imposed on the concierges from the project team sparked immediately tensions for the concierges to get their work done in a limited amount of time. These time restrictions subsequently also took a toll on their professional identity as they found it more difficult to do a meaningful job. They felt restricted in their work and ability to help their clients. They dealt with these struggles by *rationalizing tensions,* which meant that they tried to objectively look at the added value of their work to navigate these tensions. The concierges felt like the imposed restrictions to focus on more deliveries could potentially pass by the whole idea of the project as they had increasingly little time to make an assessment of clients and therefore focus on prevention of care. The strength of CareHub was the service the concierges could

deliver. One concierge mentioned during an interview: "*This signalling function, as part of our job, I currently see it as a disadvantage. The clients have certain expectations, which we simply can't meet. But also for yourself, you started this job with a reason. (...) You have all these thoughts of how can I do this? And we all really want to do it. But I mean it's great if I can get in my car and deliver, but if it's just going to be that? A mail delivery man? Then I won't like it anymore.*". However, the concierges extracted a lot of meaning from the interactions with the clients and the positive change they could make for them, despite the restrictions - it made it worthwhile for them to do this work. They started to embody the boundary between on the one hand CareHub and on the other hand the client. By trying to rationalize the situation, and looking beyond the experienced tensions, they were able to deal with the identity tensions: *"you don't have to do this job here for the appreciation from the top. (...) one lady, she said "child, I am so happy, I am so at peace now" [after she had brought her medicine]. That made it easier to put things in perspective. So then, while driving home, I thought: what do I care what the [project management] thinks of me? If you get appreciation from the resident, where you work for, that is what matters"(interview, concierge)*. Furthermore, they also tried to navigate this tension by extracting meaning from the appreciation from their direct collaborative partners: *"well at the pharmacy we also really feel part of their team, and there it also shows in terms of appreciation, for example when you take back old medicine or something for example, or things like that" (interview, concierge)*. Hence, despite the persistent tensions due to time restrictions which were imposed on them by the project team, the concierges were able to increasingly navigate the subsequent identity tensions by rationalizing them and shifting their focus on what mattered and gave them purpose, as opposed to the limitations of the work they were allowed to do. So while the situation itself did not necessarily change, the concierges themselves tried to find ways to navigate the tensions. However, while this practice did allow them to look beyond the restrictions and identity tensions, they still experienced issues on how to detach themselves from the challenges surrounding this work, and not get caught up too much in the day-to-day issues while being time constraint.

*(C3) Collaborative boundary work between individual and collaborative realm - enabling swift alignment:* The desire to scale CareHub put pressure on the concierges to further integrate and collaborate with the organizations around them, yet maintain the spirit of the initial concept. However, integration was difficult, as CareHub and the concierges were still relatively small and most other organizations had not worked with them before. To navigate this tension, they *enabled swift alignment* practices to coordinate different interests and needs, which meant they quickly leveraged and built their internal and external network by using the resources and

connections they had at hand. Between the concierges, they quickly exchanged information among each other as they encountered new situations or opportunities, lessons learned or pitfalls. For example, during an interview with a concierge a fellow concierge entered the room and asked: "*excuse me for interrupting, have you heard anything yet from the pharmacy about [client]"*? The other concierge answered: *"No need to worry, I had contact with [coordinator wellbeing] and the pharmacy and we won't have to deliver [medicine] anymore. [Client] is forgetful and still thinks she requires the medicine from her surgery months ago" (observation, concierges)*. They kept each other up to speed on any developments they encountered. One concierge also had a background in home care, and therefore had experience on how to maintain professional distance between the concierges and clients - a skill she taught the others. They also informed each other on who to contact for different situations in relation to different volunteers, wellbeing organizations etc. to quickly map the necessary contacts: "*we have intense Whatsapp contact with each other [haha] [...] simply about the small things like "do you already have this" or "do you remember to do this or that" [...] we really try to attune to each other" (interview, concierge)*. This allowed them to quickly build a foundation for their new role and get a grip on their work. This crucial element fostered group identity among the concierges as they collectively were able to deal with emerging issues - something that was absent from Emily's situation where she had lacked the peer support.

This foundation among concierges also allowed them to enact these swift alignment practices at the boundaries of the organizations in the neighborhood. They attempted to increase collaboration by swiftly aligning with partners such as wellbeing coordinators, which were already established neighbourhood entities. These coordinators knew who was working where, who was responsible for which tasks and whom to contact when concierges faced issues or had questions. This was critical to foster collaboration, but also to deal with issues around confidentiality. As concierges were no "professionals", as opposed to home care or wellbeing workers, they did not have access to personal information about clients which would help them to connect clients with the right organizations or to help them themselves. Fortunately, wellbeing coordinators could assist with this. One coordinator said: "*You know, due to GDPR I can't convey all information to CareHub [i.e. concierges]. That's just not possible. But I do trust them. So I can ask them, what do you know [about a case]? So they say, I see this, and this and this. Then we can check in our system and we can take it up. (...) Or tell them, no need to worry, we know her [client] and it's part of her illness" (interview, coordinator wellbeing)*. Our interviews showed how this allowed the concierges to quickly assess situations and initiate collaboration if needed: "*we visited this lady in the neighbourhood where we were quite worried*

*about. Sometimes she opened the door wide open, and the next time only a little. A neighbour contacted us as she was worried. So we contacted [wellbeing coordinator], and it appeared that she was already in the picture by the social neighbourhood team" (interview, concierge)*. This communication with established organizations allowed concierges to quickly reach out to different organizations and find the right help, but it also helped them to increase legitimacy, as they increasingly knew what to do and organizations became acquainted with them. In turn, these other organizations also started to reach out to them as they realized the concierges could be of added benefit. Hence, enabling swift alignment practices allowed concierges to navigate the tension between self-reliance and collaboration by both allowing them to collectively make sense of emerging issues and get a grip on their own work, while also quickly connecting with established organizations to expand their network to provide a better service to clients.

As the concierges enabled swift alignment practices to foster collaboration between the concierges and other organizations in the neighbourhood, they also worked through tensions in the collaborative realm. First of all, the boundary work practices allowed CareHub to focus more on collaboration with other organizations in the neighbourhood, and to not be so dependent on their own project. More connections meant that a better service could be provided to clients, organizations started to find CareHub instead of the other way around and that their main partner, the municipality, became even more interested in pursuing a long-standing collaboration: *"I am super curious about this sustainable business model, which is going to be the holy grail. If we can prove that we can actually make a viable business model and that governments can say "this is going to save me 1 million per year, then we are willing to invest half a million", then you have a strong win-win" (interview, project manager).* And second, because the concierges were able to deal with the new imposed demands, through both types of boundary work practices, they were able to do more deliveries and therefore contribute to the newly set goals of the project team to focus on efficiency to make a viable business case. Yet, efficiency from a sole logistics/delivery focus was not enough - they also required a solution in collaboration with the municipality to guarantee funding.

### Period 4 - We are - Sustainably navigating persistent tensions (Aug 21 - Oct 22)

*(D1) Tensions in the inter-organizational realm escalate further and force break with individual realm:* The fourth period of CareHub started when a new policy officer from the municipality replaced the previous one who had been involved from the beginning of CareHub. The new officer conducted a thorough analysis of the

project and concluded that a long-term plan for scaling up the project was lacking. He believed a plan was needed to financially exploit and quantify the preventative capabilities of the concierges including budgeting without the continuous financial support from external actors such as the municipality. The project was put on hold. Behind the scenes, actors in the project team started intense negotiations to continue the collaboration with the municipality, but there was a real risk that the project was discontinued. This is where two separate story lines emerged: on the one hand actors in the project team were occupied with "saving" CareHub, but this also meant they almost shut down all communication with the community centre, other organizations in the collaboration and concierges as well. The restrictions imposed on the concierges in terms of efficiency remained, but no additional need for collaboration was required at this stage. On the other hand, this persistence of tensions emphasizing efficiency created a break between the project team and the concierges. The concierges realized they had to do things on their own – which they did not mind as they were thriving. They had grown and professionalized to such an extent that they also did not really need the project team to continue their work or make decisions: they could simply do this on their own or in consultation with the owner of the community centre – none of the diary data for example mentions anything about issues as a consequence of this event. Although they felt abandoned by the project team, they were still able to sustain their network with the organizations in the neighbourhood and continue the groundwork for CareHub based on what they had built collectively. Hence, they coped very well with the imposed tensions by enacting different boundary work practices - therefore enterig their final period in a spirit of "we are" (see figure 3.7 for an overview).

*(D2) 'Embodied' identity practices in individual realm - compartmentalizing tensions:* Ever since the inception of CareHub, the concierge(s) had encountered persistent goal tensions concerning time allocation and identity tensions about their role within the CareHub project. While the tensions continued due to the ongoing focus on efficiency and resulting need to get work done in time, in this period the concierges found a sustainable approach to deal with these tensions by *compartmentalizing*. This entailed that the concierges were able to take a more objective look at their work and acknowledge the persistence of tensions, instead of getting caught up in the emotional side of wanting to help clients and provide the best possible care while being unable to do so due to the imposed restrictions. One striking example was that they used the client's door as a metaphor to start and end each encounter: "*you have to make so many decisions, sometimes it simply overwhelms you, you cannot let all of that enter. I see every encounter now as a new opportunity, I ring the bell and I tell myself: "I'm going to do the best I can to help this*

*client during this encounter". Then they open and the encounter can be very positive, but also very sad, depressing or frustrating. But after that, I close the door, and that's it. When I ring the next doorbell I use that time while I wait to close off the last encounter and start off fresh again with a fresh mindset" (interview, concierge)*. The way they approached their work was that, despite the restrictions, they tried to do the most they could do for their clients. This helped them to navigate the time-related tensions, but it especially helped them to navigate the identity tension: to pursue the intent they had at the beginning of period three, to always go above and beyond to help clients: *"you take the good with the bad"*. This was also partially fostered by the radio silence from the project team, which resulted in the concierges feeling left to fend for themselves. But they had also learned and grown so much over the last years that they were now able to navigate the persistent tensions. Here is one example, which nicely shows how concierges were able to do all the work they had to do, while still being on time and extracting fulfilment from them: *"went to community centre for meals for [client] (normal routine). Consulted with [social team] that a bill will be sent to the meal delivery service, so that [client] does not have to pay every single time. Will pass it on to case manager (liaising with other organizations). Also did groceries for her (normal routine), peeled some mandarins and poured a glass of orange juice (doing just that little bit extra, despite time restrictions). And… the hairdresser came by, she looks so different!!! Looks amazing on her. She also put on new clothes, just for me. So nice, she receives the care she needs, so glad for her (extracting fulfilment). [...] Make it work again, see you next week! (closing off, awareness of time)" (diary entry, concierge)* Although the nature of the work still sometimes raised difficult situations to deal with the goal or identity tensions, or to pass a case on to other organizations instead of solving issues themselves, overall they managed to proactively navigate these tensions.

*(D3) Collaborative boundary work between individual and collaborative realm - stretching role across boundaries:* Previously, it had been difficult for concierges to demarcate their own work among the work of other professionals, and it had remained unclear what their role really was or could become. However, over time, as the concierges experienced a lot of different situations and began to understand the limitations as well as the opportunities of their new role, they became better in navigating the competing demands of self-reliance and collaboration and the boundaries they operated among. They learned to *stretch their role across boundaries* to deal more effectively with the tension between collaboration and self-reliance and the persistent focus on efficiency - based on their experience, they were able to make more informed decisions on when to simply do the work they were required to do, such as deliveries, but also when to do a little extra work at

one client and speed up at another. Moreover, they made decisions on when to step outside of their official role: *"visited [client] today and told me she had trouble putting on her support stocking due to her aching lower back. I helped her put them on and madam was all happy again" (diary entry, concierge)*. Officially, putting on support stockings is a task for certified home care personnel, which actors were not allowed to do without the proper training - something the concierges were aware of. However, after following up on this example during an informal conversation, the concierge elaborated that it was late in the day and the client was already in the process of doing it herself. Calling a home care professional would have taken another half an hour and resulted in added costs for the home care organization. Therefore, she decided to take it upon herself to help the client with this relatively simple procedure. This stretching practice also implied the concierges were better able to assess which organizations and individuals to contact when encountering clients with different kinds of needs. For example, one concierge wrote in her diary: *"Did groceries for Mrs [name]. She trusts me to know what she needs, if she forgets something I always ask if she does not need that item this week. I had contact with one of the living support workers. Madame [name] receives 3 times a week 2 hours of support from them. I suggested that because they are there anyway, they could take over the groceries. They thought that was an excellent idea [...] The attention she values from me I can then give her during her medicine delivery"*. As they collaborated with more and more organizations, they became increasingly knowledgeable in which organization to reach out to, and organizations also knew how to find them. They became fully embedded in case meetings, discussions and integrated the added benefits of the concierges with the work of the other organizations, which allowed them to effectively navigate the tension between self-reliance and collaboration.

The final period showed how concierges by enacting boundary work practices were able to fully embed themselves among the different organizations and professionals and to demonstrate their added value. Although the focus of CareHub had not changed, and there was still a need to focus on efficiency, the concierges realized a stable situation within their own work by successfully navigating tensions. Simultaneously, the concierges' abilities allowed the project team in the collaboration realm to continue the focus on efficiency and collaboration. Because even though they currently went through a temporary crisis, they also would not have been able to get this far without the work of the concierges, and their ability to navigate the tensions that were imposed on them. Excessively emphasizing the efficiency pole, or the inability of concierges to navigate the associated tensions, would have resulted in further escalation of the perceived tension of concierges, thereby negating the added value of CareHub.

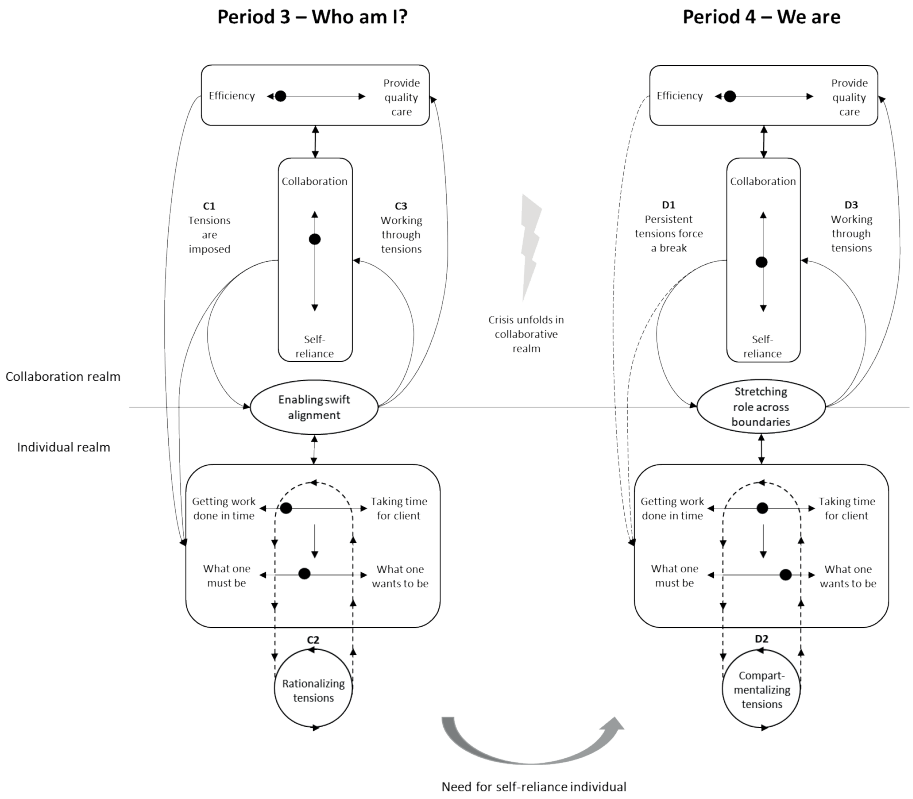



**Figure 3.7** Shift from period 3 to period 4

## Discussion

Our aim with this research was to understand how individual actors in emerging inter-organizational collaborations use boundary work to navigate nested tensions between competing demands. By combining insights from paradox theory and the boundary work literature, we propose a model that unravels the multifaceted process of how actors in emerging inter-organizational contexts enact different boundary work practices to navigate the evolving tensions resulting from emerging inter-organizational demands and the development of their own work. With this work we set out to make several contributions to existing work on paradox, boundary work and inter-organizational collaboration.

### Nested tensions in emerging inter-organizational collaboration

Earlier work on paradox theory has made calls to take into the account the "principle of holism" (Schad et al., 2016), to further our understanding of how complex systems consist of multiple nested tensions across multiple levels (Bansal & Schad, 2018; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Gilbert et al., 2018). We address the calls to advance our understanding of nested tensions (e.g. Schad et al., 2016; Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Smith, Keller, Gaim, 2021) by closely examining the relationship between inter-organizational and individual level tensions in emerging settings.

First, we extend the work by Jarzabkowski et al., (2022) on nested and knotted tensions in inter-organizational systems, by showing how tensions not only manifest themselves at the level of the inter-organizational system or among the participating organizations, but also directly impact the individuals working in these complex settings. Earlier work by Gilbert et al. (2018) already showed how nested tensions cascade from the health ministry cascade down to the healthcare professional, but our study adds to these insights by showing that this is not necessarily such a linear process, but rather an ongoing oscillation between the inter-organizational and individual level as time progresses. We show empirically how at the beginning of collaboration, this interrelation is characterized by latent tensions from the inter-organizational collaboration during which individuals are able to enact their own work and emphasize poles favouring their identity and time allocation. Over time as actors at the inter-organizational level emphasize their own objectives, tensions across the inter-organizational system become salient and the nestedness of the entire system "shifts into gear". By emphasizing the desire on one pole of a performing paradox, organizing paradoxes are triggered as well, which collectively spark tensions of performing and belonging at the individual level. We extend work by Sheep et al. (2006), by showing the persistent

nestedness between competing goals and identity on the individual level once the inter-organizational level shifts objectives. Once time allocation is affected, this inherently triggers a response in how individuals perceive their identity and extract meaning from their work. As Cunha & Putnam (2019) proposed, the subsequent responses (i.e. boundary work practices) from individual actors to navigate tensions therefore also address both tensions and cannot be separated. While research on identity and paradox already showed us the complexities and multi-faceted nature of identity tensions (e.g. Sheep, Kreiner & Fairhurst, 2017; Kreiner et al., 2006), our analysis shows how in emerging settings rapid identity construction is both a curse and a blessing. Swift identity formation can be an effective way to align interests and work through tensions in early uncertain situations, as Ungureanu et al. (2020) showed in their study. However, our findings also suggest that once an identity is rapidly constructed, especially under favourable conditions and by individuals themselves, actors anchor themselves to this former identity which makes it much harder to navigate identity tensions once imposed decisions from the collaboration force actors to change over time.

Second, and building on this argument, this rapid identity construction also enables unique opportunities for the inter-organizational collaboration of which these actors are a part of. Where Gilbert et al., (2018), acknowledges the top-down effect of nested tensions, and Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) provides a closer understanding of how macro, meso and micro paradoxes interrelate, we add to these works by highlighting that individuals are not only affected by tensions, but that these tensions are also nested the other way around - individuals actions can actually provide opportunities to navigate inter-organizational level tensions. Where Keller et al. (2020), identified more closely how individuals deliberate responses to tensions shape organizational responses to tensions, our findings suggest that tensions can also be shaped without such deliberate intent. We show how tensions affect individuals working in inter-organizational collaborations, and how their responses (i.e. boundary work practices) are predominantly enacted to navigate their own perceived tensions, yet, in doing so, also have unintended effects in navigating tensions at the level of the collaboration - either in opening up room to emphasize one pole of the paradox, or to work through persistent tensions. Furthermore, our findings show the criticality of individuals in navigating emerging systems, as they are key in fostering virtuous cycles and preventing vicious cycles (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017; Smith & Lewis, 2011). When collaboration level goals are overemphasized, this may subsequently overemphasize goal and identity tensions on the level of the individual, sparking vicious cycles which may lead to escalation and termination of individuals' work. These individuals are key in developing novel collaborative systems, as they both

navigate the imposed tensions but simultaneously help develop the collaboration and navigate subsequent tensions. They have a unique position in these emerging settings which ought to be treated with care. Therefore, these insights on nested tensions across emerging inter-organizational collaborations contribute to our understanding of how tensions behave across complex systems (Schad et al., 2016; Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Schad & Bansal, 2018).

### Boundary work in navigating emerging tensions

Our second main contribution lies in explaining how tensions become nested and cascade across inter-organizational collaborations and how boundary work practices navigate these tensions in emerging contexts. We extend our insights into how practice theories, in particular boundary work (Langley et al., 2019), allows actors to successfully navigate tensions (Lê & Bednarek, 2017). First, our study highlights the multifaceted process over time of how actors enact boundary work to navigate emerging tensions. Prior work has shown how collaborative boundary work can initiate and foster collaboration among organizations or groups (Langley et al., 2019; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008; Reay et al., 2006), but also delved into the associated identity tensions that may accompany boundary work (Ellis & Ybema, 2010; Soundararajan et al., 2018), which Langley et al. (2019) call embodied boundary work. However, if individuals are a part of emerging, cross-boundary initiatives and still have to find their new identity in these settings, they must enact both collaborative and embodied boundary work, which has received insufficient attention in the current literature. Our study shows how individuals go through four phases of collaborative and embodied boundary work as they try to make sense of their emerging work and increase collaboration with other organizations. In the beginning actors are unreflexive of their actions and practices, and as they lack clear conditions on what is and is not possible or allowed or as actions are seen as mundane day-to-day practices (Azambuja & Islam, 2019; Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011). Their boundary work practices predominantly result in navigating tensions towards their own purpose. Over time we see that as tensions become more salient and affect the day-to-day work and the identity of actors, actors start to become more reflective of their actions and engage in boundary work to navigate these tensions. Despite persistent tensions being imposed on them, actors are able to develop and navigate tensions on an ongoing basis, which is facilitated once more actors are involved in the same roles. This is due to actors developing a shared identity and enacting swift alignment practices, which allows them to quickly make sense of issues together and collaborate with actors to solve these issues.

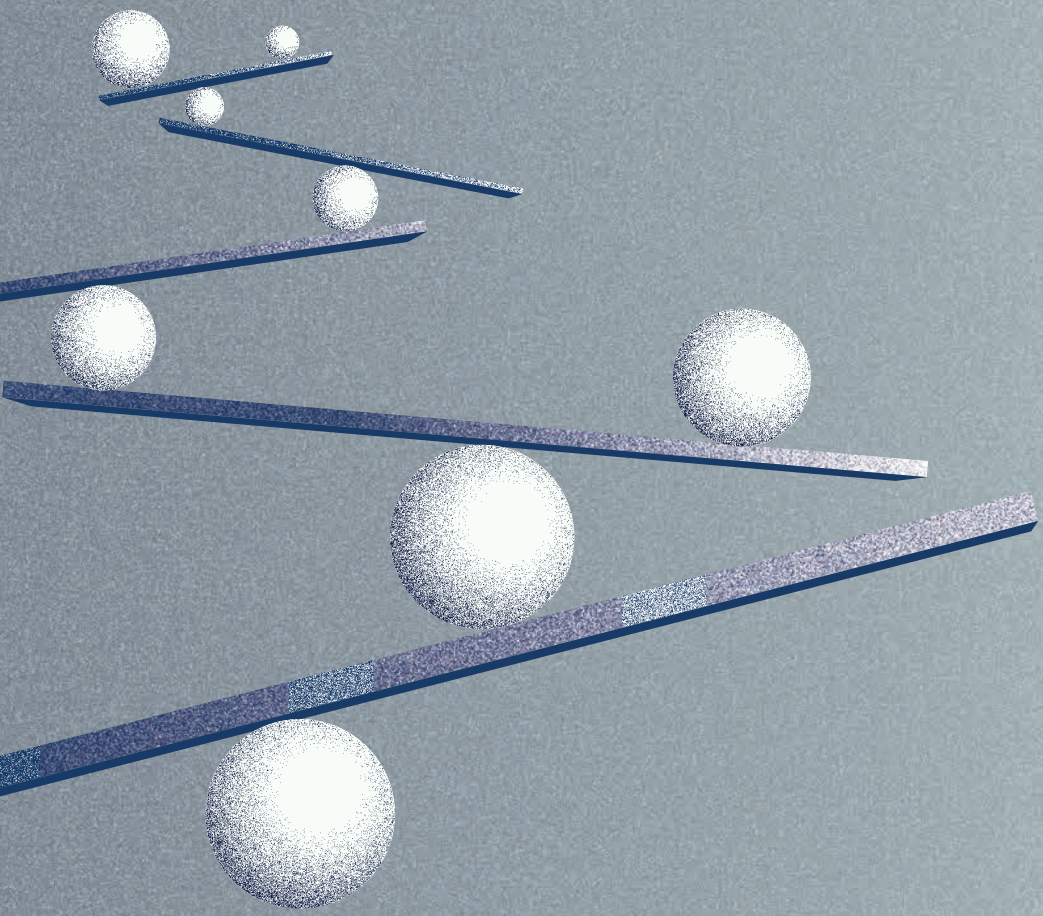
Although collaborative and embodied boundary work practices are enacted in different situations and contexts, we argue that they are interrelated: it is the ongoing enactment of embodied boundary work that allows actors to maintain their professional identity and navigate the goal tensions associated with the imposed demands of the collaboration. In turn, this serves as a necessary foundation upon which actors can enact collaborative boundary work practices with their external network - one cannot exist without the other. Our findings also suggest that, over time, individuals "decouple" from the persistent tensions imposed on them from the collaboration. This can occur due to an external shock (Couture et al., 2023) or crisis (Carmine et al., 2021), but we argue that this might also happen without such shock, but merely due to the developing capabilities of actors to learn and navigate persistent tensions. We found that while tensions on goals and organizing persisted, actors eventually were able to do their own work despite this - partially through compartmentalizing practices, which allowed them to navigate the perceived tensions, and by being able to stretch their role across boundaries, allowing them to navigate organizing tensions.

Finally, we make a contribution to the work on inter-organizational collaboration and societal challenges. Prior work on this topic has highlighted the inherent complexities in navigating societal challenges (e.g. Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016), and elaborated on the need for inter-organizational collaboration (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022), importance of different forms of organizing (Kaufmann et al., 2022) or temporality (Hilbolling et al., 2022), and so on. Yet, while we acknowledge the importance of all these topics, we also argue that these large scale and complex issues, ultimately almost always land on the plate of the individuals working in these contexts. It is not necessarily about making large strides to quickly and easily solve these issues, but actually also about how these challenges manifest themselves at the level of the actors working in these contexts. We add to the work of Smets et al. (2012) by arguing that it is through actors making sense of the complexities in these pluralistic contexts and being left to their own devices that ultimately these challenges can be navigated and progress can be made on different levels of the system they are a part of.

## Boundary conditions and further research

There are certain boundary conditions for this study that provide directions for further research. First, the diary data we used for our analysis was not specifically written down by concierges to answer our concrete research question. While it provided us with amazing in-depth insights into the phenomena of interest, it would be interesting to see other uses of diary data that was specifically collected

to answer boundary work related questions. Second, we investigated a single case with unique characteristics in an emerging context. However, we acknowledge that different settings, especially outside of the healthcare sector, might provide other novel insights to our research question. Similar emerging contexts where frontend workers (Schneider et al., 2021) are expected to navigate emerging collaborations, for example in blue collar settings, might see different phenomena and results. Third, our study specifically focussed on the emerging stages of inter-organizational collaboration to study how tensions became nested across this system and actors enacted subsequent boundary work practices to navigate tensions. It would also be interesting to investigate how similar phenomena would unfold when new actors are introduced in more established collaborations, or if over time other practices would be enacted as tensions and the context would change. Finally, it would be interesting to see additional research on the nestedness of tensions with the graphic representation of tensions we used in this study. Although a model can never fully represent how socially constructed paradoxes and tensions manifest themselves, we believe it does provide an interesting perspective to use in pluralistic contexts such as innovation or additional research on nested tensions in addressing societal challenges.



# Chapter 4

# A Dynamic Agency Perspective on Navigating Paradox in Emerging Inter-Organizational Collaboration

Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the following conferences:

Sande, L.F.L. van de, Lauche, K., Blazevic, V. & Ziggers, G.W. (2021). Roles and role transitioning for managing tensions of value creation and value capture in emerging networks. In 12th International Process Research Symposium: Online (2021, September 1 - 2021, September 3).

Sande, L.F.L. van de, Lauche, K., Blazevic, V. & Ziggers, G.W. (2024). A Dynamic Agency Perspective on Navigating Paradox in Emerging Inter-Organizational Collaboration. In 15th International Process Research Symposium: Cyprus (2024, June 24 - 2024, June 27).

## Abstract

In this paper we investigate how organizational actors need to navigate the emerging stages of inter-organizational collaboration to deal with persistent paradoxical tension between stability and change. The ability of actors to navigate these tensions are heavily influenced by their agency - not all courses of action are available to all actors due to their situatedness and ability to be reflexive of paradox. However, we currently lack an understanding of how and why actors' agency shifts over time, therefore either enabling them or constraining them to navigate paradox, especially in dynamic contexts such as emerging inter-organizational collaboration. By conducting a process study of an emerging inter-organizational collaboration where a diversity of actors were consciously or unconsciously navigating the stability-change paradox, we found five strategies these actors use to navigate tensions given shifts in their situatedness: giving agency, restricting agency, crafting agency, relinquishing agency and recovering agency – and we elaborate how these strategies are highly relational to one another. Our findings provide a more find-grained take on paradox navigation, by showing how agency is constantly in flux in dynamic environments, such as emerging inter-organizational collaborations, therefore enabling or constraining paradox navigation.


**Key words:** agency, paradox, inter-organizational collaboration, emergence, relationality

## Introduction

In this paper, we unfold how and why agency shifts occur during the emergence of inter-organizational collaboration while actors navigate the paradox of stability and change. Initiating inter-organizational collaboration is crucial to navigate the increasingly complex societal challenges we currently face as a society (Ferraro et al., 2015). But attempts to initiate and organize inter-organizational collaborations are often met and complicated by paradoxical demands (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022), which are defined as contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). One such paradox which is especially prevalent while initiating collaboration is navigating the demands between stability and change, where stability corresponds with continuity, reliability and exploitation, and change corresponds with innovation and exploration (Farjoun, 2010). As emerging and unfolding processes of organizing are generally quite messy – this sparks tensions between these two elements (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Putnam et al., 2016). Successfully navigating paradox through acceptance of tensions or oscillation between poles has shown to create virtuous cycles while organizing (Jay, 2013; Schad et al., 2016), where defensive responses in paradox navigation may lead to undesired consequences. Action, for example by the enactment of practices or through other active/defensive responses (Lê & Bednarek, 2017; Smith & Lewis, 2011), plays a key role in dealing with paradox, as action ultimately facilitates navigation. Consequently, taking action depends on an individual's agency, which Emirbayer & Mische (1998, p. 970) refer to as "the temporally constructed engagement by actors which, through the interplay of habit, imagination and judgment, both reproduces and transforms structures" - which will play a central role in this research.



However, the role of agency in actors' ability to navigate paradox has been largely overlooked so far. Earlier work on paradox has implicitly framed actors' ability to navigate paradox as rather agency neutral, for example through paradoxical mindsets (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), where it is assumed that all actors are more or less equal when faced with paradoxical demands and deploying strategies to navigate paradox (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Van Bommel & Spicer, 2017). In reality this is not the case, as earlier work has also shown how the situatedness of actors' accounts for their (in)ability to influence the organizing process: not all courses of action are available for all actors (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Tracy, 2004) – highlighting the importance and ambiguity of agency. Actors must be reflexive to identify paradoxes to take subsequent action, but they must also have the appropriate resources (e.g. power, material, hierarchical position) available to them to take action.

Hence, it becomes clear why agency plays a central role in initiating inter-organizational collaboration and navigating subsequent tensions between stability and change, as the situatedness in these contexts is still in a continuous state of becoming (Hussenot et al., 2020). Furthermore, the plurality of heterogeneous actors who must make sense of competing demands, roles, responsibilities and objectives (Bechky, 2006; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) shows that agency is key in taking action to organize collaboration.

However, although we have established that agency matters while navigating paradoxes in emerging settings, we still lack an understanding of how agency changes and shifts in organizing these collaborations. While Berti & Simpson (2021) emphasized the interrelation between agency and power in navigating paradox, the emerging stages of collaboration are still in flux and lack such a taken for granted division of roles or responsibilities where manager-subordinate structures are already in place (Knight & Paroutis, 2017; Nayak & Chia, 2011). As the collaboration is still in a state of becoming and actors struggle to balance both stability and change, we argue this also shows in the dynamics in agency among the heterogeneous actors. Understanding how and why agency shifts over time allows a more nuanced perspective on how to navigate paradox and organize emerging collaboration, yet we currently lack such an understanding. Hence, we set out to answer 1) how and why actors' level of agency changes over time as they attempt to navigate the competing demands between stability and change, and 2) how this influences their actions in navigating demands while initiating inter-organizational collaboration.

To answer these questions, we conducted a process study of an emerging inter-organizational collaboration, which set out to develop an innovative new service in the healthcare industry. As none of the actors in the collaboration knew how to develop such a new concept, they heavily relied on experimentation. We noticed how this experimentation resulted in an ongoing stream of new insights, events and actions to shape the collaboration – which also resulted in an ongoing shift in actors' agency and how they could shape the collaboration. Hence, this context was very informative to answer our research questions by unearthing how and why agency shifts contribute to organizing collaboration. We set out to make two main contributions. First, we extend paradox theory by highlighting the importance and multifaceted nature of agency. We propose five strategies actors use as different situatedness over time enables or constrains them to navigate paradox. Second, we add to the literature on inter-organizational collaboration, by showing how agency plays a key role in how actors contribute to organizing during the emerging stages of collaboration.

# Theoretical background

## Navigating stability and change in emerging inter-organizational collaboration

While inter-organizational collaborations are known to be rife with paradoxes (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Schrage & Rasche, 2021; Ungureanu et al., 2020), most research has been carried out in more established contexts which are generally more stable, allowing actors to get an understanding of tensions through for example sensemaking efforts over time (Farjoun, 2010; Seidl & Werle, 2018; Smith & Tracey, 2016). In emerging settings however, paradoxical dynamics are still difficult to grasp and in a continuous state of flux (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019; Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, Lê, 2018), but how this unfolds in inter-organizational collaboration remains a lacuna in our understanding of organizing inter-organizational collaboration. This is interesting because we know how, from a process perspective, emergence meanders between temporarily moments of stability among a sea of constant flux and change, where the future is shaped through ongoing iterations between the past and present (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Nayak & Chia, 2011; Seidl & Werle, 2018). Hence, the first phases of organizing inter-organizational collaboration are arguably quite important to understand to unravel future success, their ability to tackle novel societal challenges (Ferraro et al., 2015; Kaufmann & Danner-Schröder, 2022) and prevent the collapse of collaborative efforts (Dyer et al., 2001).

We argue that in essence actors are occupied with navigating the paradoxical demands between stability and change: "to survive and prosper, organizations must reconcile stability, reliability, and exploitation with change, innovation, and exploration" (Farjoun, 2010, p. 202). While stability provides a foundation for change by conserving resources through established routines, change, in turn, introduces opportunities for experimentation and risk-taking (Farjoun, 2010; Feldman & Pentland, 2003). This dynamic interplay supports learning and broadens the strategic options available to organizations, ultimately contributing to the achievement and maintenance of stability (Raisch et al., 2018). Striking a balance is challenging, as an excessive focus on stability may lead to rigidity and resistance to necessary transformations, while an exclusive emphasis on change may result in organizational chaos (Farjoun, 2010). We argue these tensions are especially prevalent in emerging inter-organizational collaboration due to a number of reasons. Collaborations generally consist of a variety of heterogeneous actors, who all have different backgrounds, priorities and objectives (Gray, 1985; Huxham & Vangen, 2000), and who bring different resources to the table, for example in terms of expertise or financial resources. Furthermore, the collaborations often still lack

clear structures (Ahuja et al., 2012), role responsibilities and routines (Bechky, 2006; Feldman & Pentland, 2003), objectives or an understanding of paradoxical tensions such as between stability and change (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Raisch et al., 2018). Also, as inter-organizational collaborations address complex challenges, there are often multiple timelines and issues being addressed simultaneously and in relation to each other, which result in an ongoing stream of events which actors struggle to must make sense of and require to take action upon to navigate tensions (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Seidl & Werle, 2018). All these elements combined results in an uncertain environment where actors' ability to navigate paradox is a lot more challenging as opposed to more established settings. In other words, they directly or indirectly relate to changes in actors' situatedness, where not all courses of action are available all the time for all actors equally: the resulting shifts in agency enable or restrain actors to navigate tensions. Yet, we lack an understanding of how and why actors move from different levels of agency in these emerging settings as they try to grapple with navigating the tension between stability and change. Insights into this phenomenon would provide us with a more nuanced understanding of how actors shape collaboration, and how actors' agency enables or constrains these efforts while navigating paradox.

## Agency and situatedness in paradox theory

The paradox literature has made great strides in exploring how to move from either/or thinking to embracing a both/and perspective to unravel complex organizational phenomena and navigating opposing yet interrelated poles (Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Paradox theory states that by engaging with tensions and working through them organizations foster virtuous cycles in organizing (Smith, 2014; Smith & Tushman, 2005), as opposed to employing defensive responses such as ignoring or overemphasizing one of the two poles which may lead to vicious cycles in the ability to pursue both poles or lead to organizational decline (Lewis, 2000; Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). However, the role of agency in how actors can navigate paradox has been largely unexplored - a concern also raised by Schad et al. (2016). Agency is conceptualized by Emirbayer & Mische (1998, p. 970) as "the temporally constructed engagement by actors which, through the interplay of habit, imagination and judgment, both reproduces and transforms structures". Agency involves the past, but oriented towards the future and present. Agency is vital for understanding individual behaviour, organizational dynamics, leadership practices, and social relations within organizations. It offers insight into how individuals make choices, shape organizational processes or navigate structures, contributing to a nuanced understanding of organizational behaviour and effectiveness (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Giddens, 1984). And it

is this particular nuance that can arguably develop the explanatory potential of paradox theory, as also argued by Berti & Simpson (2021), as it explores and explains why one actor may be able to navigate paradox, while another may be restrained and not have similar opportunities to do so.

A few studies have shown the importance of examining the impact of agency on paradox, e.g. research into nested paradoxes shows how tensions cascade across organizational levels and how actors' agency at these different levels enable or constrain them to navigate paradox (Gibbs, 2009; Gilbert et al., 2018; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). However, in general the current paradox literature tends to overlook or minimize the role of agency in navigating paradox. For example, the literature on "oppositional thinking" (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) or "paradox mindset" (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018) refers to how individuals make sense of the contradictory demands placed on them, and how they can leverage these insights to engage in proactive responses to paradox. However, this research does not address the degree of agency different actors have when developing a paradox mindset or attempting to formulate responses to said tensions. Another example shows in work which combines paradox theory and institutional theory (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Smith & Tracey, 2016), which is quite powerful to explain field level change for example in relation to addressing societal challenges (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2013), but often neglects the role of individual agency in pursuing change and navigating paradox (Albertsen et al., 2023; Smith & Tracey, 2016). Moreover, the current work on paradox tends to focus on how actors with stronger hierarchical positions, or power (Berti & Simpson, 2021), are affected by and aim to navigate paradox (Knight & Paroutis, 2017; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith, 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2019), where we can question whether these insights transfer to other actors without such agency and resources to initiate change. Hence, we argue there is still a lot of room to improve our understanding of navigating paradox by providing a more nuanced view of agency.

An important enabling or constraining condition of actors' agency to navigate paradox is embedded in their situatedness (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Hahn et al., 2023). It argues that not all actors have a similar degree of "free will" to navigate tensions, as for example a lack of resources, constraining power relations or hierarchical position within an organization might not provide all actors a similar degree of opportunity to proactively navigate tensions once faced with them. Hence, it is not merely a matter of cognition and reflectivity, where actors are aware of the paradox, but also a matter of to what degree they are able to act upon their agency given the situatedness they are in (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Hahn & Knight, 2021).

When actors perceive and make sense of paradoxical tensions, combined with a certain degree of agency, they are able to leverage these conditions to take action and navigate the tensions. However, if actors face tensions without a sufficient degree of agency, this might spark defensive responses and potentially paralysis as actors are unable to figure out how to deal with them (Lewis, 2000). Hence, an actors' ability to navigate tensions is more nuanced than previously depicted in paradox research (Hahn et al. 2023). As situatedness in emerging collaborations can be highly dynamic, as discussed previously, we argue this also heavily influences an actors' ability to navigate tensions between stability and change due to changes in agency and how actors are able to act upon their agency over time. However, this process remains a lacuna in the current literature. Hence, we ask 1) how and why actors' level of agency changes over time as they attempt to navigate the competing demands between stability and change, and 2) how this influences their actions in navigating demands while initiating inter-organizational collaboration.

## Methodology

We used a single in-depth longitudinal case study to examine the agency shifts in emerging inter-organizational collaboration as actors attempted to navigate the stability-change paradox. We first briefly describe our case after which we elaborate on our data collection and analysis process.

### Case setting

We investigated the case of CareHub, an emerging inter-organizational project in the healthcare industry, which set out to design and provide an integrated service of healthcare, wellbeing and logistics services to vulnerable clients in Dutch neighbourhoods. The idea was quite innovative for this field, as traditionally the three services had existed predominantly in isolation, resulting in a lot of wasted potential in service delivery, costs, speed, and their environmental impact. When combining these services there were a lot of opportunities for synergies in terms of combined deliveries, closer collaboration between organizations, reduced costs, prevention of loneliness and ultimately the prevention of future care. The idea was that by providing this new service in the short term, they could prevent long term illnesses and issues in the long term - allowing clients to live at home longer and saving on rising healthcare costs. A key element for CareHub was the introduction of a new role: a community concierge, who was responsible for combining all these services "on the ground" by visiting clients and combining and aligning the services of the different organizations. However, as these services had operated for so

long in isolation and were for the majority only aware and familiar with their own processes, it was very challenging to bring these actors together and design this new service together. On the level of the municipality, for the managers working at the different organizations, but also for the operational employees who had to work together in the neighbourhood - including the new community concierge. *"Who was going to pay for all this?", "Aren't we already doing this kind of work within our own organization?", "These concierges, do they have any experience with doing this kind of work?"*. These were some of the questions which showed the uncertainty when initiating CareHub. One major challenge among this uncertainty was how were they, collectively, going to both focus on change through experimentation and innovation, while simultaneously going to integrate this new work within the existing organizations and make a viable business case? Due to the fact that no one really had any answers to these questions, the participating actors were quite equal during the first phase of organizing the collaboration. Sure, some organizations had contributed more in terms of financials or other resources to set up CareHub, but when figuring out what they wanted to do and how they were going to do it, there really were no formal rules or guidelines just yet. Hence, as different events emerged, tensions between stability and change became salient and interests shifted, the agency of actors shifted as well. Hence, making this an ideal case to study our research question.



## Data collection and analytical process

We collected real-time longitudinal data for over 30 months at CareHub as the collaboration emerged and matured over time. Our data consists of multiple sources to allow for different perspectives while analysing and validating data. First, we collected around 30 interviews over this period from various actors in healthcare, wellbeing, logistics and the municipality. We made sure to also take into account different roles from the project management group such as the home care director who initiated the project, managers on topics such as innovation, research and program management, and more operational roles such as the community concierge and healthcare workers (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019). Second, we attended 10 meetings during these early stages which were characterized by actors trying to make sense of the new project: what to do, who to bring on board, how to structure and align different processes among the different organizations etc. Finally we collected a variety of documents such as periodic updates, presentations, progress resorts and news articles. To analyse our data we engaged in an iterative analytic process which consisted of multiple steps.

First, we wrote a thick description of the case initiation and evolution to write a story on how CareHub had progressed over time (Langley, 2007). This allowed us to identify how actors worked together to set up and structure the collaboration. It also allowed us to identify the competing yet interrelated demands between stability and change (Smith & Lewis, 2011), as actors tried to innovate and pioneer CareHub, but also struggled with how to structurally embed themselves among the different organizations and figure out a sustainable funding scheme. This is also where we first identified how, over time, agency among actors could shift. Actors who were involved quite extensively during one phase, would be very static in another phase - and vice versa. Second, to structure our data and our initial insights, we made a timeline of the different events that occurred between October of 2019 and April 2022 through structural bracketing (Langley, 1999). This allowed us to identify specific episodes where either change efforts or attempts to stabilize the collaboration emerged and began to take shape. Furthermore, it allowed us to dive deeper into how and why agency shifted, as we were able to accurately trace specific actors over time, and make an overview of what actors did and why during different episodes. We made sure to break the episodes down into shorter as opposed to longer episodes, as we found that events may not necessarily be impactful, but could indeed result in smaller shifts in agency. Third, we started to code these instances to continue to make sense of the data and aggregate our insights. Here we were able to more closely identify specific events, their subsequent consequences for the collaboration, how this affected the situatedness of actors and how they perceived the paradoxical tensions. Next, we identified how these changes resulted in a potential agency shift for actors, and how this affected their ability to act upon their agency to take action and navigate the paradoxical demands. We identified five strategies of agency shifts: crafting agency, giving agency, relinquishing agency, recovering agency, restricting agency (see table 4.1). Finally, we wrote down how these different strategies related to each other in every episode throughout inter-organizational emergence.

**Table 4.1** Different strategies for agency shifts

| Strategy | Explanation |
|---|---|
| Crafting agency | Actor acting upon their agency and progressively develop this agency over time to shape their own role and structure around them |
| Giving agency | Actor opening up situatedness to allow other actors to act upon their agency to initiate change |
| Relinquishing agency | Actor making the decision to not act on their agency, while they are in the position to do so |
| Recovering agency | Actors agency being restricted by their situatedness, yet still trying to initiate change and shape their environment |
| Restricting agency | Actor restricting situatedness, preventing other actors from acting on their agency to initiate change |

## Results

We now present the findings of our analysis. We identified five agency strategies that actors enacted in the process of navigating paradox. As we work through the emergence of CareHub, we show in every episode how events lead to flux in the collaboration, how actors used different strategies to influence their agency through a change in their situatedness and reflectivity to paradoxical tensions, and how this in turn affected their ability to take action to navigate these tensions (see table 4.1 for overview). In the figure 4.1 below we show an overview of the ongoing process of how actors can navigate paradox through a shift in their agency. Our analysis showed quite a turbulent evolution of CareHub over time as they struggled to balance change and stability. Across six different phases, we identified how the emphasis shifted from either stability, change or both over a period of three years. While CareHub started off with the intention to focus on innovation and change, they were increasingly faced with the need to focus on stability as well.



### Episode 1: Pioneering - Focus on change - November 2019 - March 2020

*Episodic event and change in situatedness:* In October 2019 the home care organization and a larger research consortium kicked off CareHub with various other wellbeing organizations and suppliers. Since the project was quite unique in combining home care, wellbeing and logistics services to vulnerable clients, the collaboration required a lot of focus on experimentation. There was a sense of pioneering where everything seemed possible and novel ideas were welcome. Part of the experimentation was hiring the first community concierge: *"I saw a news article in the paper that talked about this new concept called CareHub, which was all about helping the vulnerable people in the neighbourhood. They talked about this new role called the community concierge, who was this sort of linking pin among the organizations in the neighbourhood. So I was like, this is me! [...] I called [innovation manager], we had a talk and it was very nice. I had no idea what the role was really about, nor did they, but it felt right – so that was that, I was the first community concierge! (interview, community concierge).* Since there really was no plan yet, CareHub was very loosely organized which therefore also showed in the situatedness of the community concierge. Our interviews and observations showed that the entire collaboration emerged from the bottom up: there were no clear role responsibilities just yet, there was no need to focus on stability through setting up routines and rules, or focussing on a business case, there were no real hierarchies yet as everyone still had to collaborate with everyone to get the project off the ground. During a meeting we noticed how organizations in the neighbourhood

were still unaware of CareHub: "*Who was going to pay for all this?", "Aren't we already doing this kind of work within our own organization?", "These concierges, do they have any experience with doing this kind of work?".* The organizing process was still in its infancy. There was only a basic project structure with a small team consisting of the home care director, the home care innovation manager, a research manager and a few people involved with either home care, wellbeing or logistics activities. As no one really knew what to expect and the operational element of CareHub was so important, the most important task was to get an understanding of what was out there in the neighbourhood with this vision of combining home care, wellbeing and logistics in mind. Hence, the concierge was tasked with starting deliveries of medicine and meals, to learn as she went, and to relay her insights back to the project team.

*Agency dynamics and paradox navigation:* Although there were a multitude of dynamics in terms of agency during this phase, we highlight the agency evolution between the project team and the community concierge, as shown in figure 4.2. As the situatedness was a result of the initiation of CareHub pioneering the concept, the project team *gave agency* to the community concierge during this episode. While the team were sorting out the short and long term timelines of CareHub, they tasked the concierge with figuring out what kind of opportunities were out there "on the ground" in the neighbourhood. They basically gave her "carte blanche" on how to structure her work, as long as it fit the vision of CareHub. There were a lot of opportunities, which also raised numerous questions on how to organize these ideas: "*There are so many opportunities in the neighbourhood. There are a lot of people who feel lonely. So we thought, how is it possible? So we looked at what is there in the neighbourhood for elderly. And that is a lot, but a lot of initiatives also don't know each other. And also the general practitioner, does not know. So we also align those kinds of health workers for elderly people. And then we also thought, it is nice to know for people what activities there are in the neighbourhoods, but then the question is: how do they come to these locations? Lots of elderly people don't have a car or family that can bring them around. So we also thought about a "concierge", who can pick up elderly people and bring them around by electric car to reduce CO2 emission. And then we thought if we have a concierge, can they also bring stuff to people in elderly homes, and then we can make a new business model by clustering products from suppliers and she brings it to people at home, and she also has a goal to go to elderly because she has medication, laundry, the meals. And when she brings it to people she enters people's homes and can make a little talk with people and have a view of the situation and do something about that. Because that is not well embedded nowadays. So there were a lot of growth opportunities for the concept." (interview, innovation manager).* The

situatedness of the first period was enabling for the community concierge: all eyes were on her, but at the same time she also used this opportunity to *craft her agency* to initiate and emphasize change. Even though the concierge was more of an operational role in the neighbourhood, she received a lot of freedom to structure and shape CareHub. This started off slow, she made a few connections with clients through the delivery of food and medicine. She had a coffee, took time to talk to them and learn about them, and made sure the deliveries were being organized: "*There really is no system just yet [from project management] for combining food and medicine deliveries, I just use an Excel sheet and fill everything in there. Sometimes I see opportunities to combine deliveries, and I organize that manually. Interviewer: do you align this with project management, or did they ask you how to do this? Concierge: no, not really. I mean I keep them up to date every two weeks, but this is how I want to plan it now"*. There were small opportunities here and there that allowed her to act upon her agency to initiate changes. However, over time these instances became larger. As her client numbers grew, she was building close relationships with several clients. Since the current situatedness still did not restrict her in any way, she was able to increasingly structure her own work. For example, she also started to do groceries for clients, visited some clients after working hours and sometimes stayed with a single client for extended periods of time, just to talk and be there for them. She was able to increasingly build on her agency to cater to new wishes from clients or to pursue issues she found relevant: "*One woman says she has a lot of contact with others, but in reality she is very lonely. So I was like, I have to get her into the picture more. One way I do that is by going to the pharmacy and telling them: I want to visit that person more, do you perhaps have some more medicine I can deliver at that address? So by delivering medicine I now have an accessible way of getting in contact with her.*" As she was able to increasingly craft her own agency in implementing more sophisticated changes (e.g. providing tailored services, showing opportunities to combine services, gaining access to clients' homes to identify hidden needs), she pushed the "change" pole for the entire collaboration: due to the success of her work CareHub started to get in contact with various new organizations, and also organizations such as local and regional governments began to express their interest.

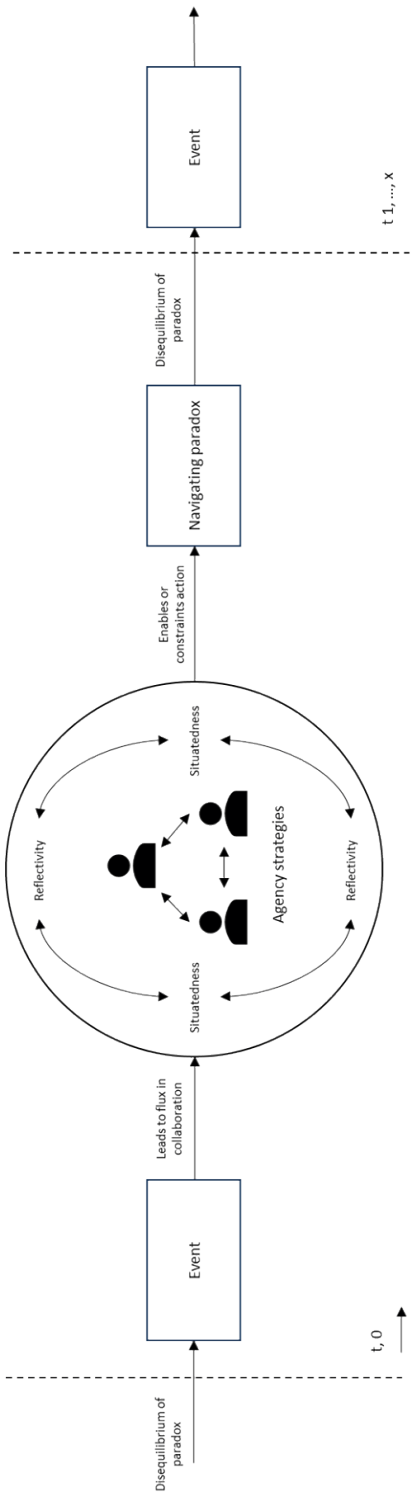



**Figure 4.1** Model of how agency strategies evolve to navigate paradox

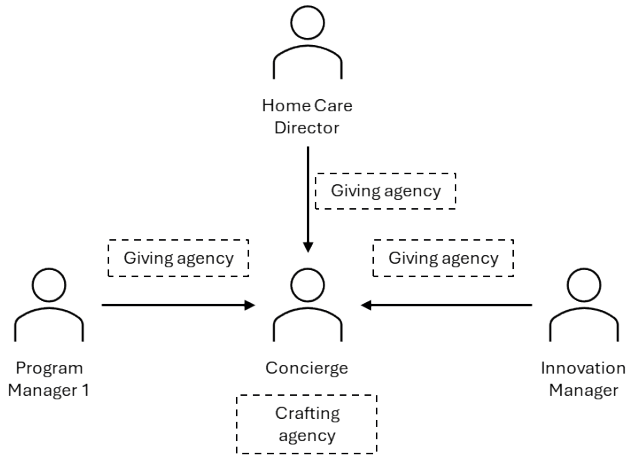



**Figure 4.2** Agency shifts among actors in episode 1



## Episode 2: Streamlining - Focus on stability - March 2020 - June 2020

*Episodic event and change in situatedness*: the emphasis on change - which was realized by the project team giving agency and the concierge crafting agency - had shown great promise. However, the current situation also sparked tensions as it did not necessarily allow for a stable and scalable environment upon which the project team could build. As funding ran out, the project started to evaluate their progress in a number of meetings. The project team reflected on the progress of CareHub during the first episode and realized two things: from a business case perspective, the community concierge was simply doing too few stops. Her personal touch during visits made the concept quite powerful, but also limited the number of deliveries and associated revenue from logistics suppliers. During an informal conversation, the research manager reflected on this topic: *"We ran the calculations in Excel, and in its current form it's simply not feasible. We would like the community concierge to continue doing the things she has been doing, but I don't really see how. We will have to make changes".* And second, as the temporary funding that had kept the project running almost came to an end, there was a clash of positions: the program manager wanted to continue focussing on research and explore their position in the overall healthcare domain by predominantly organising CareHub as a logistics concept, while the director and innovation manager from the home care organisation wanted to focus on wellbeing and healthcare.

**Table 4.2** Overview of evolution of CareHub throughout its emergence

| Episode | Time | Focus | Opening event |
|---|---|---|---|
| Episode 1 Pioneering | Nov 2019 – Mar 2020 | Change | Initiation of CareHub with focus on experimentation |
| Episode 2 Streamlining | Apr 2020 – Oct 2020 | Stability | Role and work of concierge is narrowed down to get grip on project |
| Episode 3 Professionalizing | Nov 2020 – Feb 2021 | Change | New project manager hired to scale up CareHub |
| Episode 4 Consolidating | Mar 2021 – Sep 2021 | Change/stability | Two new neighborhoods are started |
| Episode 5 Mitigating crisis | Oct 2021 – Feb 2022 | Paralysis/stability | Municipality pulls the plug on funding |
| Episode 6 Realigning | Mar 2022 – Nov 2022 | Change/stability | Agreement with municipality for temporary financial solution |

*Agency dynamics and paradox navigation:* This new realization that the role of the community concierge would need to change and a change in the situatedness of actors participating in CareHub, led to yet another shift in actors' agency. The home care director, the innovation manager and the research manager acted on their agency to dismiss the program manager, and the innovation manager was *given agency* by these same actors to temporarily take over the program manager role. Subsequently, a number of decisions were taken to guarantee a more stable situation for CareHub. For example, the role of the community concierge had to be changed. The project team decided to allow the concierge to merely focus on "signalling", which meant only making short visits to clients, identify any issues or what they would need, and relay this to other organizations that can take this up - hence *restricting her agency*. Furthermore, they decided to stop trying to design a transportation service within the work package of the concierges, and they paused the idea of designing a central "hub", from which everything could be coordinated: "*we found that with the current volume it's simply not viable to set up a hub, so that's in terms of logistics, but also for wellbeing and social services. There are organizations*

| Change in situatedness | Actors | Strategy |
|---|---|---|
| Lack of role structure and responsibilities, allowing all actors to take up agency and structure collaboration | Home care director<br>Innovation manager<br>Program manager 1<br>Community concierge | Giving agency<br>Giving agency<br>Giving agency<br>Crafting agency |
| More senior staff to take up agency to make structural changes | Home care director<br>Research manager<br>Innovation manager<br>Community concierge | Giving/restricting agency<br>Giving/restricting agency<br>Crafting agency<br>Recovering agency |
| New order among actors agency – new actors with more agency. Agency vacuum filled | Home care director<br>Research manager<br>Innovation manager<br>Community center manager | Giving agency<br>Giving agency<br>Crafting agency<br>Crafting agency<br>Crating agency |
| Fast paced environment with small group of actors with high agency | Home care director<br>Innovation manager<br>Research manager<br>Municipality | Relinquishing/giving agency<br>Giving agency<br>Relinquishing agency<br>Restricting agency |
| Passive environment where everything is shut down except top level and operational execution | Municipality<br>Home care director<br>Innovation manager<br>Community center manager | Crafting agency<br>Crafting agency<br>Crafting agency<br>Recovering agency |
| Focus on slow growth with increased focus on stability | Community center manager<br>Community concierge | Crafting agency<br>Recovering agency |



*already doing that kind of work as well" (observation during meeting, innovation manager)*. These decisions led to a more "streamlined" version of CareHub, which was more stable: there were not as many elements running in parallel, they could, in theory, focus more on a viable business model, and they could focus on initiating collaboration with more home care and wellbeing organizations - in line with the new vision of the project team: *"the community concierge will now have, let's say, between five and ten minutes per client to do her work. We had to set a boundary. After that through signalling she will contact the "second ecosystem layer" of existing organizations in the neighbourhood. They already have the expertise so they can then pick it up. The concierge can move on to the next client". (interview, research manager)*. However, on the level of the community concierge, she faced her agency being restricted with these new measures, and therefore wanting to *recover agency*. Where she had had plenty of opportunity before to craft her agency and initiate change, both for herself and for CareHub, she was now being told what to do and also what not to do. Although she still experienced her work as somewhat meaningful, it was no longer as free as it had been. It also became more difficult to bring up any

challenges she faced or promote new ideas in this new episode: "*with the previous program manager I was able to discuss a lot of issues I ran into, he was my daily talking point. Now he is out of the picture, and I have good contact with [innovation manager], but she is also very busy, so it makes sense I have those discussions less often now. I have to draw my own boundaries [...] it's now more about policy stuff, like logistic developments, collaboration with Rotterdam, etc. those kinds of topics*" *(interview, community concierge)*. Also there was increasingly more demand for her to be a part of the research element, for example to collect data. However, a discussion during one of the observations showed how she did not feel comfortable doing this, as it jeopardized her personal connection with clients. This reduced input to the project team and the limitations and demands which were placed upon her work therefore fuelled a desire to *recover agency* to initiate change and shape her work, yet contributed to the vision of the project team to focus more on stability within the collaboration.

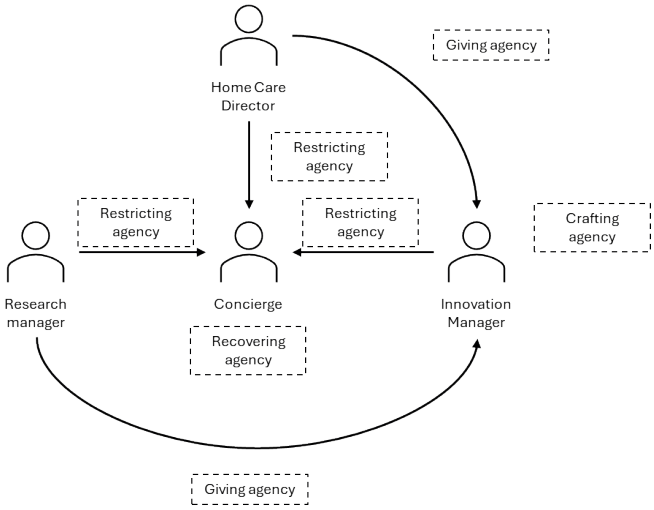



**Figure 4.3** Agency shifts among actors in episode 2

## Episode 3: Professionalizing - Focus on change - June 2020 - February 2021

*Episodic event and change in situatedness:* Over time the project team realized that this new situation was far from ideal either. They lacked a structural hub in the neighbourhood from which they could coordinate all their activities of deliveries, inventory, social gatherings, networking etc. Now, the community concierge improvised on all these activities: she picked up meals at suppliers or pharmacies,

tried to set up and maintain a network in the neighbourhood, and tried to connect clients to other organizations. However, this was always done on the spot, making it very difficult to coordinate: *"Sometimes I try to find other people who can take over or extend some of my work. I've tried for example to find volunteers in the neighbourhood to make visits. That didn't work out. [...] I did find someone now, who approached me while I parked my car, who was very enthusiastic to help out after I told him about my work and challenges. So we really have to try and find more people to extend my work, we also try to work on that through policy, planting the seeds. So that's still evolving" (interview, community concierge).* The project team also realized that CareHub started to revolve a lot around the community concierge, she had become the face of CareHub: *"When we look at the future we want to scale of course to different neighbourhoods, but we have to think hard on how we do that. When people talk about the concept they now talk about Emily, but not CareHub" (interview, logistics consultant).* And while this familiar face was very comforting and tangible for clients, it did not meet the project team's vision for scaling up the concept. The situatedness of the actors in the project team had become more constraining and did not align with their vision to scale up. During that period, the research manager chanced upon a consultancy company that had just launched a white paper on a *"neighbourhood service centre of the future"* (document), which proposed similar ideas to what CareHub tried to do: establishing a hub in the neighbourhood from which home care, wellbeing and logistics could be coordinated. The project team decided to bring a project manager from this consultancy company on board to explore the integration with CareHub. This episode was therefore characterized by a new desire for change, which formed the foundation for the scaling up of CareHub. Interestingly, through their discussions and the presentation of their ideas to other stakeholders such as the suppliers and community centre, they found out that the community centre actually already had most of the infrastructure on board to function as the hub for CareHub: the network of social organizations, groups and volunteers in the neighbourhood, experience with funding such a complex social enterprise and a physical location which could function as a hub: *"The community centre manager walked us through their day to day activities and financial situation, and it just clicked. It was a no-brainer to explore this further with them" (interview, research manager).*

*Agency dynamics and paradox navigation:* Based on the changes in situatedness of the actors in the project team, where there were new potential avenues for innovation to be explored, they *gave agency* to both the new project manager to plan and structure a new form of CareHub, and to the community centre manager, to plan and set up the physical "hub" location for CareHub. In collaboration with the prior project team, they were tasked with developing CareHub to bring it to the next level. The

innovation manager considered this decision to be a "*critical and important junction*" in the project. This opened up opportunities for the new program manager to *craft agency* to structure and plan for the next steps. At the end of this period, the program manager, in collaboration with the project team, had recruited several new suppliers, several other knowledge institutes, and they had chosen a new neighbourhood to scale CareHub: "*with these new partners we expect our volume to quadruple, so it's going to give the project a huge boost to grow"*. She also coordinated several work packages including logistics, IT and the social/wellbeing elements of CareHub to make concrete developments in different areas. This enabled her to provide input for the upscaling plans scheduled for February 2021. The project team decided to recruit four new community concierges to fit this new model. Emily proactively attempted to plan for the vision they had developed through the white paper. However, her *crafting her agency* sometimes also hindered progress here, as her more formal way of doing business did not always align with the softer and more personal approach which was often used between wellbeing/healthcare organizations: "*I visited this location that I have been in contact with them for years, and I heard the program manager and innovation manager had visited them to talk about a potential collaboration. They had talked about the business case and costs, and that it just wasn't the correct tone to talk to these organizations. So after I visited them and explained the CareHub vision from my perspective, and how it could aid their work, they were a lot more willing to potentially cooperate" (observation during tour with coordinator wellbeing)*. So although the crafting of agency allowed for great strides forward, it also highlighted the complexities in emphasizing change. The new situatedness of the community centre manager also allowed her to *craft her agency* to constructively design the role of the hub in the larger CareHub project, and think about how they could leverage their expertise to aid CareHub. Although her role implied less agency than that of the programme manager, she still had significant leverage in structuring the hub's operationalization. She negotiated that the new concierges would fall under her leadership, co-authored the new function profile, and started to think ahead about how the new concierges could be integrated into the existing work processes and how their expertise could benefit CareHub's ambitions: "*We have a few years of experience with organizing and funding these types of activities. We have developed this dashboard, which provides an overview of how to calculate and set up the financial aspect of providing these services to clients" (interview, community hub manager)*. Yet despite this new surge of change and innovation, there were still a lot of questions to be answered on how to implement these initiatives .

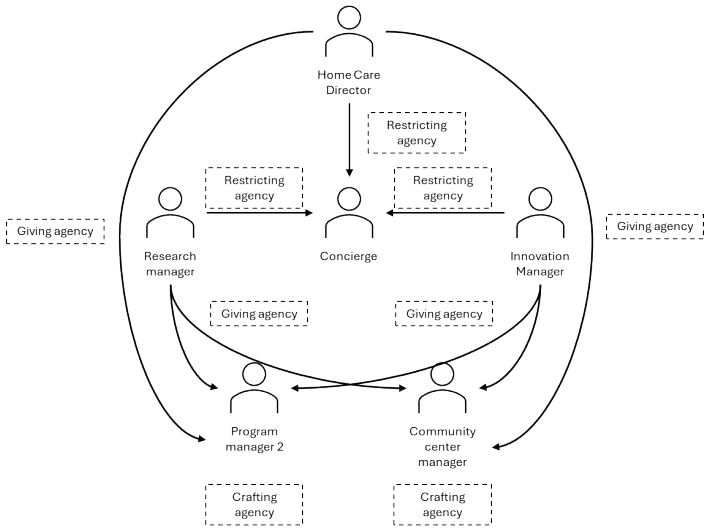



**Figure 4.4** Agency shifts among actors in episode 3



## Episode 4: Consolidating - Focus on stability & change - February 2021 - September 2021

*Episodic event and change in situatedness:* The fourth episode was initiated when the two new neighbourhoods were officially launched in February and March 2021 under the new program manager and the new vision. This led to a lot of changes and dynamics in the collaboration: the four new community concierges had to familiarise themselves with their role and establish connections with relevant organizations in the neighbourhood, new suppliers had to be found to continue scaling the concept, a future organizational form had to be determined, and the municipality had to be brought on board to guarantee future funding. This resulted in the following situatedness of all the actors in the collaboration: On the one hand, they were tasked, both on the level of concierges and the project team, with innovating and exploring the opportunities for developing CareHub: *"It's both thrilling and nerve wracking at the same time, it's really pioneering all over again. Fortunately we can build on the lessons from [first community concierge], but we also have to set up other things from scratch again" (interview, community hub manager)* On the other hand the team were also working on a foundation for future scaling up through a stable organizational form and a viable business model supporting CareHub: *"We have to move as fast as possible towards a professional organization which is embedded in existing structures and processes, otherwise we will remain stuck in this loose sand which is predominantly build on the people you just happen to know and are enthusiastic about a concept like this"*

*(interview, research manager)*. There were a lot of different story lines co-occurring and intertwined with each other, which made it increasingly difficult to maintain an overview and pursue a clear direction with the project. Although actors had dedicated roles now which were determined for this new phase, the dynamic nature of this phase resulted in numerous instances where actors had to stretch their agency and role to accommodate the ever fluctuating demands of navigating both stability and change in the collaboration.

*Agency dynamics and paradox navigation:* although there were a lot of developments going on in CareHub, and questions concerning how to scale up, it was also an episode where prior key actors felt like it was up to the practitioners now to take this over, and where research and organizations such as the home care provider were ought to take a step back to let others take over to foster innovative efforts, these actors *relinquished their agency*. They decided, while they could have acted on their agency to initiate change, to intentionally not do so to let others take the initiative. The home care director stated: *"we intentionally organized CareHub for a large part outside of [home care organization], why? Because if you keep it inside, at a certain point it becomes constrained by that organization. I think you should give it room to let it grow in a different way. If you keep it inside, we are the limiting factor. [...] That's also why I am still attending the project meetings, but I am not as involved any more as compared to the beginning to get things off the ground" (interview, home care director)*. A similar phenomenon was observed for the research manager, which although on paper was responsible for the research part, in practice had been quite hands on in upscaling CareHub: "*I'm "just" a researcher haha, the meetings I attend, those are really practitioners, so I think it has to be carried out by practitioners. I can only give some advice, solicited or not. But I have to admit I also took a step back, I don't want to burn myself on some things. It has to be carried by them. Sometimes it's very difficult: when it becomes difficult to get things off the ground, all of a sudden everyone is looking at you, asking 'what do we do now?' Those are not questions I have all the answers for. I also talked to [program manager] about this, and told her, "look, at some point it has to be their decisions, it's their thing, it cannot become our thing, they have to do it in the end" (interview, research manager)*. This in turn led them to *give agency* to the program manager and community hub manager to structure the collaboration even more. They were occupied with the operational and strategic questions which emerged during this phase, but due to the plurality of different topics that were being addressed this sometimes also became too much as they were occupied with *crafting their agency*: "*As different things are being discussed, such as for example the development off the app, we ask them to "throw it over the fence" to us so that we also know what is going on. But then the feedback from the operational*

*level is what is difficult. We negotiated that [community hub manager] is the point of contact for the concierges, but I realized that is becoming too much, that she's reaching her limits. An extra hand that relays between the strategic and operational level – that would be so nice, but we simply don't have that now" (interview, program manager).*

Simultaneously, we identified how the municipality started to *craft their agency* during this phase, as they had been increasingly involved in negotiations for CareHub, and wanted to know how they could incorporate this at a larger scale and how to fund such a project in the future. Hence, they had also granted them several rounds of funding up until now. However, as the details of CareHub remained somewhat vague, partly due to the complexity of the matter and partly due to the enormous amount of work that had to be addressed, they grew increasingly worried: "*We've had some tough discussions with the municipality. We are occupied with determining a new way of funding CareHub, where we look at a format where the municipality isn't necessarily a partner, but rather a customer where they pay per client. However, a demand from them is that we first move from a project to a real organizational entity. But how we are going to do that, and what the best decisions are to move forward… we have a lot of still remaining questions…" (observation meeting, program manager)*. Hence, during this period we found a lot of tensions between becoming a stable entity and pioneering and innovating to prove the projects' worth to the municipality and other stakeholders.



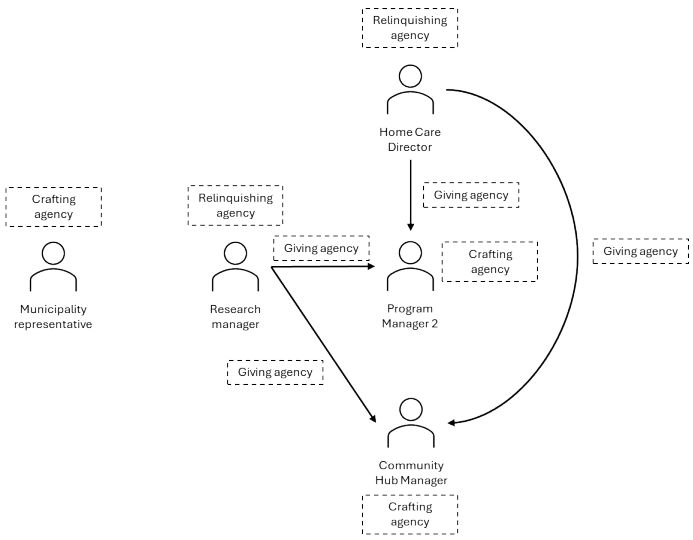



**Figure 4.5** Agency shifts among actors in episode 4

**Episode 5: Mitigating crisis - Paralysis but focus on stability - September 2021 - February 2022**

*Episodic event and change in situatedness:* Tensions had been rising between the need for stability and continuous change in the collaboration, which ultimately came to a climax once the last funding by the government had run out and the municipality announced that they were discontinuing their funding for CareHub. There had been discussions on how to move forward together, but nothing had been set in stone. Our analysis shows how during the prior period, there had been many "*difficult yet productive talks*" *with* the municipality, and the project team had hoped that the collaboration would simply continue. When this failed, it had major consequences for the situatedness of actors in CareHub: all communication between the project team and community hub was frozen and all plans for scaling were stopped. The home care provider allocated some emergency funding and only the operational work of the community concierges continued, while the project team went into harsh negotiations with the municipality behind the scenes to try and resolve the situation: *"I have to check every penny since there simply is no money. I understand the attitude of the municipality though. They know what kind of funding the province has granted, they know what it costs to hire a program manager, which was substantial, and if we take a critical look, they put all resources in the execution and all the risks are for the community hub? And that's something they have to get on board with? They figured 'the municipality has benefits from this, so they will simply join', but no, they should have sorted these things out beforehand" (interview, community hub manager).* Hence, the situation led to paralysis among actors in the collaboration, as people did not know what to do. They were not allowed or capable to further develop CareHub, but also a focusing on stability was difficult as they did not know what the future would look like. The sudden salience of the tension between stability and change caused by termination of funding from the municipality resulted in a state of paralysis in the collaboration.

*Agency dynamics and paradox navigation:* Due to the sudden crisis and subsequent paralysis a number of shifts occurred in terms of actors' agency. First, we observed how the municipality representatives *restricted agency* in the negotiations, as they had been a key participant in making CareHub a success, yet their withdrawal from the collaboration set the entire project on the brink of collapse: "*They dropped a bombshell on us by not continuing the funding for CareHub, they set their foot down. Basically what this means is that we won't be able to continue developing CareHub for now. We first have to figure out and repair our relationship with the municipality…" (interview, research manager).* Although the municipality had good reasons, as there had been a lack of strategic vision and a financial business model, the project team

had anticipated the municipality to continue working with them. By making this decision, they initiated a paralyzed state. In turn we identified how this decision also allowed the actors such as the home care director to *craft their agency,* as they were now tasked with pushing through intense negotiations with the municipality: *"[home care director] really had to push himself to save this initiative, I'm not sure if it wasn't for him we would be here today. He made a lot of effort to talk to everyone up the chain at the municipality, even with the Mayor. [...] You really need someone as [home care director] in a stage like this, he has the connections and can pull the necessary strings to guarantee a next step for CareHub" (observation during meeting, innovation manager).* Unfortunately, the intense negotiations between the municipality and the project team of CareHub moved the attention away from the operations of the project: the community hub and the concierges. As there was no more funding to grow, the community hub worked off temporary funding injections by the home care organizations - they moved from deadline to deadline. This lack of resources, lack of communication from the project team and lack of perspective led to fewer opportunities for the community hub manager who had to *recover agency*: "*It's been… a tense period to say the least. We don't know anything basically on what's going on and what's going to happen. [...] We need stability, the new organizational form has to be organized, but [home care director] told me that was far from being finalized. [...] I need some guarantees though, everything is being put on us, we have stayed operational all this time and we love to do it, but everything has its limits. I have to keep paying the concierges but to be honest I don't even have enough money right now to pay their next salary, but my hands are bound" (interview, community hub manager).* She, the community concierges and other colleagues directly involved at the work in the community hub were unable to initiate action to turn the tide as they lacked the funding, information and resources to bring stability back to CareHub, all the while they were the ones who had to continue the spirit of the project on the ground. Hence, this episode was characterized by paralysis, but at the same time the need for more stability by actors in the collaboration. However, as everything remained uncertain for several months, actors were unable to navigate the objectives back to a stable state for a long time.



### Episode 6: Realigning - Focus on stability & change - February 2022 - April 2022

*Episodic event and change in situatedness:* after intense negotiations had ensued, the final phase of our analysis was initiated when finally a new organizational form was erected by the project team: a foundation. This milestone, in combination with new efforts and promises in relation to developing a business case and research opportunities, ultimately led to the municipality coming on board again. They had

had discussions on how to move towards a more tangible blueprint of the CareHub project together, and wanted to explore a business model where subscriptions would cover a part of the costs: "*The last four months we have been working on the business case, as the municipality asked us "what would it cost to roll this out over the entire city?". That means an enormous multiplier, when you move from the neighbourhood level to the city level. The risks become bigger, the expenses become bigger, but also the burden of proof. So that means we want to move away now from the year-to-year funding scheme, but go back to the essence of CareHub: providing care, prevention and the social element. So we ran that new model for the business case, and were able to, theoretically, come to a price per address per year. Part of the cost is covered through logistics, you do some extra work through signalling, etc. And now when we scale, we can lower that price even more" (interview, home care director)*. Hence, these new insights provided for the need for stability in CareHub to start and focus on scaling once again. Although there was time and reason for celebration, there were still a lot of topics to figure out and the prior crisis period had not been without consequences. The program manager had to stop, as there was no more funding to pay such a skilled, yet expensive, program manager. Furthermore, the relations with the suppliers had taken a hit as well, as they also had not heard anything from the project team during the crisis. And finally the relationship with the research manager had also degraded due to a misalignment of research efforts during this new stage of CareHub. So, it was also an episode during which stability was required in multiple areas before they could focus on change again.

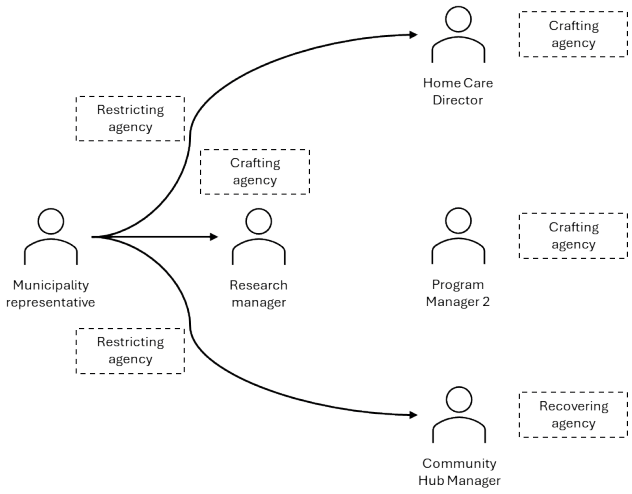



**Figure 4.6** Agency shifts among actors in episode 5

*Agency dynamics and paradox navigation:* During this final episode a number of agency shifts occurred. As the program manager was dismissed, the project team and new foundation board *gave agency* to the community hub manager. She had acquired a lot of experience by integrating her community hub with the vision of CareHub and the community concierges and was the right person to further develop the project in the new context. The community hub manager therefore was able to *craft her agency* to initiate change and development for the next episode of CareHub. She had to restructure the way community concierges interacted with the other organizations in the neighbourhood, had to figure out how to position the community centre as hub in the larger operationalization of CareHub throughout the city, and had to think about how to train and hire future community concierges for example. Hence, although the new funding scheme had provided some stability, there was also still a lot of change while organizing: *"We're still constantly on the move, it remains constantly being on the lookout on where do we stand? Where do we have to adjust? Where are the tensions?" (interview, community hub manager).* Furthermore, the community concierges faced another episode of *recovering agency* due to a number of new developments. Previously they had a lot of connections with different organizations in the neighbourhood, allowing them to quickly align for different client needs. However, in this new situation they had become a lot more isolated again, preventing them from doing the same quality work as before: *"We have less contact with the social team in the neighbourhood as before, these existing teams have been moved around and centralized. There is a lot less contact, unless it is really necessary. [...] Before we had contact weekly, made plans, and moved forward together. It went both ways, but now that's missing and the work became a lot more difficult. And, not to forget, they only have three places now from where they can work in the neighbourhood. They don't really have a base, so that makes it also a lot more difficult" (observation meeting community manager and concierge).* These developments highlighted yet another challenge to consider for scaling up from just a couple of neighbourhoods to servicing an entire city. Hence, on the one hand this episode was characterized with some much needed stability through the new business case and the new program manager, but on the other hand they also increasingly pursued change efforts to scale the concept to a bigger platform. However, this remained challenging as the collaboration remained in a constant state of flux.

## Discussion

With this study we set out to investigate how and why actors' agency changes over time as they attempt to navigate competing demands between stability and change, and how this affects their ability to navigate these competing demands in emerging inter-organizational collaborations. By drawing on earlier insights of paradox theory and agency, we found how actors can use five different strategies to deal with different kinds of situatedness and their ability to navigate subsequent tensions, and how these strategies are actually highly dynamic and relational to each other. With this research we contribute to the literature on paradox theory and inter-organizational collaboration.

### Agency as a relational enabler or constrainer in navigating paradox

Paradox theory has been a burgeoning stream of literature, which has seen rapid growth the last couple of years by showing how organizations and individuals can proactively navigate paradoxes (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016). However, so far there has been surprisingly little attention on the role of agency in this process of paradox navigation. With this research we set out to address this important gap in the literature. Earlier work of Berti & Simpson (2021) highlights the relevance of agency in navigating paradox, linking power and actors' ability to act upon their agency to navigate paradox. While there are indeed important parallels between power and agency, for example managers may have more power and agency to take decisions and influence subordinate goals or behaviour and navigate tensions (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Cuganesan, 2017), our findings show more fine-grained insights in how agency relates to an actors' ability to navigate paradox. Earlier research on paradox navigation shows how managers or leaders (Smith, 2014), or specific roles such as grantmakers (Pamphile, 2022) can navigate the paradoxes they encounter, implicitly assuming that agency is linked to a specific role. Our findings suggest however that while (hierarchical) roles may be more prone to actors being able to act on their agency to navigate paradox (Pradies et al., 2021), this is not necessarily always the case. We show how agency can actually be highly dynamic rather than bound to a specific role or position. Dynamic environments that result in a highly turbulent situatedness can provide opportunities for actors to successfully navigate paradox at one moment in time, while they may find themselves unable to do so at a different point in time. While roles are often conceived as "static" or more or less defined (Ashforth, 2000), an actor's agency within that role can fluctuate, either enabling or constraining actors to navigate paradox. We add to the notion that temporality is a key part of how actors can act upon their agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and show empirically

how this process unfolds in dynamic settings, as actors can have varying degrees of agency over a short period of time.

We found five strategies for navigating paradox, given a specific situatedness and an actor's ability to be reflexive on competing demands. These strategies involve *giving agency*, which means actors open up other actors' situatedness and allow them to act and develop their own agency to navigate and shape the paradox, and *restricting agency,* which means actors limit others' situatedness and constrain their agency. These two strategies confirm earlier work on how managers can act upon their agency to navigate paradox (Denis et al., 2001; Smith, 2014), and enact "sensegiving" practices to impose certain ideas on others (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). We also extend existing research s by identifying three additional strategies. First, we identified *crafting agency*, which means actors use their agency and situatedness to their advantage to further develop their agency to create momentum and proactively navigate paradox. These insights extend paradox theory by showing how actors without substantial agency at the start can actually craft their agency over time to take adequate action to shape and navigate paradoxical tensions - even in a more operational role (Wenzel et al., 2019). Second, we identified *relinquishing agency,* which means actors with sufficient agency to initiate change and navigate paradox themselves intentionally step aside to let others take over and shape paradox navigation. While giving agency is a more direct way of giving other actors the capacity to take up agency (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Pradies et al., 2021), relinquishing agency is a more reactive strategy: actors take a step back and do not intervene in the emerging of the organizing process. Finally, we identified *recovering agency*, which means that actors have lost a degree of agency compared to a previous period in time due to a shift in situatedness or other actors acting upon their agency. This restricts them in navigating paradox and shaping their role and environment, yet they still try to contribute to paradox navigation as much as possible, thereby nuancing the power perspective from Simpson & Berti (2021). Overall, these insights complement findings on the evolution of nested tensions across organizational levels (Gilbert et al., 2018; Sheep et al., 2017), and on different tensions sparking different responses from different actors (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013) by showing how a shift in an actors' situatedness and reflexivity to paradoxical tensions allows them to initiate different strategies to act upon their agency to actually navigate tensions.

Finally, these insights also show the relational element of agency in navigating paradox: paradox navigation rarely happens in isolation from other actors. Earlier work has predominantly emphasized the role of the individual in navigating

paradox, for example examining the role of cognition in actors' ability to navigate paradox (Miron Spektor et al., 2018), how actors' "paradoxical thinking" informs their ability to reflect and act on competing demands (Hahn et al., 2014), or how individuals enact different practices to respond to paradox (Smith, 2014). We contrast this work by highlighting the role of relationality in paradox management, adding to the emerging interest on relationality in navigating paradox (Pamphile, 2021). We already know that the involvement of top management teams is crucial for making latent tensions salient for middle managers in navigating paradox (Knight & Partoutis, 2017), and how "paradox peers" from outside one's own organization who face similar paradoxical tensions can aid in understanding and working through tensions (Pamphile, 2021). We add to these insights by showing the dynamic interplay between actors' agency which enables or restricts actors to navigate paradoxical tensions. Our results show that when agentic actors give agency or relinquish their agency, this allows other actors to act upon and craft their agency to successfully navigate tensions and pursue objectives. Similarly, when actors restrict others' agency, they may turn to recovering strategies to try to recover some of the lost agency. It is the ongoing change in situatedness and the network of relations that enable or constrain actors in their strategies to navigate paradoxical tensions. A shift in agency is therefore often in relation to other actors, be they managers, less powerful actors, or equals.

## Dynamics in emerging inter-organizational collaboration

Our second main contribution lies in the literature on inter-organizational collaboration. While there has been extensive work on inter-organizational dynamics (Davis, 2016; De Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004; Majchrzak et al., 2015; Sydow & Berends, 2019), we particularly add to the literature on the dynamics during the emerging stages of inter-organizational collaboration. Earlier work by Deken et al. (2018) for example show how managers in an emerging strategic initiative go through several cycles while strategizing resource complementarity together. Beck & Plowman (2014) on the other hand elaborate on the complexities of ad-hoc inter-organizational collaboration in response to a large sudden crisis. Both papers highlight the additional complexity in understanding and grasping inter-organizational dynamics (De Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004). While changes in structure, processes, practices or roles are already known to produce these dynamics in inter-organizational collaboration (Ahuja et al., 2012; Beck & Plowman, 2014; Jay, 2013; Vlaar et al., 2007), we extend these insights by showing how agency shifts are actually also a big part in understanding the dynamics in inter-organizational collaborations. Our results show that during the emerging stages of collaboration, uncertainty and ambiguity result in frequent shifts in actors' situatedness, which

subsequently spark agency shifts as actors grapple to pursue both stability and change in the collaboration. Established collaborations generally have more defined roles (Dedehayir et al., 2018) and clearer forms of governance and hierarchy to coordinate activities and goals of collaboration (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020; Van de Ven & Walker, 1984). Our findings show that the lack of hierarchy and clearly defined roles during the messy and unclear emerging stages create a constant state of flux in which agency moves around between different actors, enabling actors in different roles to shape the emerging collaboration. These insights challenge earlier findings that attributed the emergence of collaboration to specific activities of actors with specific roles (Dedehayir et al., 2018).

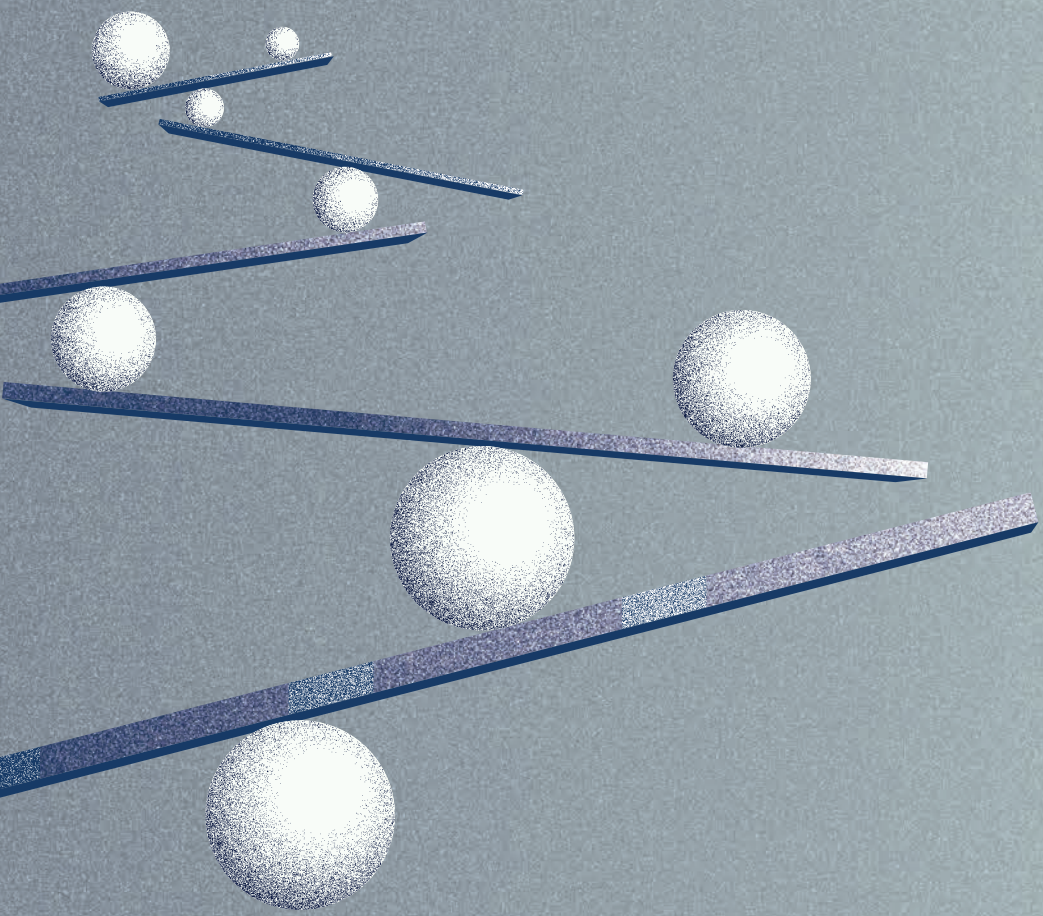


Our findings also show how the emerging stages are characterized by an ongoing iteration between stability and change activities, adding to the work by Deken et al. (2018). We found how these paradoxical activities are in a constant "tug of war" between each other, and that while active responses are generally considered to be quite effective in managing these tensions, this becomes and remains a lot more difficult during these early, emerging stages. As actors do not yet have an overview of the different timelines in the collaboration, different activities and sequences of activities required to achieve certain goals, or just start (over)emphasizing either stability or change activities during different episodes, the actors and objectives in the collaboration are pulled to all sides during these stages. Besides the learning element that is involved during this time (Raisch et al., 2018), it is also about aligning the different objectives at different stages of collaboration, with the necessary resources and actors involved. Due the complexity and dynamics associated with these kinds of settings, this is exceptionally challenging to do during the early stages of collaboration. The overemphasis of either stability or change activities results in the need of a similar or higher degree of the opposite "pushback" to keep the paradox from escalating, and both small and large changes can therefore have major implications (Plowman et al., 2007). Only over time these amplifications become less severe.

## Boundary conditions and future research

Our study also has a number of boundary conditions. First, we conducted an inductive study based on a single case in a fairly unique setting at the intersection between healthcare and last mile logistics. While the situatedness and the mindset of actors may have been specific to this case, the need to identify and navigate paradoxical tension will be inherent to other collaborations that seek to address societal challenges. Second, this study predominantly focussed on the different strategies for acting upon one's agency to navigate paradox, but we did not

conceptualize the situatedness of these actors in different settings. Future research could investigate and theorize different kinds of shifts in situatedness to understand when actors pick one strategy over another in different circumstances. Third, our case involved a variety of different roles ranging from operational to middle and senior managerial roles, which resulted in interesting agency dynamics within actors' activities and between actors. Other settings may involve less diversity of roles, which could result in different dynamics and strategies over time. Finally, for this study we mainly looked at the paradox between stability and change. However, paradoxical tensions are often intertwined and nested across organizational levels (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Taking into account other paradoxes such as identity, which is known for its rigidity and importance in setting up new initiatives (Ungureanu et al. 2020), might also provide a more complete picture of how agency shifts enable or constrain the navigation of paradox while organizing these inter-organizational collaborations.



# Chapter 5

## General discussion and conclusion

The objective of this dissertation was to better understand how organizational actors deal with emerging paradoxical tensions while initiating inter-organizational collaboration for societal challenges. I approached this research question by predominantly drawing on paradox theory and practice perspectives to unravel how actors navigate the emerging competing demands associated with organizing in emerging and uncertain contexts. By using different case studies in the context of last-mile logistics for liveable cities I was able to investigate how paradoxical tensions emerge and cascade across inter-organizational systems, how organizational actors are impacted by these tensions, and how actors navigate these tensions. The main research question was addressed through three sub-questions, which refer to the three different chapters of this dissertation. The first study investigated the emergence and navigating of tensions between the interplay of the organizational and inter-organizational level, where the second study investigated the interplay between the inter-organizational system and the individual actors in such systems. Finally, in the third study, I explore which type of agency enables or constraints actors in navigating paradoxical tensions in inter-organizational collaborations.

In the following section I will first briefly elaborate on the main findings of the three individual studies, and how the different sub-questions are addressed in these studies. Next, I take a birds-eye view, by identifying and elaborating on the overarching findings and lessons I found based on the cumulation of findings of the three studies. I will elaborate on the theoretical implications on research of paradox theory, inter-organizational collaboration and business and society. Furthermore, I elaborate on the practical implications of this research and show how this research matters for practitioners. Finally, I discuss the boundary conditions of this research, and address the opportunities of further research.

## Chapter 2: Navigating the Business-Society Paradox in Inter-Organizational Collaboration: Emergence and Mitigating of Vicious Cycles

In chapter 2, I set out to investigate why persistent tensions and vicious cycles emerge in inter-organizational collaborations that can hinder or paralyze subsequent collaborations, and how practices contribute to the emergence and mitigation of these vicious cycles. The underlying research question of this chapter was: How do actors' practices contribute to the emergence and mitigating of vicious cycles while navigating the business-society paradox in inter-organizational collaboration? By building on paradox theory and a practice perspective, I analysed four different cases - two longitudinal and two retrospectively. This study produced two main theoretical contributions.

The first contribution lies in extending the novel stream of literature combining paradox theory with a practice perspective (Lê & Bednarek, 2017). Earlier work on paradox theory has predominantly looked at how different factors, processes, decision dysfunctions or simplistic responses to paradox can disturb an equilibrium and lead to vicious cycles (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Es-Sajjade, 2021; Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). My study opens up this black box and shows actors' doings and sayings that influence paradoxical tensions and subsequently give rise to emerging vicious cycles in organizing inter-organizational collaboration. Paradox navigation is often implicitly framed as a deliberate act (e.g. Smith & Besharov, 2019), however, my study shows that it is actors' "unknowing" and muddling through the messiness that can amplify practices that perpetuate vicious cycles. This study shows how these shifts in amplifications are the result of "slipping points" which emerge if actors ignore the paradox or are unaware of it and overemphasize one paradoxical pole for an extended period of time. Not attending to these slipping points can give rise to subsequent bundles of practices, which further lock actors into working towards one dominant pole.



The second contribution lies in unravelling how vicious cycles can be mitigated. Prior work has shown how vicious cycles emerge (Es-Sajjade, 2021; Ungureanu, 2019), but we know relatively little on how these can be mitigated in inter-organizational collaborations. This study identifies "tipping points", where tensions become particularly salient after a prolonged period of sustaining a vicious cycle. These moments in time trigger reflection among actors, allowing a window of opportunity for actors to navigate back. However, if the tipping point is too volatile or actors are not able to reflect, these points can lead to escalation and even to termination of collaboration. I find that mitigation is a multifaceted process, consisting of reflection, getting momentum back into the collaboration and finally concretely addressing the underlying issues head on. Finally, while escalation may lead to negative consequences in the short term (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Cunha & Putnam, 2019), my findings show how escalation can also foster a recalibration of collective efforts, in which actors use the momentum and lessons learned during periods of disequilibrium to recalibrate. My results thereby question the notion that the escalation of vicious cycles necessarily leads to a finite end state (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017).

## Chapter 3: Individuals' Boundary Work in Navigating Nested Tensions in Emerging Inter-Organizational Collaboration

The objective of chapter 3 was to uncover how front end actors in novel and emerging inter-organizational collaborations are affected and navigate the nested tensions imposed on them. We know that inter-organizational collaborations are uncertain and emerging environments that can lead to additional complexity in organizing (Beck & Plowman, 2014). How do these tensions impact the individuals who start working in such emerging systems, while also still constructing their own emerging roles and tasks? Hence, the research question for this chapter was: How do actors in emerging inter-organizational collaborations use boundary work to navigate nested tensions between competing demands? I conducted an inductive process study of an emerging inter-organizational collaboration to investigate this phenomenon, using a combination of paradox theory and boundary work to pinpoint how, where and when actors navigate such tensions. This study led to several contributions to the literature.

First, I heed the call from Schad et al., (2016) to consider the "principle of holism" in unravelling how intertwined, nested tensions collectively make up a system (Schad & Bansal, 2018; Gilbert et al., 2018). My research shows how system level tensions of the inter-organizational collaboration coincide, become nested and ultimately affect the actors working in these collaborations. While prior research has indicated the importance of such dynamics (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), this study empirically and theoretically unravels how tensions migrate across organizational levels and over time. My findings show that this is not a linear process, but rather a meandering one where the system-level tensions affect the individuals, but individuals in turn also shape the tensions of the collaboration through different boundary work practices. This may occur through deliberate action (Gilbert et al., 2018), but more often as a consequence of actors navigating their own perceived tensions, such as different performing or belonging tensions. The study shows how the individuals working in these systems are key in such emerging systems, as they are directly affected in multiple ways from decisions on different levels, but also pose unique opportunities to navigate and work through persistent tensions on the system level.

The second contribution of this chapter lies in the use of the boundary work perspective (Langley et al., 2019) to show how actors enact boundary work practices to navigate tensions across organizational boundaries. While earlier work has elaborated on different kinds of boundary work (Bucher et al., 2016; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008; Orlikowski, 2002), this study combines collaborative boundary

work and embodied boundary work - showing how different practices are required to navigate both tensions in the collaboration and tensions inherent to actors' own work in complex systems. I show how these practices evolve over time over four phases. Actors are likely to start off without much reflection and awareness of the competing demands on these actors (Azambuja & Islam, 2019), but over time get a better grip on their role and its potential impact and may develop more proactive practices to navigate and shape tensions. I also found that the swift construction of an actors' identity can be vital for them to cope with and navigate tensions imposed on them. This strong foundation also allows them to, over time, "decouple" from the persistent tensions. Although tensions are still there, front end actors are better able to navigate tensions through different boundary work practices and a strong identification with their role.



### Chapter 4: A Dynamic Agency Perspective on Navigating Paradox in Emerging Inter-Organizational Collaboration

The aim of chapter 4 was to investigate the paradoxical tensions between stability and change in emerging inter-organizational collaboration, specifically why some actors may be in a better position to navigate this paradox compared to others. Paradox navigation is not homogenous across all organizational actors, but dispersed, uneven, perhaps even unfair at times. In this study I investigated why this was the case and how this affected actors' ability to navigate the paradox between stability and change. Hence the research questions of this chapter are: 1) How and why do actors' levels of agency change over time as they attempt to navigate the competing demands between stability and change? and 2) How does this influence their actions in navigating demands while initiating inter-organizational collaboration? I conducted a longitudinal case study of an emerging inter-organizational collaboration, in which I combined paradox theory and agency to further unravel these questions.

My first contribution with this chapter lies in the elaboration of the role of agency in actors' ability to navigate paradox. Earlier work on paradox has often implied that one's ability to navigate is linked to a certain (hierarchical) role or power (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Tracy, 2004), as it would offer more opportunities and resources to make such decisions. However, my research shows that in turbulent environments agency is not a stable characteristic but rather dependent on an actor's situatedness and reflexivity of paradoxical tensions. Hence, while roles remain static (Dedehayir et al., 2018), an actor's agency may fluctuate over short periods of time, allowing or constraining them to navigate paradoxes. I propose five different strategies actors can deploy based on their situatedness and reflexivity:

giving agency, developing agency, crafting agency, relinquishing agency, and recovering agency. I show how these strategies are also highly relational - they are always enacted between actors to enable or restrict actors' ability to navigate paradoxes. My results show for example when actors give or relinquish agency, this allows others to act upon and craft their agency to successfully navigate tensions and pursue objectives. It is the ongoing change in situatedness and in the network of relations that enables or constrains actors to enact different agency strategies to navigate paradoxical tensions.

The second contribution is made to the literature on inter-organizational collaboration. Previous work has already provided useful insights into the dynamics of (emerging) inter-organizational collaboration. While changes in structure, processes or roles are already known to produce these dynamics in inter-organizational collaboration (Jay, 2013; Vlaar et al., 2007), we extend these insights by showing how agency shifts also play a big part in unravelling the dynamics in inter-organizational collaborations. During the turbulent stages of collaboration, changes in situatedness are abundant and unavoidable (Beck & Plowman, 2014). In combination with a lack of fixed (hierarchical) roles, agency shifts all the time between different actors - both managerial and operational. This finding extends earlier literature, which have predominantly focused on the different roles in emerging collaboration (Dedehayir et al., 2018). I explain these phenomena by highlighting the fundamental interrelatedness between stability and change activities in the collaboration (Farjoun, 2010). As actors cannot anticipate the different timelines in the collaboration or the different activities and sequences of activities required to achieve certain goals, the actors and objectives in the collaboration are pulled to all sides during these stages. Hence, I provide a more fine-grained and bottom-up perspective on how actors contribute to paradox navigation while organizing emerging collaboration.

## Implications for theory

With this dissertation I set out to make three main and overarching contributions to the literature. The first contribution is to the emerging literature on combining paradox theory with a practice perspective to examine how actors' practices shape and affect paradoxical tensions in emerging contexts. The second contribution is to the literature on paradoxes in inter-organizational systems, by showing how navigating in such contexts can only be done by taking a system and nested tensions perspective. The third and final contribution it to the literature on inter-organizational collaboration, where I elaborate on how to navigate and comprehend the messiness in organizing in emerging inter-organizational collaborations.

## Leveraging practice perspectives to inform paradox theory

I contribute to the literature on paradox theory by further unravelling the potential of using practice perspectives to respond to paradoxes across organizational levels and in emerging settings. The insights from this dissertation extend earlier work of paradox navigation, which tends to neglect the actor in the process of paradox navigation. Early work on paradox for example highlighted how strategies such as spatial or temporal separation were useful to navigate paradoxical tensions (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Later studies started exploring more fine-grained responses to paradox, for example by leveraging a paradoxical mindset (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011) or how leadership informs paradox navigation (Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Tushman, 2005). However, it was only relatively recent that scholars started exploring how individual actors are impacted by paradoxical tensions, and how they navigate tensions - in particular through focussing on a practice perspective (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Lê & Bednarek, 2017). These perspectives allow us to unpack paradox navigation in pluralistic settings - especially in emerging settings where paradoxes are not yet well understood and might behave more turbulently. I propose two main contributions.



First, my research extends paradox theory by unpacking responses to paradox as a multifaceted process. Responses to paradox are often presented as static "single" strategies that allow actors or organizations to deal with experienced tensions, for example spatial or structural separation (e.g. Poole & Van der Ven, 1989; Smith & Tushman, 2005). However, we are also increasingly confronted with the need to address paradox more dynamically and in response to paradox' fickle nature (Smith, 2014; Schad & Bansal, 2018). My research extends this view by building on the emerging stream of literature combining paradox theory and a practice perspective (Lê & Bednarek, 2017; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017) - showing how paradox navigation is actually a multi-faceted process of different practices, which unfold and change over time. As per their definition, paradoxes are contradictory, interrelated and persistent over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011), meaning that they cannot be resolved. Responding to paradox therefore inevitably leads to paradoxical disequilibrium, which means that the context and situatedness of how actors perceive and are affected by tensions changes as well (Berti & Simpson, 2021). My research shows how, as tensions persist, they need to be constantly navigated over time, requiring different responses at different times.

In chapter 2, for example, I show how in inter-organizational collaborations emerging vicious cycles are "enacted into being" by actors working in such settings - contrasting existing insights into such phenomena that build on decision

dysfunctions (Ungureanu et al., 2020), perpetuating factors (Es-Sajjade et al., 2021) or simplistic/defensive responses to paradox (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003) to explain why vicious cycles emerge and hinder progress or development. I show how, over time, individual actors enact different practices, which emphasize either of the two paradoxical poles, and therefore initiate different trajectories favouring either of these poles. One bundle of practices gives rise to another bundle of practices, thereby further exacerbating the paradox. It is through the enactment of practices that such phenomena unfold, and tensions are (un)successfully navigated.

In chapter 3, I show how actors use different boundary work practices to navigate a multitude of tensions in pluralistic contexts. This research shows how in a system of different actors, multiple responses are required to navigate the subsequent complexity imposed on individual actors. I show how through enacting different practices, actors are able to deal with tensions imposed on them through the collaboration, but also navigate subsequent tensions such as identity and performing tensions, which they experience on their individual level. Hence, navigating should not be conceived of as simplistic responses to tensions at single moments in time. I show how different, and sometimes multiple, practices are required simultaneously to navigate different kinds of tensions. I thereby contribute to our understanding of how multi-layered challenges manifest themselves in practice (e.g. Bednarek et al., 2017). An important conclusion from this is that we need to perceive paradox navigation as a multifaceted and temporal process - extending earlier work that used longitudinal approaches on dealing with paradoxes (e.g. Smith, 2014; Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). My research shows how a practice perspective highlights actors' navigation of pluralistic contexts over time such as emerging inter-organizational collaboration.

The second contribution on using a practice perspective lies in its explanation of how complex societal challenges ultimately play out in our day-to-day encounters. Societal challenges are notoriously challenging to deal with (Ferraro et al., 2015), and require a systemic approach to come up with innovative solutions (Grewatsch et al., 2023; Schad & Bansal, 2018). Such challenges are often as in need of novel organizational designs (George et al., 2024), the need for inter-organizational collaboration (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022), and faced with persistent tensions between business and societal objectives (Hahn et al., 2018; Sharma & Bansal, 2017; Van der Byl, Slawinski & Hahn, 2020). By using a practice perspective, I show how these big and complex challenges we face as a society, ultimately also land on the individuals who choose or are tasked to come up with novel solutions to them. I show how such complexities are as complex for the actors facing them, as is the system that

tries to address them. In all three chapters, it becomes evident that navigating paradoxical tensions which come with organizing to address societal challenges, ultimately comes with actors enacting practices to navigate tensions within their own work, and address tensions on (inter-) organizational levels. Although tensions might not necessarily arise as large-scale business-society tensions, the underlying questions and issues that arise with working on such issues manifest themselves in how actors enact practices to navigate the associated tensions. I thereby show how "large-scale practices" (Lê & Bednarek, 2017), manifest themselves in localized activities by individual actors, and how it is through these localized activities that tensions at different levels of the collaboration can be addressed. Sometimes similar tensions are perceived on different levels, e.g. business and society, but more often than not they are perceived in a different form in the experience of actors' everyday work – for example through identity tensions. It is through the responses to these challenges in their everyday work that the system eventually changes as well. Ultimately, it is through their actions and ability to learn and make sense of the situation, that larger and perhaps more prominent issues can be addressed. I therefore contribute to the debate on how societal challenges are required to be addressed from a systems lens (Carmine & Di Marchi, 2023; Schad & Bansal, 2018) - highlighting the benefits of using a practice perspective to understand the messiness and dynamics which are associated with such complex issues (Lewis & Lüscher, 2008; Jarzabkowski et al., 2019; Lê & Bednarek, 2017).



## Complexity and nestedness of paradoxes across inter-organizational systems

My second main contribution builds further on this line of reasoning by contributing to the emerging literature on nested paradoxes to explain the complexity associated with organizing inter-organizational collaboration. Several calls in the past have asked to further our understanding of complex phenomena by expanding on nested tensions (e.g. Schad et al., 2016; Schad & Bansal, 2018; Cunha & Putnam, 2019). These scholars call for research to further our understanding of intertwined tensions which cross organizational levels and organizational boundaries. Tensions often coexist across a larger system, where addressing or ignoring tensions in one case, may spur reactions and responses on other levels (Schad & Bansal, 2018) - and while several calls have been made, the empirical work expanding on these questions remains relatively sparse (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Gilbert et al., 2018; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013) - especially in the context of inter-organizational collaboration.

In this dissertation I address this lacuna in the literature, most notably by providing insights into how tensions become nested in and across inter-organizational systems in chapter 3. First, I show how multiple tensions on the inter-organizational level affect each other, and how navigating tensions on this level unintentionally spur tensions on the level of the individual. During the emerging stages of such collaborations, there is still a lot of uncertainty and lack of overview, which prohibits effective navigation of tensions. Second, I show how these tensions subsequently spur different nested tensions on the level of the individual who also still has to make sense of the emerging overarching objectives and their own work - highlighting and unravelling the interconnected nature of tensions across levels in inter-organizational collaborations. Third, I show how different boundary work practices enacted by these actors both allow collaboration among the different parties in the collaboration, help navigate emerging tensions in their emerging work, and might even contribute to navigating tensions on the inter-organizational level. Finally, I show how this process unfolds over time - where initially tensions cascade across the system relatively randomly, over time actors collectively learn and make sense of the entire system. This allows them to make more informed decisions on how to navigate tensions. My research therefore extends work by Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) by showing how tensions in an inter-organizational system interact across levels, and how local responses to paradoxes (i.e. inter-organizational or individual) affect different paradoxes in the system (Schad et al., 2016).

In chapter 4, I provide insight into why (nested) tensions may spur different actors' responses across different levels of an organization or collaboration. Earlier work has largely ignored the importance and relevance of agency in an actor's ability to navigate paradox (Berti & Simpson, 2021). This work for example linked paradox navigation to a (hierarchical) role, implying that different roles enable or constrain paradox navigation (e.g. Smith, 2014; Pamphile, 2021), or framed paradox navigation as rather "agency-neutral", for example by elaborating on paradoxical mindsets (Miron-Spektor, et al., 2018). However, other research also states that actors' ability to navigate tensions is linked to actors' ability to make sense of paradoxical tensions, and their situatedness - hence influencing their agency and ability to navigate tensions (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Tracy, 2004). Not all courses of action are available for all actors.

I build on these insights by arguing that in emerging collaborations, both situatedness and actors' ability to comprehend tensions is highly dynamic - resulting in dynamics in actors' agency over time as these elements change. I identify five different strategies that may allow actors to deal with different kinds of

situatedness and agency to navigate tensions, and how these strategies are highly dynamic and relational to each other. These strategies include crafting agency, giving agency, relinquishing agency, recovering agency and restricting agency. I empirically show how situatedness changes for different actors involved in the system. In emerging settings hierarchical roles and subsequent power dynamics are not as formalized as compared to more mature or stable settings (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Farjoun, 2010). Hence, the degree of agency an actor possesses changes over time, and therefore their ability to navigate tensions. For example, an individual in an operational role might craft agency early on to navigate different tensions, but as the collaboration becomes formalized and the situatedness of this actor changes, they lose their "grip" on the process of paradox navigation. While previous research has shown how tensions move across organizational levels and spur different responses at such levels (e.g. Gilbert et al., 2018; Ashforth et al., 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), my research provides insights into why these responses may differ from each other. Some actors may not have sufficient agency at a certain point in time, given their situatedness and/or awareness of a tension, which restricts them to adequately address the tension. An additional explanatory factor lies in the relationality of paradox navigation. I built on earlier insights by Pamphile (2021) to show that paradox navigation often occurs in relation to different actors. As certain actors or dominant objectives gain traction, actors with a higher degree of agency at one level may start to constrain (or enable) other actors at different levels to effectively navigate paradoxical tensions. While actors have the ability to craft agency for example for themselves, we hereby show that a shift in agency is also often in relation to other actors, either with managers, non-powerful actors or equals (Huq et al., 2017; Pamphile, 2022; Pradies et al., 2021).



## Messiness of emerging inter-organizational collaboration - a bottom up approach

Finally, my research has implications for the broader literature on inter-organizational collaboration. Traditionally, this literature has been concerned with topics such as structure, governance, coordination and cooperation (Doz, 1996; Faems et al., 2008; Gulati et al., 2012), which for a large part imply a top-down focus on how to organize inter-organizational collaboration. While these perspectives have provided a rich and burgeoning body of research (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020; Gulati et al., 2012), we also increasingly see streams of literature emerging that focuses on practice and process approaches to uncover how actors contribute to this organizing process (Reypens et al., 2021; Hilbolling et al., 2022; Deken et al., 2018). My research has several implications to advance and inform both streams of literature on inter-organizational collaboration.

First, the literature on inter-organizational collaboration often highlights the importance and understanding of interdependencies in inter-organizational collaboration (Gulati et al., 2012), which can for example be about resources, tasks (Puranam et al., 2012), partners (Gulati & Sytch, 2007) or interests (Poppo et al., 2008). It is well established that the higher the interdependencies between these elements, the riskier and more complex the collaboration becomes (Aggarwal et al., 2011; Puranam et al., 2012) - especially with the multi-level character of inter-organizational collaborations. While my research, and most paradox research on inter-organizational collaboration for that matter (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Stadtler, 2016), does not yet combine these specific elements together, there are interesting synergies here that can inform this field. For example, my research informs our understanding of how actors in inter-organizational collaborations face challenges in understanding the complexity and scale of the challenges they face. By framing inter-organizational collaborations as multi-level, i.e. individual, organizational and inter-organizational (Majchrzak et al., 2015; Schilke & Cook, 2013), but also including a (nested) paradox perspective, I show how complexity in such inter-organizational collaborations emerges and affects interactions. It is not merely the challenges between levels (Majchrzak, et al., 2015), but especially about understanding the dynamics and interactions across these levels. Making decisions in one part of the collaboration inevitably leads to changes somewhere else - highlighting the interdependent nature of different elements in inter-organizational collaborations. The paradox perspective in my research provides a powerful lens to grasp and explain such complexity over time and across organizational levels.

Furthermore, my research expands our understanding of how the emerging stages of inter-organizational collaboration unfold. Gulati et al. (2012) discusses how cooperation and coordination challenges arise and are addressed during alliance life cycles including partner selection, alliance design and post-formation dynamics. These stages are crucial to effectively cooperate and coordinate tasks and objectives in such collaborations (Gulati, 1998), and focus on formal approaches such as the different mechanisms, collaboration structure or contractual arrangements required to optimize collaboration and reduce risk (Gulati & Singh, 1998; Sampson, 2004), as well as relational approaches, such as the need for trust, knowledge sharing routines or relation-specific assets (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Puranam & Vanneste, 2009). While both these perspectives are relevant, they do not provide insights into the sayings and doings of the actors involved in collaboration - how do actors contribute to the emerging stages of collaboration. My work extends this view by unravelling what actors actually do during these stages. While partner selection and alliance design are logical steps towards organizing

collaboration, they do not capture the messiness associated with organizing such initiatives "on the ground", where actors get their hands dirty and try to make sense of the complex environmental conditions (Jones & Lichtenstein, 2008) or ad-hoc complexities of working together (Beck & Plowman, 2014). I show how emerging collaboration is per definition messy - actors try to make sense of what they are doing and enact practices which are merely based on prior experience, situatedness and bounded rationality actors possess. Even if overarching objectives or end-goals are clearly stated at the beginning, I show that this does not necessarily equate to a linear and clear path forward. Making sense of these stages consist of a multitude of iterations between decisions, mistakes and experimentation, which ultimately bring the collective collaboration forward. I show how through different practices actors start to shape their environment, and how this provides fuel and context for new action towards an (unknown) objective. It is only after a while that routines, processes and structures are set up and a more formalized environment emerges in which actors work towards clearer and formalized goals. I therefore extend work by Deken et al. (2018) and Beck & Plowman (2014) by further examining the emerging stages of such collaborations, and how the decisions made during these stages set the scene for the rest of the collaboration's success.



## Implications for practice

Besides several contributions to the literature, my research also proposes several contributions to managers who work in complex settings such as inter-organizational collaborations to benefit from the insights of this dissertation.

First, I provide important insights for managers who work in emerging inter-organizational collaborations and must pursue both business and societal goals. While business objectives are often on the forefront for managers in terms of their day-to-day activities, and more funding for emerging initiatives might be associated with an increased chance of success (i.e. to reach business *and* societal goals), my research shows how this is actually not necessarily the case when taking both goals into account. There is a fine line, which has to be walked in pursuing both objectives. Too much emphasis on business goals might reduce opportunities for the achievement of collective, societal goals, which might benefit a larger and broader audience besides the direct partners and interests of (a small number) of participants in the collaboration. This is especially troubling in inter-organizational collaborations where a plurality of different individual and collective goals are pursued simultaneously. However, too much emphasis on societal goals, under the condition that sufficient temporary funding is available, also poses risks. While it might allow managers to come up with innovative and novel solutions to

pressing issues, it can also cause a lock-in effect where all collective resources are put into this process – overlooking the need or developing the know-how on how to commercialize such an initiative. Hence, it is important for managers to not put all their eggs in one basket when they start to experiment and make sense of the emerging collaboration – even though this might be intuitive when coming from a strong business background (such as the logistics industry in this dissertation), or when early successes towards attaining societal goals are an appealing path forward to put collective resources towards. That said, my research also shows that managers should not always be afraid of emphasizing one goal (i.e. pole) over the other – at least not for short periods of time. I show for example how taking the time for experimentation and allocating resources to potentially groundbreaking initiatives might be required sometimes to come up with something truly new and innovative. Such innovations would not have been possible when "the business case" had been on everyone's mind throughout this process. However, once again, it is a matter of navigating, being aware of the oscillation between competing objectives, and taking adequate and timely action when needed.

This brings about the next contribution, which concerns how managers deal with such emerging issues – or tensions – associated with organizing novel and emerging inter-organizational collaborations. While managers might be aware of the complexity of organizing such initiatives, my research shows that navigating such competing demands cannot simply be dealt with by a silver bullet. I propose the need for "navigating" such competing demands, as opposed to enrolling a single strategy, ad-hoc issue solving or relying on a single or a few interventions to solve issues. Managers are expected to navigate the competing demands related to organizing such complex contexts. Different contexts, time periods, crisis or developments require different approaches to effectively navigate competing demands. Navigating therefore is a multifaceted process, consisting of different practices based on how paradoxical tensions evolve and affect the individual and collective goals of participating organizations - for example, it is a matter of reflecting practices and concrete navigation practices when breaking out of a vicious cycle while collaborating. These are interconnected and cannot be seen interdependent from each other. This also implies that this is a continuous process: paradoxical equilibrium changes over time due to the responses from actors to paradox, which subsequently require new responses to make sure that equilibrium is once again pursued. Especially in emerging contexts which are volatile it is essential that managers are aware of this phenomenon – sensing early on that tensions are evolving, making sense of the situation. However, my research also acknowledges that different tensions during these stages often remain latent for a

long period of time – i.e. managers do not always know there is something going on in the background, which might cause issues later on. Sometimes these issues reveal themselves after a sudden event, requiring an ad-hoc response, but more often than not these tensions are left unaddressed for a longer period of time – hindering or frustrating collective action. An important, and perhaps first, step is to foster the development of a paradoxical mindset – being aware that managerial challenges are not merely a stand-alone issue. We cannot expect to design radically innovative solutions to societal challenges and ignore the need for a sustainable business case or expect collaborative efforts which consist of a wide variety of actors, goals and overall dynamics to remain stable without acknowledging that ongoing and continuous change is always part of (inter-)organizational stability. Such an approach to managerial issues allows managers to consider the complexity of the situation, and therefore allow them to timely observe critical turning points in the collaboration which require a multifaceted response.



This ties into the systems approach I have investigated in this research, especially by highlighting the nested nature of paradoxes and tensions. I state that organizing is associated with different sorts of tensions, which are also interrelated and cascade across organizational levels. Complex issues are not easily solved and affect the broader context in which they are interacted with by managers. Tensions between business and societal coexist alongside tensions of stability and change for example. Hence, when managers respond to paradoxical tensions, either knowingly or unintentionally, this is never a standalone event and only affects that one specific tension on that specific level. When decisions are made at strategic levels of a collaboration, this may have broader implications for the rest of the system: the decision to emphasize for instance business objectives directly impacts how less powerful actors are able to effectively enact their work, and extract meaning from their work. In return, when individuals are able to extract sufficient meaning from their work, this in turn might provide opportunities for novel work which is of such added value to the collective collaboration, that it also helps navigate tensions on the level of the collaboration. Hence, it is up to managers to take this complexity into account when making decisions in the collaboration: what are the implications of these actions for the different individuals, organizations or collective efforts? Especially when actors collaborate across organizational boundaries, this complexity becomes particularly challenging. What might aid in this process, it to consider the need for collective sensemaking during these emerging stages. While a paradoxical mindset of course helps, as mentioned earlier, it is also about making sense of the complexity of collaborating together. As managers' perception of the system is often bounded, it helps to inform each other on developments early

on – involving a broad spectrum of actors to foster an understanding of which consequences decisions have for different actors, goals, etc. across the system. This fosters collective learning, where connections, tensions and responses can start to make sense for everyone. If this is not done consistently, a disequilibrium may occur early on in the collaboration, potentially pushing or pulling it in a wrong direction which might be very difficult to turn around This also means collectively making sense of unintended or surprising events. While big events or crisis of course are critical events which require ad-hoc responses, during these early stages of collaborating it might also help to follow through or trace back why things emerged the way they did – before formalizing the collaboration.

## Reflections, boundary conditions and future research

While this dissertation has provided several contributions to the literature and practice, I also acknowledge that no research is without limitations. Below I will elaborate on some of the boundary conditions of my research in this dissertation, and how this might provide fruitful and interesting opportunities for future research. But first I provide a short personal reflection on the process of conducting the research.

Before diving into the boundary conditions and opportunities for future research, I would first like to briefly provide a personal reflection on the research process itself. The NWO research project I was a part of initially started as a "living lab", where actors collectively were able to experiment with complex and novel challenges. The organization of these living labs was quite non-hierarchical, with quick communication between organizations and a strong focus on making societal, especially practical, impact. At times it was challenging to find the role of a "traditional" university in such initiatives, compared with several universities of applied sciences, which were much more hands on and had shorter "production cycles", where partners in the collaborations could benefit from. We, on the other hand, often had longer cycles, where data collection and analysis simply took longer. Although this was challenging at times, in the end I am happy with the way we were able to contribute to the project. Both through working with eight different master student from various backgrounds and programs to provide the partners with input and answers over four years, providing practical summaries, interviews and roadmaps for practitioners to learn from our insights, collaborating with different researchers in the program on different topics which ultimately also led to a joint publication (Tolentino-Zondervan et al., 2021), and by showing the partners that there is an unique added value in working with universities and use a strong theoretical grounding to come to new and useful insights. What it taught

me was that science, and organizational scholars in particular, have much to offer practitioners – and that scholarly impact is much broader than simply doing theoretical research. But it takes effort and planning to sometimes bring these synergies into fruition. When doing my job interview for this position in 2019, I told my (now) colleagues, that this position was "a match made in heaven", due to its intersection between logistics, healthcare, sustainability, a focus on qualitative research and making an impact with scholarly research, based on my interests and experience at the time. Although nothing could have prepared me for what was coming for me and how this would play out, I am glad to say that looking back, it was everything and more of what I had envisioned. Doing research with practitioners is not easy, but this project has taught me a lot about how to make this work and how to show the added benefits of scholarly research.



## Boundary conditions and future research

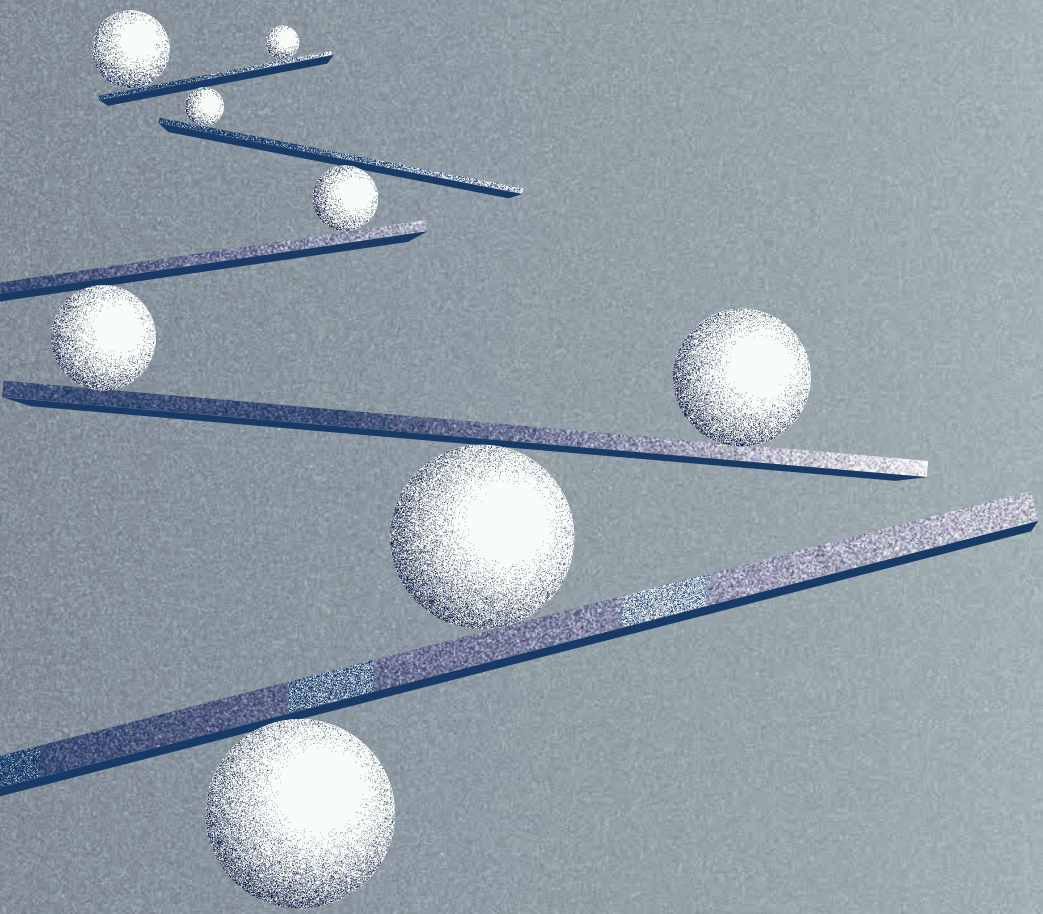
First, this research is bound to a specific context, namely that of the last mile (i.e. liveable cities). While I am confident that this context has unique and relevant characteristics which allowed me to conduct my research and produce novel insights, it is also bound to certain characteristics such as a relatively "fixed" variety of actors (suppliers, consumers, municipalities and a hub) and a relatively challenging financial environment with low margins - potentially hindering innovative efforts. These contexts may not provide a complete picture of how similar challenges in different contexts might look like. It would be interesting to see for example how different compositions of actors influence the outcomes of my research questions (George et al., 2024). How would these phenomena for example play out in collaborations, which are more characterized by public organizations, who might have very different goals, values and time horizons (Vangen et al., 2015)? Or the other way around, would collaborations consisting of a majority of private organizations produce different results(Faems et al., 2005)? Their emphasis on short term gain, potentially with more of a business case focus, might yield very different dynamics between actors. It would be highly relevant to foster our understanding of emerging paradoxes in different inter-organizational collaboration contexts.

Second, my research is grounded in qualitative methodologies, where I predominantly draw on interviews, observations and document analysis. By using different qualitative data sources, I was able to triangulate different perspectives to strengthen my analysis (Gibson, 2017). While I made sure to establish a good working relationship with respondents to guarantee open and transparent communication (Solarino & Aguinis, 2021), and this approach allowed me to understand and comprehend the complexity in collaborations, I felt like there

was still unexplored potential left in understanding how different tensions impact and influence actors and their subsequent practices. While I am confident in my research approach and the results produced in this dissertation, an ethnographic approach in studying paradox in inter-organizational collaborations may provide an even richer understanding of unfolding phenomena. Calls have been made to include more ethnographic research into inter-organizational collaboration (Berthod et al., 2017), as the unique complexity associated with organizing inter-organizational collaborations is sometimes challenging to comprehend through interviews and observations alone (e.g. Ashforth & Reingen, 2014). Boundaries between organizations are blurred and emerging settings are fast paced and consist of a variety of different events – making it difficult for respondents as well to fully grasp the complex environment they are working in. Furthermore, earlier work has also emphasized the sometimes subtle nature of paradox and actors' responses to latent or salient tensions (e.g. language, emotion, everyday action, humour) (e.g. Lê & Bednarek, 2017; Jarzabkowski, Bednarek & Lê, 2018; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Conducting ethnographic research in these contexts therefore might be able to produce an even more fine-grained account of how actors navigate paradoxes in inter-organizational collaborations – as I also started to show for example in chapter 3 by using diary data over an extended period of time.

Another interesting avenue for further research is to unravel the role of learning paradoxes in such emerging contexts. While this research explores how actors make sense of emerging contexts and enacted different practices navigated competed demands, the implicit role of learning is not adequately addressed, yet poses a crucial element in how actors make sense of the uncertainty associated with these situations (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Learning paradoxes are often observed in innovation processes, for example in ambidexterity research where navigating the exploration-exploitation tensions is crucial for an organization's survival. However, they are difficult to analyse in separation, as they are often intertwined around other paradoxes. However, research has pointed to the importance of furthering our understanding on this topic (Raisch et al., 2018), and while my research does address topics such as the stability-change paradox, there are still numerous questions remaining in emerging contexts such as: how do actors learn about paradoxes over time? What is the relation between cognition and actors' actions? How do different practices foster or inhibit learning? Such questions also spark the need for additional research using a process perspective, as such phenomena are best studied over time.

Finally, through this research I investigated how actors navigate emerging paradoxical tensions while initiating inter-organizational collaboration, and showed the unique dynamics which emerge throughout the process of paradox navigation. While my earlier chapters highlighted the importance of distinguishing organizational phenomena from inter-organizational phenomena – as insights cannot be automatically be copied – this also holds the other way around. While emerging is especially challenging in inter-organizational settings, this does not automatically mean that it is easy in organizational settings. It would be relevant to also study how the combination of paradox theory and a practice perspective might explain and discover paradox navigation during the emergence of organizing new organizations. As some barriers are absent from such settings, such as the divergence in objectives, (generally) fewer actors, and easier coordination, this might show very different results. Different questions could be asked, such as why despite these barriers, do actors still face such persistent tensons? How do they navigate such tensions? This might also provide useful insights for inter-organizational settings.



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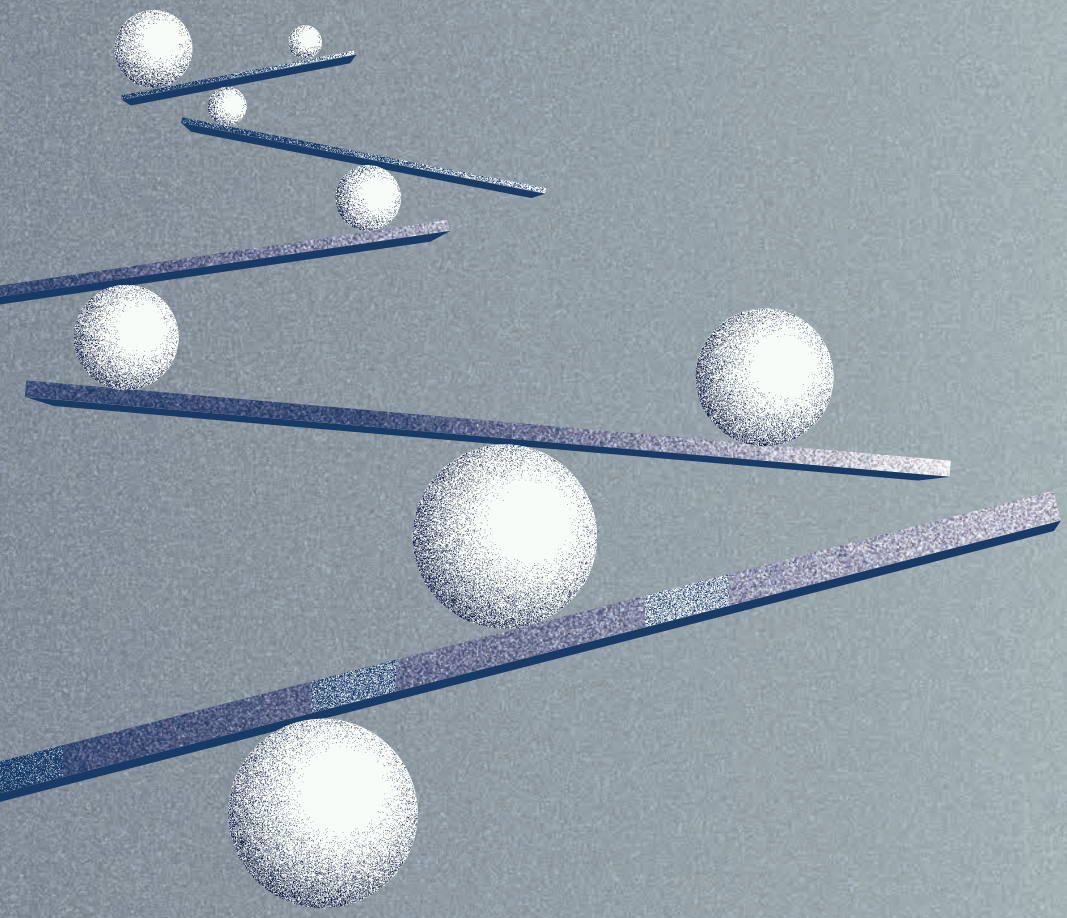

# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Data excerpts business orientation of MediHub and BuildHub

| | Bundles of practices | Practices |
|---|---|---|
| *Initiating collaboration practices* | Self-serving maneuvering | Prioritizing own business interests |
| | | Deflecting responsibility |
| *Sustaining practices* | Fracturing collective efforts | Putting off decisions |
| | | Venting frustration |
| | | Exploiting existing arrangements |

| | **Exemplary excerpts** |
|---|---|
| | Manager 1 university Y: He does not engage in dialogue with our suppliers to broker a deal on price, he just confronts them with the costs and that's it [...] He charges a fixed price per product, instead of per delivery, although he makes one large stop here at the hub. (MediHub, vignette observation, 2-2020) |
| | Manager 1 university Y: The static rates of the hub are in the way to connect more suppliers. Research manager: yeah, the suppliers also mentioned the starting rates are simply too high for them to join. […] Director university X: it is not a shared and fair business model. (MediHub, vignette observation, 4-2020) |
| | Manager 1 hospital: If we don't initiate anything for change, [*hub owner*] does very little to progress the concept. He has to sit down and talk with suppliers to develop their relationship and figure out how to allocate costs between them. (MediHub, vignette observation, 2-2020) |
| | Previously coordinators were not able to take decisions with contractors, they weren't given any mandate [*by the hub*]. I heard "oh, no, no, we cannot make these decisions". The [*hub*] simply did not care though. (BuildHub, interview, site manager) |
| | Manager 2 university Y: How do we get people moving? [*silence*] We have enthusiastic people but there is a lack of support for sustainability. Research manager: we have to make clear what the urgency is. Manager 1 university Y manager: we also need to show something, progress, but what? [*nothing is decided*] (MediHub, vignette observation, 01-2021) |
| | Manager 2 university Y: Do we know if [*hub*] organizes their own transport or collaborates with [*other provider*]? Who are we doing business with? Project manager: we should ask them, I've taken notes. (MediHub, vignette observation, 8-2020) – Research manager: what are the responsibilities of [*other provider*] in delivering our goods? They were cc'd in the last e-mails again. Research manager: we have to take a look at that, I don't know (MediHub, vignette observation, 12-2020) |
| | Manager hospital: every single time we are walking into this cost issue, it won't work!! Do we need to find a different hub? [*no response*] Project manager: we first need to enter conversations about this with the hub. Manager 1 hospital: this way we won't increase our volumes, we really won't!! (MediHub, vignette observation, 3-2021) |
| | Manager 2 university Y: I had contact with [*supplier*] and they are fed up with the hub, and don't want to collaborate any more – I think the bad relationship has taken a toll. […] we can't incentivize our suppliers to join. (MediHub, vignette observation, 2-2021) |
| | They wanted to adhere to the contract we had, they didn't want to develop and that was the issue that we were discussing all the time. We said, you have to make some plans for development and we have to change things because we have seen that the services are not working. But they said we can't change it because we are adhering to the contract. (BuildHub, interview site manager) |
| | Director university X: [*hub owner*] had all kinds of demands on the hub and its growth, and called us out on us promising to recuperate his decision in five years. [...] he has a real fighting mentality, but no empathy towards us [*the concept*] at all (MediHub, vignette observation, 2-2021) |

**Appendix 1.** Continued

| | **Bundles of practices** | **Practices** |
|---|---|---|
| Mitigating practices | Rejuvenating momentum | Recalibrating collective interests |
| | | Instigating small wins |
| | | Turning around collaboration arrangements |

| | Exemplary excerpts |
|---|---|
| | Director university X: What we're currently doing is destructive for the logistics concept of our supplier […] to try and force them into using our hub and make extra costs in the process (MediHub, vignette observation, 8-2021) |
| | Director university X: On the one hand we can say, alright we did a good job, we have six suppliers with [hub], but I mean, what if we had chosen another partner? [...] I wouldn't mind stopping our collaboration and just figuring that out… (MediHub, vignette observation, 9-2021) |
| | Manager 2 university Y: One of the things we want to push is the integration of service and building logistics on campus between the organizations, we looked into it and it seems like there are some very interesting synergies there. Project manager: I'll say let's just get started, [manager 1 hospital] also said we can just start with it. (MediHub, vignette observation, 08-2021) |
| | [*The first meeting in months where the hub is not negotiated]:* Project manager: "we've heard a lot of good things from our colleagues using the lockers, even though it hasn't been that big yet. We would like to look at possibilities to further scale the initiative" (MediHub, observation, 8-2021) |
| | Manager 2 university Y: What could also be an option is to let suppliers choose a hub themselves, instead of our own. We'll have to talk to the suppliers first though, to figure out what their main barriers are. Manager 1 hospital: let's also tell the hub that we are going to contact the suppliers about this, so at least this process is transparent. (MediHub, vignette observation, 9-2021) |
| | So in the end we ended the contract in 2017, one year before it should have ended. [...] However, it also gave us the opportunity to look at a new consultancy organization [for exploiting the hub], and implement our learned lessons with them and steer the project in a good direction. (BuildHub, interview program director) |

## Appendices - Appendix 2. Data excerpts societal orientation of CareHub and RetHub

| | Bundles of practices | Practices |
|---|---|---|
| *Initiating collaboration practices* | Quickly building momentum | Leveraging available resources |
| | | Sidelining business issues |
| *Sustaining practices* | Pursuing societal purpose single mindedly | Idealizing success |
| | | Overextending resources |
| | | Omitting key actors |

| | Exemplary excerpts |
|---|---|
| | Last May we met each other for the first time and came up with a lot of ideas. It started itching for me, once I get something in my head I want to start and do it. In September I told everyone: "on the first of February I want to start with two new neighborhoods, four concierges, six days a week with six suppliers", and we did it. (CareHub, interview project manager, 12-2020) |
| | It was quite difficult to get in touch with the different organizations in the neighborhood, they simply did not know CareHub. […] But I reached out to many organizations and people at the beginning. We got the word out and told people about CareHub. People quickly began to notice us and saw what we could do. (CareHub, interview concierge, 6-2020) |
| | Another common thing in the decarbonization projects I've been working on is you might have a goal [*business case*], [...] but, how do you get there? I've seen that quite vividly at RetHub. People usually don't know. [...] or if I want to achieve that what should I do first and second. Organizations all have the same goal, but why do they have these goals is also important to understand. (RetHub, interview researcher) |
| | While actors from CareHub did talk about the need for a sustainable business model in the future, this was not something they actively pursued during the early stages of organizing collaboration. They did small ad-hoc business calculations for the logistic suppliers for example, but did not start to plan and develop for a long term financial plan. This was partially due to them having external funding to first get the project off the ground, and because the problem was quite complex (CareHub, observation) |
| | For the future […] you know I think that if we, at the end of the year, three neighborhoods, [*neighborhood 1 and 2*], and then started a third one, and operational in a good way, then I'll be very content. If we have grown to nine, ten, well then we have something, then you're really something. Then you've learned a lot en I think after that, the year after we will be ready for the next step, into a new region. (CareHub, interview director home care, 5-2021) |
| | The RetHub project increasingly received funding from various national and European grants, through the efforts of the municipality and researchers to continue experimenting - even though the scheme never broke even and no drastic changes were made to the scheme or the conditions in the mutual contract. (RetHub, observation documents and research report) |
| | I love it, don't get me wrong, but I'm in over my head. I only have a few hours per week to spend on this project, but last week for example I already worked three full days on CareHub. I have other projects to run as well, and that's also on top of my regular work load. (CareHub, interview home care manager, 5-2021) |
| | Observation from multiple interviews and informal conversations: whenever funding ran out, the home care provider was there to inject new capital into the project to keep it running. However, there was no plan or strategic objective to justify these capital injections and mainly led to the ability to move from deadline to deadline. (CareHub, observation) |
| | We heard practically nothing since the funding ran out [*from project management*]. It puts a strain on us, because we don't know what's going to happen. I have to pay the concierges, but […] I'm not sure if I can pay them next month, and I feel responsible because they are under our employment. (CareHub, interview community hub manager, 11-2021) |
| | The retailers that used the scheme had different motives for using it. […] I must admit though, we could have investigated this sooner and figure out how we could have involved the retailers more. […] now we just casted a broad net in trying to involve them. (RetHub, interview municipality representative) |

**Appendix 2.** Continued

| | **Bundles of practices** | **Practices** |
|---|---|---|
| *Mitigating practices* | Manifesting vision | Reflecting on business oriented issues |
| | | Leveraging previous success |
| | | Concretizing business viability |

| | Exemplary excerpts |
|---|---|
| | I think part of the problem is that we are not established yet, we need some kind of new organizational form which will provide us with legitimacy, people and tools to work this through to a viable concept (CareHub, interview coordinator social care, 2-2022) |
| | I think the probably the biggest challenge was, recognizing that freight consolidation is just part of a solution. So it may work for one business, but will be totally inappropriate for another. And I think that was that was the biggest challenge is trying to find out who would be best place to use a freight consolidation scheme. And that was something that we didn't really identify. (RetHub, interview municipality representative) |
| | Home care manager: I've tugged and pushed for CareHub, we had to do a lot of negotiating and convincing [*laughter*]. It was all or nothing. […] I brought it up during various meetings with the municipality and other relations we have in the neighborhood and tried to convince people that we had something that was working and that had benefit. Even though the business case isn't done yet, this does not mean it's not worth pursuing. (CareHub, vignette observation, 3-2022) |
| | Project leader: I believe in this project. We have come so far, from nothing. We have seen the impact we can make for our clients, it is life changing. [...] We have all poured our hearts and souls into this. We will make it work, one way or another. (CareHub, vignette observation, 2-2022) |
| | The foundation as the organizational form of CareHub has been an enormous boost. It has created a lot of clarity: we could contact suppliers again on how to move forward, we have a platform to talk to the municipality [...] and it provides us with a platform to deal with our financial situation (CareHub, interview community hub manager, 4-2023) |
| | This new price per client per year, it's not just a cost indication we can work with, but it's also a tool I can use to negotiate with the municipality. Beforehand I couldn't do that, but now we have something to work with which I can say "ok knowing this, how are we going to make this work?" (CareHub, interview home care director, 4-2023) |

## Summary

In this dissertation, I investigate how actors contribute to the emergence of organizing inter-organizational collaborations that set out to address pressing societal challenges. While organizing inter-organizational collaboration is challenging in itself, this is particularly precarious during the early stages of collaboration, as the added complexity, uncertainty and volatility of setting up collaboration adds another layer of complexity. At the same time, the success of such collaborations is vital in addressing societal challenges, as only by collaborating across organizational boundaries and combining resources, expertise and knowledge, we can come up with novel and innovative solutions to these challenges. To capture the complexity of setting up such collaborations, we combine paradox theory and practice theories. Paradox theory sees such challenges as contradictory yet interdependent elements that appear simultaneously and persist over time – requiring constant navigating to pursue equilibrium between oppositional elements. For the "navigating" of paradoxes, we draw on practice theories, highlighting how the "doings" and "sayings" of actors in these collaborations navigate tensions. Taking these elements together, I set out to answer the research question: *How do actors navigate emerging paradoxical tensions while initiating inter-organizational collaborations to address societal challenges?* To answer this research question we conduct research in the context of last-mile logistics within urban contexts, where actors collectively attempt to set up collaborations to organize efficient and cost effective deliveries of goods and services, while at the same time making societal impact for society. For this dissertation I conducted three studies to investigate how actors organized collaborations:

The first study in chapter two takes a broader perspective to how actors navigate the business-society paradox, by comparing four different inter-organizational collaborations, which set out to address different challenges for the last mile. In this research I was curious as to why such collaborations often struggle to get off the ground and why actors keep running into similar issues, which prevent them from effectively addressing the challenges they set out to tackle. I show how this is not always a conscious process, especially during the emerging stages of collaboration, which are more prone to uncertainty and ambiguity. By combining paradox theory with a practice perspective, I show how actors' bundles of practices favouring either the business or societal pole give rise to two different orientations of emerging vicious cycles, which inhibit collaboration. I show how initial practices in these orientations led to slipping points, which led to subsequent practices that further fuel the vicious cycle in either of the two orientations and inhibit progress. When

paradoxical poles were emphasized too much, the ongoing enactment of practices exacerbated the one-sided orientation towards a paradoxical pole. Tipping points emerged, which either led to termination of the collaboration or sparked mitigating practices, which helped to navigate back to equilibrium. I show how escalation of vicious cycles can under certain conditions be beneficial in that it can provide productive instances to help actors recalibrate and navigate the back to equilibrium.

For the second study in chapter three, I was interested in how people working at the coal face of such emerging inter-organizational collaborations were affected by the decisions made at strategic level while still figuring out their own emerging work and purpose. Hence, for this study I zoomed in on how such individuals were positioned in the inter-organizational collaboration, how they were impacted by inter-organizational decisions, and how they found their way over time. I conducted a longitudinal case of an emerging inter-organizational collaboration, and collected different types of qualitative data, among which diary data, which allowed me to accurately trace how individuals were impacted and dealt with different tensions. By combining paradox theory with a boundary work lens this study provides two main contributions. First, by identifying different tensions and tracing these over time, I was able to show how tensions become nested, or interrelated across inter-organizational levels. Paradox navigation on the inter-organizational level sparked different intertwined tensions on the level of the individual. Second, by using the boundary work perspective, this study shows how different practices are enacted to foster collaboration between inter-organizational actors, but can also lead to identity tensions as these individuals make sense of their own role and navigate the competing demands imposed on them. I show how this intricate process plays out over time, and how actors' boundary work practices are ultimately able to successfully deal with persistent tensions that are imposed on them from the collaboration.



The prior studies provided insights into how actors dealt with tensions across different levels of analysis by enacting different practices. But they also raised additional questions, as I observed how some actors in emerging inter-organizational collaborations were able to effectively navigate tensions, while others were not. Why was this the case? Therefore, the fourth chapter questions why different actors develop the ability to navigate paradoxical tensions in such emerging settings. By conducting a process study of an emerging collaboration, I was able to follow how emergence of collaboration was a balancing act between periods of stability and change. Whether an actors could navigate tensions was dependent on their agency, which in turn was linked to them being able to be reflexive about tension, (i.e. are they aware of the tension and do they understand it),

and the constraints of their situation. My analysis showed how different periods of stability and change sparked shifts in actors' situatedness, which sparked different strategies they could employ to navigate paradox: giving agency, restricting agency, crafting agency, relinquishing agency and recovering agency. How these strategies were enacted was highly relational: an actor's change in agency and subsequent ability to navigate the paradox is often the result of how they enacted their own strategy in relation to others' strategies. Thus, I provide a more fine-grained take on paradox navigation in dynamic settings, and how inter-organizational collaborations emerge.

In chapter 5 I provide a general discussion and conclusion, synthesizing the insights from my research. In this chapter I discuss three main points, on how my this dissertation advances theory. First, I highlight the importance and strength of leveraging paradox and practice perspectives. I elaborate on how paradox navigation is no static or one time effort, but rather an ongoing stream of practices which shape and affect the navigation of paradoxical tensions. Second, I highlight the importance of understanding nested tensions in inter-organizational systems, by showing how tensions may cascade across such systems and by providing insights into why different actors may be more effective in navigating paradox due to agency shifts. And third, I elaborate on the dynamics associated with the emerging stages of organizing inter-organizational collaboration, by discussing how it is not merely important to understand challenges between organizational levels, but especially how decisions at one location may affect others – emphasizing a systems perspective. Finally, an important takeaway from my research is that organizing is per definition a messy process, as actors try to make sense of what they are doing and enact practices which are merely based on prior experience, situatedness and bounded rationality they possess. More practically, for managers this means that they must balance business and societal goals, as overemphasizing either can hinder success. Too much focus on business objectives may limit broader societal benefits, while excessive attention to societal goals can stifle commercialization. Managers should experiment, adapt, and shift focus as needed, carefully navigating competing objectives to foster both innovation and sustainable outcomes. Developing a paradoxical mindset is key to recognizing the interconnectedness of business and societal goals and responding to emerging tensions in a timely and effective manner. Managers must account for the complexity and interconnectedness of a system, and make decisions that consider how they affect individuals, organizations, and collective goals. Fostering collective sensemaking and early communication helps managers navigate these tensions effectively, preventing imbalances and supporting collaboration success.

# Samenvatting

In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik hoe actoren bijdragen aan het ontstaan van het organiseren van inter-organisationele samenwerkingsverbanden die zich richten op het aanpakken van urgente maatschappelijke uitdagingen. Hoewel het organiseren van inter-organisatorische samenwerking op zichzelf al een uitdaging is, is dit met name in de vroege stadia van de samenwerking precair, omdat de toegevoegde complexiteit, onzekerheid en veranderlijkheid van het opzetten van een samenwerking een extra laag van complexiteit toevoegt. Tegelijkertijd is het succes van dergelijke samenwerkingen van vitaal belang bij het aanpakken van maatschappelijke uitdagingen, omdat we alleen door samen te werken over de grenzen van organisaties heen en door middelen, expertise en kennis te combineren, met nieuwe en innovatieve oplossingen voor deze uitdagingen kunnen komen. Om de complexiteit van het opzetten van dergelijke samenwerkingen te vatten, combineren we paradox theorie en practice theorieën. De paradox theorie ziet dergelijke uitdagingen als tegenstrijdige maar onderling afhankelijke elementen die tegelijkertijd verschijnen en in de loop van de tijd blijven bestaan - waarbij voortdurend moet worden genavigeerd om een evenwicht tussen tegenstrijdige elementen na te streven. Voor het "navigeren" van paradoxen putten we uit practice theorieën, die benadrukken hoe de handelingen en gesprekken van actoren in deze samenwerkingen spanningen kunnen navigeren. Met deze elementen samen wil ik de onderzoeksvraag beantwoorden*: Hoe navigeren actoren door opkomende paradoxale spanningen terwijl ze inter-organisatorische samenwerkingen initiëren om maatschappelijke uitdagingen aan te pakken?* Om deze onderzoeksvraag te beantwoorden voeren we onderzoek uit in de context van de last-mile logistiek binnen stedelijke contexten, waar actoren collectief proberen samenwerkingen op te zetten om efficiënte en kosteneffectieve leveringen van goederen en diensten te organiseren, terwijl ze tegelijkertijd maatschappelijke impact hebben voor de samenleving. Voor dit proefschrift heb ik drie studies uitgevoerd om te onderzoeken hoe actoren samenwerkingen organiseerden:

Het eerste onderzoek in hoofdstuk twee biedt een breder perspectief op de manier waarop actoren de paradox tussen winst en maatschappij navigeren, door vier verschillende inter-organisatorische samenwerkingsverbanden te vergelijken, die zich richten op verschillende uitdagingen voor de last-mile. In dit onderzoek was ik benieuwd waarom dergelijke samenwerkingen vaak moeilijk van de grond komen en waarom actoren steeds weer tegen soortgelijke problemen aanlopen, waardoor ze de uitdagingen die ze willen aanpakken niet effectief kunnen tackelen. Ik laat zien hoe dit niet altijd een bewust proces is - vooral in de beginstadia van

de samenwerking die vatbaarder zijn voor onzekerheid en ambiguïteit. Door paradox theorie te combineren met een practice perspectieven, laat ik zien hoe bundels van verschillende handelingen van actoren die ofwel de zakelijke ofwel de maatschappelijke focus bevoordelen, leiden tot twee verschillende oriëntaties van opkomende vicieuze cycli, die samenwerking belemmeren. Ik laat zien hoe initiële handelingen in deze oriëntaties leidden tot een hellend vlak, dat vervolgens kan leiden tot praktijken die de vicieuze cirkel in een van de twee oriëntaties verder aanwakkeren en vooruitgang in de weg staan. Wanneer paradoxale polen te veel benadrukt werden, verergerde de voortdurende toepassing van handelingen de eenzijdige oriëntatie op een paradoxale oriëntatie. Er ontstonden omslagpunten die ofwel leidden tot beëindiging van de samenwerking of tot verzachtende handelingen die hielpen om terug te navigeren naar een evenwicht. Ik laat zien hoe escalatie van vicieuze cycli onder bepaalde omstandigheden gunstig kan zijn, in die zin dat het productieve kansen kan opleveren om actoren te helpen ijken en terug te navigeren naar het evenwicht.

Voor het tweede onderzoek in hoofdstuk drie was ik geïnteresseerd in hoe mensen die aan de frontlinie van dergelijke opkomende inter-organisatorische samenwerkingsverbanden werkten, werden beïnvloed door de beslissingen die op strategisch niveau werden genomen, terwijl ze nog steeds hun eigen opkomende werk en doel aan het uitzoeken waren. Daarom zoomde ik voor dit onderzoek in op hoe zulke individuen werden gepositioneerd in de inter-organisatorische samenwerking, hoe ze werden beïnvloed door inter-organisatorische beslissingen en hoe ze in de loop van de tijd toch hun weg vonden. Ik volgde een longitudinale case van een opkomende inter-organisatorische samenwerking en verzamelde verschillende soorten kwalitatieve data, waaronder dagboekgegevens, waardoor ik nauwkeurig kon nagaan hoe individuen werden beïnvloed en omgingen met verschillende spanningen. Door de paradox theorie te combineren met een lens voor “boundary work” (oftewel, werken aan de grenzen tussen organisaties en/of rollen)levert dit onderzoek twee belangrijke bijdragen. Ten eerste kon ik, door verschillende spanningen te identificeren en deze in de loop van de tijd te volgen, laten zien hoe spanningen zich tot elkaar verhouden of met elkaar verbonden zijn op inter-organisatorische niveaus. Het navigeren van paradoxen op het inter-organisatorische niveau leidde tot verschillende met elkaar verweven spanningen op het niveau van het individu. Ten tweede laat dit onderzoek, door gebruik te maken van het perspectief van “boundary work”, zien hoe verschillende handelingen worden toegepast om samenwerking tussen inter-organisationele actoren te bevorderen, maar ook kunnen leiden tot identiteitsspanningen als deze individuen nog leren hun eigen rol te begrijpen en tegelijkertijd aan de conflicterende eisen

van de samenwerking moeten voldoen. Ik laat zien hoe dit ingewikkelde proces zich in de loop van de tijd afspeelt en hoe de "boundary work" van de actoren uiteindelijk in staat zijn om succesvol om te gaan met de aanhoudende spanningen die de samenwerking hen oplegt.

De eerdere studies gaven inzicht in hoe actoren met spanningen op verschillende organisatorische niveaus omgingen door verschillende praktijken toe te passen. Maar ze riepen ook aanvullende vragen op, omdat ik zag hoe sommige actoren in opkomende inter-organisatorische samenwerkingsverbanden in staat waren om effectief om te gaan met spanningen, terwijl anderen dat niet waren. Waarom was dit het geval? Daarom stelt het vierde hoofdstuk de vraag waarom verschillende actoren het vermogen ontwikkelen spanningen te navigeren in dergelijke nieuwe settings – en anderen niet. Door een processtudie van een opkomende samenwerking uit te voeren, kon ik volgen hoe de opkomst van samenwerking een evenwichtsoefening was tussen perioden van stabiliteit en verandering. Of actoren in staat waren om spanningen te navigeren, was afhankelijk van hun agency (ofwel, handelingsmogelijkheid), die weer gekoppeld was aan hun vermogen om reflexief te zijn over spanningen (d.w.z. zijn ze zich bewust van de spanning en begrijpen ze die) en de beperkingen van hun situatie. Mijn analyse liet zien hoe verschillende periodes van stabiliteit en verandering verschuivingen in de situatie van actoren teweegbrachten, waardoor ze verschillende strategieën konden gebruiken om door paradoxen te navigeren: agency geven, agency beperken, agency creëren, agency opgeven en agency herstellen. Hoe deze strategieën werden toegepast was zeer relationeel: de verandering in agency van een actor en zijn daaropvolgende vermogen om door de paradox te navigeren, is vaak het resultaat van hoe hij zijn eigen strategie toepaste in relatie tot de strategieën van anderen. Ik geef dus een meer verfijnde kijk op paradox navigatie in dynamische omgevingen en hoe samenwerkingsverbanden tussen organisaties ontstaan.

In hoofdstuk 5 geef ik een algemene discussie en conclusie, waarin ik de inzichten uit mijn onderzoek samenvat. In dit hoofdstuk bespreek ik drie hoofdpunten over hoe mijn proefschrift de theorie vooruit helpt. Ten eerste benadruk ik het belang en de kracht van het gebruik van paradox- en practice perspectieven. Ik leg uit hoe paradox navigatie geen statische of eenmalige inspanning is, maar eerder een voortdurende stroom van handelingen die de navigatie van paradoxale spanningen vormgeven en beïnvloeden. Ten tweede benadruk ik het belang van het begrijpen van geneste spanningen in inter-organisatorische systemen, door te laten zien hoe spanningen stapsgewijs door dergelijke systemen kunnen bewegen, en door inzichten te verschaffen in waarom verschillende actoren effectiever kunnen zijn in

het navigeren van paradoxen als gevolg van verschuivingen in agency. En ten derde ga ik dieper in op de dynamiek die gepaard gaat met de opkomende stadia van het organiseren van inter-organisatorische samenwerking, door te belichten hoe het niet alleen belangrijk is om de uitdagingen tussen organisatieniveaus te begrijpen, maar vooral ook hoe beslissingen op de ene locatie van invloed kunnen zijn op andere - met de nadruk op een systeemperspectief. Tot slot is een belangrijke uitkomst van mijn onderzoek dat organiseren per definitie een rommelig proces is, omdat actoren proberen te begrijpen wat ze aan het doen zijn en handelingen toepassen die louter gebaseerd zijn op eerdere ervaringen, de huidige situatie en de begrensde rationaliteit die ze bezitten.

Praktischer gezien betekent dit voor managers dat ze een evenwicht moeten vinden tussen zakelijke en maatschappelijke doelstellingen, omdat een te grote nadruk op één van beide het succes kan belemmeren. Een te grote focus op zakelijke doelstellingen kan bredere maatschappelijke voordelen beperken, terwijl een te grote aandacht voor maatschappelijke doelen commercialisering in de weg kan staan. Managers moeten experimenteren, zich aanpassen en de focus verleggen als dat nodig is, waarbij ze zorgvuldig moeten navigeren tussen concurrerende doelstellingen om zowel innovatie als duurzame resultaten te bevorderen. Het ontwikkelen van een paradoxale mindset is de sleutel tot het herkennen van de onderlinge verbondenheid van zakelijke en maatschappelijke doelen en het tijdig en effectief reageren hierop. Managers moeten rekening houden met de complexiteit en onderlinge verbondenheid van een systeem, en beslissingen nemen die rekening houden met hoe ze individuen, organisaties en collectieve doelen beïnvloeden. Het stimuleren van collectieve sensibilisering en vroegtijdige communicatie helpt managers om effectief met deze spanningen om te gaan, onevenwichtigheden te voorkomen en het succes van samenwerking te ondersteunen.

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# About the author

Luc van de Sande was born on March 24th, 1992 in Oosterhout, the Netherlands. He completed his bachelor's degree in Logistics Engineering at the University of Applied Sciences (formerly NHTV) in Breda in 2018. After that, he obtained his master's degree in Supply Chain Management at Tilburg University, where he graduated 'cum laude' in 2019.

In November 2019 he started his PhD project at the Nijmegen School of Management in the Netherlands, in particular at the department of Organizational Design & Development. During his PhD he was part of an larger NWO consortium, called "Sustainable Supply Chain Management in Healthcare: Living Labs" (SSCMH), which focussed on developing sustainable last-mile logistics solutions for urban areas and healthcare settings.

Luc has attended and participated in multiple academic conferences on management and organization studies, such as the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) Colloquia (2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024) and the International Symposium on Process Organization Studies (2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024). So far he has one joint publication with colleagues from the NWO consortium in *Sustainability* journal, and one paper conditionally accepted at *Strategic Organization* journal.

Currently, Luc is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Academic Collaborative Center for Climate & Energy at Tilburg University, where conducts research in collaboration with industry partners and an interdisciplinary team of researchers to address pressing issues in the energy transition.

In this dissertation, I investigate how diverse actors contribute to the emergence of organizing inter-organizational collaborations that set out to address pressing societal challenges. While organizing inter-organizational collaboration is challenging in itself, this is particularly precarious during the early stages of collaboration, as the added complexity, uncertainty and volatility of setting up collaboration adds another layer of complexity. At the same time, the success of such collaborations is vital in addressing societal challenges, as only by actors collaborating across organizational boundaries and combining resources, expertise and knowledge, we can come up with novel and innovative solutions to these challenges. To capture this complexity I draw on paradox theory and practice perspectives to foster our understanding of how the tensions associated with organizing collaboration cascade across organizational levels, and how sophisticated, multi-level and repeated responses by different actors are required to successfully organize collaboration to address societal challenges. Hence, I set out to answer the research question: How do actors navigate emerging paradoxical tensions while initiating interorganizational collaborations to address societal challenges?

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