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Using personal narratives to explore multiple identities in organisational contexts

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores and incorporates personal narratives as a new methodological tool into the qualitative research of complex organisational issues such as identity. Particularly, this study provides a fresh methodological perspective on organisational identity exploration by using personal narratives to examine multiple identities that occur in dynamic organisational contexts.

Methodology: In order to examine multiple identities, personal narratives found in the 43 semi-structured in-depth interviews collected were analysed. These narratives were examined following a textual and performative analysis.

Findings: The paper furthers methodological discussions in organisations in three ways. Firstly, it responds to the need for a methodological approach that allows multiple identity exploration in organisations while it presents personal narratives as a valuable methodological perspective within organisational research. Secondly, it extends the methodological use of personal narratives for the in-depth qualitative study of complex organisational issues such as identity. Finally, the study stretches the boundaries of mainstream organisational research by illustrating that personal narratives can be used as a methodological approach to explore organisational identities.

Originality/value: This research integrates personal narratives as a methodological tool into the qualitative research of dynamic organisational issues. Employing personal narratives has allowed the exploration of multiple identities that take place in organisations in a manner not previously achieved in organisational studies. The study, therefore, challenges

previous organisational research and expands the boundaries of organisational identity studies, offering a new qualitative methodological account for identity exploration in organisations.

Keywords: Identity, multiple identities, narrative analysis, personal narratives, organisational contexts, qualitative research

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

In contrast with the studies that explore organisational identity as a stable and fixed entity (e.g. Corley et al., 2006; Whetten, 2006), this study follows a process perspective and explores identity as an ongoing process (Gioia and Patvardhan, 2012) that constantly changes according to contextual demands and members' interactions (Barreto and Ellemers, 2003). Following this perspective, the multiplicity of organisational identities is acknowledged (Pratt and Foreman, 2000). In particular, this research emphasises that organisational members hold multiple identities and every time, according to the changing needs of the organisation, they bring forward one of these (van Knippenberg and van Schie, 2000). This identity affects the members' ability to respond to the changing needs of the organisation and achieve its aims (Haslam, 2001). As such, organisational research suggests that identity processes play a central role for the success of organisations (Alvesson et al., 2008; Sillince and Brown, 2009) while it appears important to find a methodological approach that enables the exploration of multiple identities that are always in place (Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Ramarajan, 2014).

A part of the organisational research employs narratives as a methodological tool in order to explore identity issues (e.g. Beech, 2000; Brown, 2006). However, these studies

usually use either macro, meso or micro-level narratives. Using a specific type of narrative allows them to explore a specific type of identity (cultural, organisational or personal) that organisational members may hold but restrains them from exploring multiple identities. This study addresses this methodological gap in organisational studies, providing a fresh and valuable methodological perspective on organisational identity exploration, by illustrating that personal narratives can be used as a methodological tool for the exploration of multiple identities that take place in dynamic organisational contexts. More specifically, the aim of the paper is to explore and incorporate personal narratives as a new methodological approach into the qualitative research of complex organisational issues such as identity.

This paper furthers methodological discussions in organisations in three ways. Firstly, it responds to the need for a methodological approach that allows multiple identity exploration in organisations while it presents and discusses personal narratives as an important and new methodological perspective within organisational research. Secondly, it extends the methodological use of personal narratives for the in-depth qualitative study of complex organisational issues such as identity. Finally, the study stretches the boundaries of mainstream organisational research by illustrating that personal narratives can also be used as a methodological approach for the exploration of organisational identities.

The article is structured in four sections. Firstly, it explores the multiplicity of organisational identities and suggests the use of personal narratives as a methodological tool for the exploration of multiple identities in organisations. Then, it introduces the case study and the method. Finally, it presents the findings and concludes with a discussion of those findings and the methodological contributions of the study in the organisational field.

Multiple identities in organisations

Identity is among "the most popular topics in contemporary organisational studies" (Sveningsson and Alvensson, 2003:1163) which usually focus on how identity-related issues affect the behaviour of the organisation and their members in different situations (e.g. Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Many of the studies that explore identity in organisations imply that identity is stable and resists change (Gioia and Patvardhan, 2012) and talk about identity as a thing, an entity emphasising what is cohesive and enduring (e.g. Corley et al., 2006; Whetten, 2006).

However, another research strand, which perceives organisations as dynamic systems in a state of flux and becoming (Gergen, 1991), suggests that identity is relational and dynamic (e.g. Hernes and Mailtils, 2010; Gioia and Patvardhan, 2012; Pratt, 2012; Kourti, 2013). This process perspective argues that identities cannot be fixed and stable entities, but rather they are a process and flow (Gioia and Patvardhan, 2012), always in a state of becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). The focus is not on who organisational members are but on who they might become (Watson, 2008). The self is not therefore perceived as a "unity, a single self that unifies our acting. In contrast, the self emerges as an effect of how different acts interact" and generate meaning from their context (Hosking and McNamee, 2006:167). The process perspective emphasises that organisational members can hold multiple identities (Pratt and Foreman, 2000), contradicting studies which suggest that identity is stable and, therefore, that organisational members hold a single identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Anteby and Molnár, 2012).

This paper is grounded in the process perspective of identity, highlighting that "multiple and potentially competing identities (or 'mental modes') are a reality of organisational life" (Pratt and Foreman, 2000:141). In dynamic organisations where the social context of interaction frequently changes, organisational members do not have a single established

identity (Alvesson et al., 2008) but multiple overlapping or cross-cutting group memberships (van Knippenberg and Ellemers, 2003) or group identifications (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) from which they have to choose. The identity that organisational members bring forward influences their perceptions, actions and interactions inside the organisation (Watson, 2008). In order for members to be able to act according to the changing needs of the organisation and achieve its aims, they should bring forward the identity that best responds to the current context they experience (Haslam, 2001). As a result, the multiple identities that members hold and the interplay between these identities can affect the success of the organisation (Cheney, 1991; Phillips and Hardy, 1997; Sillince and Brown, 2009). Therefore, it seems important to find a methodological approach that allows the exploration of multiple identities that organisational members have available.

Using personal narratives for the exploration of multiple identities in organisations

Organisations can be viewed as storytelling environments (Gabriel, 2000) while narratives, as a qualitative methodological approach (Boje, 2001), have been broadly used to explore organisational issues (e.g. Beech 2000; Patriotta 2003; Brown, 2006; Buchanan and Dawson, 2007). A part of this research suggests that narratives and identity are linked (Brown, 2005; Alvesson, 2010; Herrmann, 2011) and employs narratives as a methodological tool for the exploration of identity issues in organisations.

"People begin to put their lives together into self-defining stories" (McAdams and Janis, 2004:161) that "make claims vis-à-vis the who-am-I question" (Bamberg, 2010:5). In fact, "in identity terms, narratives legitimate and privilege certain forms of subjectivities while excluding others", allowing individuals to build certain views of reality and place

themselves within this reality (Figueiredo, 2009: 258). The telling of stories is a way for individuals to make sense of their experiences and life (Bruner, 1991), place themselves against alternative identities (McKenna, 2010) and realise who they are and how they have emerged in the social world (Phillips and Hardy, 1997). Narratives cannot therefore be separated from questions regarding the formation of social realities, selves and identities (Hyvärinen, 2008). In contrast, they are central for the construction of identities (Bamberg, 2010) since it seems that identities in organisations are embedded in the stories that members tell to one another (Weick, 1995).

Narratives have a multi-layered nature (Czarniawska, 1997; Boje, 2001), with each level having been used as a methodological approach for the qualitative exploration of different types of identities in organisations. Macro-level narratives present the totality of the organisational life, explaining the behaviour and the nature of organisations; cultural traditions; the market and the environment in which organisations operate (Preuss and Dawson, 2009). They have been associated with cultural identities (Herrrmann, 2011). Meso-level narratives deal with organisational processes and structures, and shape an organisation's character, producing organisational identities and exploring members' identification with the organisation (Kramer and Miller, 1999). Finally, micro-level narratives are personal ones that help organisational members construct and communicate relationships and personal identities (Preuss and Dawson, 2009).

Traditionally, organisational qualitative research uses one of these levels of narratives in order to explore either organisational, cultural or personal identities that occur in the organisations. However, organisational members hold multiple identities at the same time (Ramarajan, 2014) and they engage in an identity interplay in order to be able to bring forward identities that fit to the changing needs of the organisation (Haslam, 2001). Therefore, employing a specific type of narrative to explore a specific identity does not

reflect the dynamic aspects of identity and the multiple identities that take place in dynamic organisational contexts. Yet it is important to find a methodological approach that allows the exploration of multiple identities that occur in organisations.

Since narratives are a valuable tool with which to explore identities in organisations (Brown, 2005), a request to find a type of narrative that enables the exploration of multiple identities at the same time emerges. As Brown (2006) has also pointed out, there is a need for theoretical and empirical research that explores the implications of the narrative approach for identity-related issues in organisations. This research aims to fill in this methodological gap and furthers methodological discussions in organisations by presenting and discussing personal narratives as a fresh research methodology within organisational identity research.

This study finds personal narratives as an especially useful methodological tool to capture the dynamic aspects of identity and multiple identities that take place in complex and fragmented organisational contexts. Firstly, personal narratives offer information about organisational members' identities (Wells, 2011; Bold, 2012). In fact, while members talk about their lives, they present their experiences and understanding of themselves, others and the world (Herrmann, 2011), claiming identities that affect and are affected by the context they experience every time (Riessman, 2013). Therefore, personal narratives do not only tell about an organisational member's working life but they are also tools that allow members to fashion their identities (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992) and disclose these identities in justifying their actions (Bamberg, 2010). They illustrate "the active, self-shaping quality of human thought, the power of stories to create and refashion personal identity" (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997:xiv). As such, personal narratives are very important to analyse identities.

However, such narratives are not only a way of making sense of members' identities but of their situatedness as well (Krizek, 2003). They are also about individuals, the societies they live in and situations they experience (Bruner, 1991). When narrators present their

stories, they offer information about the specific context of where their narratives were developed. In fact, by presenting information about their context, narrators are able to position events and actors (Czarniawska, 1997), moving between different identities that allow them to organise their experiences and make sense of actions and events (Riessman, 2013). Personal narratives therefore operate as 'meaning-making structures' (Riessman, 2002) located in particular times and contexts (Figueiredo, 2009) that allow narrators to present events that were affected by a specific context of interaction, while affecting the identity they brought forward. Therefore, by looking at personal stories, knowledge about the context and contextual changes (Mulhall, 2013) as well as about individual and collective action located in particular times and places is achieved (Bold, 2012), allowing the exploration of how organisational members move between different identities as a response to contextual and situational organisational changes.

The aim of the paper is to explore and incorporate personal narratives as a new methodological tool into the qualitative research of organisational issues such as identity. More particularly, by employing personal narratives as a methodological tool that allows the examination of the multiple identities that organisational members bring into play while engaging in organisational work, this study fills the methodological gap in the exploration of multiple identities in organisational studies. The use of personal narratives distinguishes this research from traditional organisational research and offers a fresh and richer methodological account of identity exploration in organisations.

Research context

In order to examine multiple identities in dynamic and complex organisational contexts, this study uses an inter-organisational collaborative context in Greece. Most inter-

organisational collaborations are by definition built around temporary and dynamic organisational arrangements that evolve over time (Gray, 1989), and are subject to transformations that require temporary organising in a constantly shifting social context (Hibbert et al., 2008; Kourti, 2012). Members' identities can therefore hardly be expected to remain stable or homogeneous since collaborative members constantly bring forward different identities to respond to the emerging needs of the collaboration (Ellis and Ybema, 2010). As such, inter-organisational collaborative contexts offer a dynamic and complex organisational setting where multiple identities can be explored.

KEDDY Aitoloakarnanias Educational Collaboration (KAEC) - where KEDDY stands for Centre for differential assessment, diagnosis and support of disabled children - is an inter-organisational educational collaboration established in 2000 in order to support children with disabilities in the prefecture of Aitoloakarnanias in Greece. The collaboration consists of four categories of collaborative members: KEDDY Aitoloakarnanias (KEDDY teams that consist of a psychologist, social worker and a teacher), local parent council (parents of disabled children), local public schools (headteachers and teachers) and local government representatives (mainstream and special educational consultants).

The protocol of the collaboration assigns the roles and responsibilities of the collaborative members.

- The *mainstream educational consultant* diagnoses a child's disability and requests for the *special consultant* to examine the child and, if necessary, refer the child to KEDDY. Usually due to lack of resources, such as time and funding, consultants are not able to fulfill their roles.

- The *KEDDY team* (social worker, teacher and psychologist) is responsible for the production of a child's report (diagnosis and educational plan). Firstly, the team examines the child and agrees on a common diagnosis about their disability. Then, the team produces an

educational plan that will assist the child in overcoming educational difficulties related to their disability. However, the different expertise of the team members quite often creates disagreements around the production of the child's report.

- The *parents of the disabled children* have to accept their child's diagnosis that KEDDY produces and allow KEDDY to send their report to the child's school. Without the parents' approval the collaborative process stops. Yet, quite often parents refuse to accept or disclose their children's diagnosis mostly due to the fear of stigma and stereotypes regarding children with disabilities.

- The *headteacher* is responsible to disclose KEDDY's report to the child's teacher(s) and support the teacher(s) in the implementation of the report. The role of *the teachers* is to implement KEDDY's suggestions for the educational support of the disabled child. However, lack of knowledge on issues of disability, fear of increased workload and resistance to change are the most common reasons that teachers and headteachers cannot fulfill their roles.

The protocol of the collaboration also illustrates four collaborative stages that the members should follow in order to achieve the aims of the collaboration (see also appendix 1). *Referral*: Start of the child's support process with the referral of the child to KEDDY by their school teacher; *Diagnosis*: Examination of the child by the KEDDY team and production of a diagnosis and educational plan for their support; *Negotiation*: Presentation of KEDDY's report to the child's parents who need to accept the report and its disclosure to the child's school for the support process to continue; and *Intervention*: The government approves the funding for the educational support of the child, while the school teacher implements KEDDY's educational plan.

Despite the fact that the protocol is in place to offer stability and continuity to the collaborative work, each case that KAEC deals with is different. Each child has their own unique needs and therefore different arrangements and (inter)actions are required from the

collaboration members to successfully treat their cases. Moreover, members have to overcome obstacles, like the ones described above (common collaborative challenges are also provided in appendix 1), which emerge from their daily engagement with other members and/or the collaborative process. In this dynamic and complex context, established roles, responsibilities and collaborative practices are challenged and the members have to move between multiple identities in order to be flexible and achieve KAEC aims.

Method

Data collection

In order to collect personal narratives for the exploration of multiple identities in organisational contexts, face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted. These enabled to go deeper into the members' (inter)actions and meanings assigned to emergent social contexts and collaborative work they experienced. Interviews also allowed the exploration of the multiple identities organisational members brought forward while trying to respond to emergent contexts and achieve their aims.

Semi-structured interviews provided an initial framework for areas of discussion whilst allowing the respondents to set the agenda of the interview. They also enabled the exploration of issues as they arose and offered openness (Flick, 2007) in the sense that the areas of respondents' sense-making were determined only to a small extent. Semi-structured interviews offered a space for negotiation of meanings and surprise elements (Gaskell and Bauer, 2000), providing a friendly emphasis to data collection (Silverman, 2005). Moreover, they facilitated immediate responses to questions allowing both interviewer and interviewee to explore the meaning of the questions and answers, as well as to resolve any ambiguities. Finally, semi-structured interviews enabled a degree of rapport by encouraging participants to

present their experiences using their own words. They therefore resulted in the collection of a greater amount of information.

As such, the interview guide was used as a guideline for the interviews and not as a standardised format that indicated what should be asked, in what words and in what sequence (Hennink et al., 2011). The interviews were exploratory and each of them was different, based on a negotiation of meanings. Emergent meanings allowed some level of mutual understanding while different degrees of attention were placed on different topics based on participants' experiences. In this way, participants' personal narratives were collected and integrated in their context of social action.

Interviews were collected from all the four categories of the collaborative members. All KEDDY employees and all local government representatives working for KAEC were interviewed. Interviews were also conducted with four local teachers and four headteachers selected from a list of all the local public schools that worked with KAEC. From a list with parents of disabled children that KAEC provided, three parents were interviewed. Information, such as age, gender, educational level, occupation and position in the hierarchy, did not affect the selection of the participants.

In total, 43 interviews (9 phone and 34 face-to-face interviews) were collected from 22 male and 21 female participants. From those interviews, 21 were with KEDDY employees, 6 with governmental representatives, 12 with school representatives and 4 with children's parents. Phone interviews were recorded using a phone application, Call Recording, which allowed an easy recording of interviews of any length. Face-to-face interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. One of the participants did not allow the recording of the discussion but allowed the researcher to take notes during the interview. These notes were further enriched straight after the interview in order to incorporate information that the researcher did not have time to record during it. The rest of the

interviews were recorded with the agreement of the respondents. The length of the interviews ranged from 18 to 80 minutes, with an average duration of 55 minutes. All the interviews were transcribed and were introduced in word documents in order to be ready for analysis.

The interviews were conducted in four phases over a period of 16 months. More particularly: in the first phase, 5 face-to-face interviews were collected, in the second phase 13 and in the third phase 16. In the final phase, 9 phone interviews were conducted. In the first three phases of the research the interviews with the KEDDY employees and parents of disabled children were conducted in KEDDY's premises. The interviews with the headteachers and teachers were conducted at their schools, while those with the government representatives at their offices in Aitoloakarnanias Central Departmental Council of Primary Education (ACDCPE).

Excluding the government representatives who seemed to have a very busy schedule and therefore it was difficult to find a convenient time to conduct the interviews, it was relatively easy to schedule interviews with the rest of the members. The researcher was sharing with the participants the same language, similar upbringing, knowledge about the geographical and socio-political context as well as experience in dealing with disabled children. This common ground offered considerable insight into the surrounding context and the local society of the respondents. Moreover, it helped in the achievement of openness, successful communication, mutual understanding, trust and insightful exchanges which made the data collected richer and more meaningful for the aim of this research. Nevertheless, this shared knowledge did not prevent the researcher from formulating questions and seeking explanations about known and taken-for-granted issues in order to avoid making implicit assumptions.

Data analysis

The data was analysed in two stages. Firstly, a thematic analysis was conducted in order to obtain both a general contextual knowledge about the collaboration and about the possible emergence of an overall collaborative identity. This analysis shed light on: differences and similarities in the collaborative process; challenges that members faced; members' daily engagement with the collaboration; and collaborative practices and interactions. Through this analysis it was also possible to identify the four collaborative stages, as were described in the research context section, that members should follow in order to achieve the aims of the collaboration. Further, from this analysis an emergent KAEC 'general collaborative identity' was outlined. KAEC members highlighted the following aspects of the collaboration they felt more identified with: helping the children, asking for help, being discrete, following the protocol, compromising, being flexible, fulfilling roles, being supportive and understanding, trusting the collaborative members, being honest, prioritising the children, supporting the children, being a non-for profit collaboration, and fulfilling promises to the children (see appendix 1).

Having obtained the necessary contextual knowledge as an overall view of how members defined the collaboration's developing identity and experience the collaboration, the second narrative analysis focused on the personal stories of the participants in order to explore their multiple (collaborative, personal, professional and organisational) identities. In order to achieve this, research that theorises organisational identities as texts construed through language, discourses and narratives (Humphreys and Brown, 2007) was followed. This research suggests that "human life is a process of narrative interpretation" (Widderhoven, 1993:2), and the study of identities through narratives allows the exploration of how individuals built certain views of reality and how they positioned themselves within this reality (Figueiredo, 2009) Narrative analysis, therefore, cannot be separated from

questions regarding the narrative formation of selves, identities and social realities (Hyvärinen, 2008).

Personal narratives can be analysed in different ways: textually, conversationally, culturally, politically/historically and performatively (Riessman, 2002). This paper follows a combination of a textual (Gee, 1991) and performative analysis (Goffman, 1981) in order to address the dynamic aspects of identity and illustrate the use of personal narratives for the exploration of multiple identities in organisational contexts.

Approaching personal narratives with a performative lens means that "everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role...It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves" (Park, 1950:249). The performative element was employed in order to focus on the participants' (inter)actions, on the "everyday practices that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites" (Thrift, 1997:142) and therefore trigger identity interplay. The focus was on the linguistic understanding of action that indicated the way things were done with words (Riessman, 2002). The analysis did not focus only on what was told (the events that the language describes) (Bold, 2012) but also on the telling (the positions of characters, listeners and self) (Mishler, 1999). Moreover, the performative element was used in this research to emphasise that when individuals performed, they did so in relation to an audience; they produced performances for and with others in social situations (Young, 2000:109). Performances were developed in collaboration with an audience (the interviewer or other members) (Wells, 2011) and were therefore treated as expressive attempts to involve an audience (Riessman, 2013).

A poetic structural analysis (Gee, 1991) was also used to identify the structure and meaning of each text in relation to its context. Following this approach, the text was analysed in stanzas, scenes and parts (Gee, 1991). Stanzas were used to incorporate for analysis non-

narrative parts of the interviews. These stanzas were organised into scenes that described the interactions, social relations and identities expressed in different social contexts, and helped achieve coherence in the story (Riessman, 2002). Finally, the scenes fell into parts, as larger units that built the story as a whole.

For each narrative, the turning points were also identified. Turning points in stories "open up directions of movement that were not anticipated by and could not be predicted by their pasts" (Mishler, 1999:7-8). These points indicated a fundamental shift in the expected course of the stories and the participants' identities. Moreover, the main theme, which framed the whole narrative, indicated its tone and topic, and gave a title to the personal narratives, was identified.

The narrative analysis was conducted with all the textual material generated from the data collection. A total of 22 personal narratives were identified and analysed using the above narrative approach. Out of those narratives, four were selected to represent the different voices of each category of the collaborative members at different stages of the collaboration process outlined by the collaborative protocol (see table 1): Rob (government representative), Maria (KEDDY psychologist), George (parent of a disabled child) and Christina's (teacher) narratives - pseudonyms have been used for all the participants. These personal narratives are not the sole or even the principal bearers of the experiences of individuals in dealing with multiple identities. However, using only four stories, it is possible to provide in the limited space available the details of these personal stories which are necessary to illustrate how personal narratives can be used as a methodological tool for the exploration of multiple identities in organisational contexts.

------------------------ Table 1 here-------------------------------

Exploring multiple identities in KAEC

Rob's referral story: Between following the protocol and breaking it

Rob is a *government educational consultant* who tells the story of working with a specialist consultant to refer Marina, a disabled child, to KEDDY. Rob's personal narrative is divided into three parts. In the first, Rob describes Marina's diagnosis which he sent to the special educational consultant. In the second part of his narrative he presents the special consultant's delays in examining the child while in the final part he narrates how he decided to skip the protocol and personally refer Maria to KEDDY.

Rob begins his narrative explaining how he was called by the headteacher to examine Marina. Being a member of the collaboration for 11 years, Rob acted as a *supportive collaborative member* who knew very well his role and responsibilities. He therefore examined Marina and concluded that her case had to be dealt with urgently. Following the collaborative process, Rob sent his diagnosis to the special educational consultant, Andy, who was the next person in the process to examine Marina and who had the role of referring her to KEDDY for support.

"It wasn't hard to conclude that Marina was depressed... I wrote my report. It usually takes me a week, but in this case the problem was clear and it indicated an urgent case. I sent my report to Andy".(First narrative part)

Two weeks after sending Marina's diagnosis to Andy, Rob was surprised to learn that the special consultant had not yet examined Marina. This was the turning point that signified the start of the second part of his narrative. Andy claimed that he was very busy and was planning to go to Marina's school at the end of the term. Being familiar with the tight schedule and increased workload of his colleague, Rob brought forward his identity as a *government representative* and tried to be understanding and assist the special consultant by

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presenting Marina's case and pointing out its urgency.

"I called Andy four days later. He confirmed he had received the report but he didn't have time to read it... he didn't examine the child yet... I realised that he was very busy. I walked him through the case so as to save him some time. I asked him to speed up the process and examine Marina as soon as possible. I thought he understood that it was an urgent case". *(Second narrative part)*

The collaborative protocol dictated that the special consultant had to examine Marina and refer her to KEDDY. Yet Rob narrates how his colleague did not prioritise Marina's case and that the collaborative protocol obstructed him from fulfilling his role. As such, in the third part of his personal narrative, Rob decided to separate himself from the special consultant and the collaboration in order to help Marina effectively. In need of efficiency, support and urgency that clashed with his role as a government representative, he brought forward the identity of the *rebel against the system* that allowed him to separate himself from his unhelpful colleague. In this way, Rob was able to skip the protocol and overcome the special consultant's delays by referring Marina to KEDDY himself.

"There were other cases that had priority over Marina's; priority in terms of sequence not of emergency. I know that this is what the protocol recommends. Yet, I thought that if we prioritised just one case, it wouldn't mean that we were not following the protocol rather that it was an urgent case, an exception... I called KEDDY... He (the KEDDY manager) told me that he would make an exception and would accept a child into KEDDY with the mainstream consultant's referral and not the special consultant's referral". *(Third narrative part)*

Maria's diagnosis story: Working together

Maria is a KEDDY psychologist. Her story illustrates an identity interplay between her new collaborative member, expert psychologist and expert collaborative member identities

that assisted her in overcoming disagreements with KEDDY teachers and diagnose a child's disability effectively.

In the first part of her personal narrative, Maria explains that, when she started working for KAEC, she thought that its most important asset was that the members work together to achieve their aims. Being a newcomer in an unknown context, the collaborative members were very supportive and helped her learn her role and adapt to her new working environment. Following her friendly exchanges with the collaborative members, Maria wanted to work hard, adjust to her role and collaborate with her colleagues. She therefore brought forward her identity as a *new collaborative member.*

"I can still remember how excited I was during the first day at work... I believed that the advantage of the collaboration was that different members work together to achieve common aims... However, I didn't know much about the collaboration. I had to learn... Everyone was nice.... Kate (one of KEDDY's primary teachers) explained to me how the production of the reports works... Although I was a new member of KEDDY, I could see that there were many obstacles against our aims and, only if we collaborate, we could achieve our aims... I made clear to my colleagues that I wanted to work hard and help KAEC achieve its aims." (First narrative part)

While working in KEDDY for two months, Maria had to collaborate with a teacher, Kate, in order to produce a child's diagnosis. This occasion offered the turning point and initiated the second part of her narrative. In this part, Maria explains that she and the teacher produced two different diagnoses regarding the child's disability. On the one hand, there was Maria who, as a psychologist, had specialist knowledge on disabilities. On the other hand, there was Kate who was working in KEDDY for many years and had treated various cases. In parallel, Maria had to face the other teachers who did not agree with her diagnosis. In this context, Maria had to bring forward her identity as *an expert psychologist* in order to justify

her diagnosis and convince the teachers about its validity.

"She (the teacher) actually told me that we should go with her diagnosis because I had been working in KEDDY for only two months and I didn't have experience... When she realised that I wasn't going to change my mind about the diagnosis, she asked Lisa (a primary teacher) to join our discussion. Lisa claimed that Kate was right... I was quite surprised. How could they (teachers) say that because I don't have experience my diagnosis was not accurate?... As a psychologist, I know more about disabilities and their characteristics". (Second narrative part)

Despite Maria's efforts, KEDDY teachers did not accept her diagnosis and a clash of opinions was inevitable. This disagreement offered the turning point in the narrative and introduced the third part of Maria's narrative. In this part, she returned to the main theme of her story, namely that it is important for the members to work together in order to achieve their aims. Despite acknowledging the division between teachers and psychologists, Maria prioritised the need to work together as the key for the success of the collaboration and, in doing so, she pushed her professional identity to the background foregrounding her pertinence to the collaboration as an *expert collaborative member*.

"I explained my case to another KEDDY psychologist and he agreed with my diagnosis. We went together to the manager and we presented the case... And in the end, it was proved that my diagnosis was correct... There is competition between teachers and psychologists but the collaboration will achieve its aims only if the collaborative members actually collaborate." (Third narrative part)

George's negotiation story: Acknowledging responsibilities and roles

George is the parent of a disabled child. He became part of KAEC to help his child, Mike, overcome his disability. George presents a narrative where he had to move between his

personal, collaborative and organisational identity in order to be able to help his son overcome his disability. His personal narrative consists of four parts.

In the first part, George explains his surprise, anger, disappointment, and shame for Mike's disability and presents himself as a *frustrated father* who tries to cope with an unpleasant situation.

"*It took me some time to realise that the teacher was actually saying that my child had a problem... I feel ashamed of myself now, but I was disappointed and angry at my son. I thought it was his fault because he wasn't trying hard. Maybe the teacher wasn't doing her job and it was her fault too. I knew that something was wrong and this was very stressful. I was thinking that if my son had a disability, it meant that he was not normal. I was sure that if the neighbours learnt about it, they would have said the same.*" (First narrative part)

Following the collaborative protocol, Mike went to KEDDY. He first met with the KEDDY psychologist and then the KEDDY teachers. These encounters offered the turning point to George's narrative and made him reconsider his identity. By learning more about his son's disability, George was able to accept it and he had the opportunity to express to the other members that he was a *concerned and caring father* who wanted to learn more about his son's disability and support him.

"*I realised that whatever Mike's problem was it wasn't his fault. I had to be open to his disability. After all, there are no limits to helping my son.*" (Second narrative part)

Next, George met with the social worker. This meeting offered the turning point in the second part of his narrative. During this meeting the social worker kept his distance and acted strictly based on his profession, ignoring that George was stressed with his son's disability. This made George bring forward his identity as a member in *need of understanding and compassion.*

"*I have to admit that we didn't start well. He wasn't as friendly as the psychologist and*

the teacher. He made me feel a bit uncomfortable and I avoided asking too many questions. It's not that he said something to me, the opposite. It is the fact that he didn't say much. He went straight to the point.... I would expect to be treated with more understanding. After all, it was obvious that I cared about my son." (Third narrative part)

Then, the social worker presented his diagnosis for Mike which indicated that George was partly responsible for his son's disability because he was not offering him the necessary support. This diagnosis was a turning point that introduced the final part in George's personal narrative. Despite his original frustration, George acknowledged his involvement in his son's disability and decided that he had to fulfil his role as a *supportive collaborative member* and work together with the social worker in order to help his son overcome his disability.

"I was shocked. I was doing my best to support my child. How could he say that Mike's home environment was not appropriate? How could he claim that it was my fault?... I made clear that I was happy to follow the social worker's suggestions in order to improve the home environment for Mike. He was a bit unfriendly but I could see that he knew I wanted to help. I would do anything I could for my child. And he could see that." (Fourth narrative part)

Christina's implementation story: Building trust

Christina is a *primary school teacher* who had joined the school when the story she narrates took place. In a three-part narrative, she explains how she moved between her identity as a newly-employed teacher and a victim in order to finally become a collaborative member and teach a disabled child, Jenifer.

In the first part of her narrative Christina explains how she realised that Jenifer had a disability and referred her to KEDDY. Being a *newly-employed teacher*, she was not familiar with the collaborative process and relied on the information that KAEC members, and, more particularly KEDDY employees, offered regarding the process for the support of the child.

KEDDY explained to Christina that she had to offer to Jenifer a specialised teaching programme which she would be able to prepare and implement with the help of a specialist teacher who would be appointed at her school.

"During my first year as a teacher- I had a student, Jenifer, who seemed to face learning difficulties... I didn't know what I had to do. Uhm, to be honest I only had a rough idea about KAEC and its role. I had only heard of it... In short, I had to support the child with extracurricular activities. A KEDDY employee told me that I could organise my teaching activities with the help of a specialised teacher. This teacher would be someone with knowledge of special educational needs and in particular of Jenifer's needs." (First narrative part)

Under the circumstances, Christina expressed her willingness to support the collaborative process and teach the child. However, when discussing with her colleagues, she learnt that that appointment of a specialist teacher could take a long time and the government may not approve the appointment at all. These discussions offered the turning point of the first part of Christina's narrative. In the second part, she had to bring forward a different identity, that of the *victim*, in order to protect herself from the collaboration members who seemed to be untruthful and mistrustful.

"I have never taught disabled children. I didn't even have the relevant education. I wanted to collaborate. But one of my colleagues and the headteacher had collaborated with KEDDY before and KEDDY didn't fulfil its promises. KEDDY only makes suggestions. The government would decide the appointment or not of the specialist teacher. What if the funding is not approved? They weren't honest with me. How can we work together if we do not trust each other?" (Second narrative part)

Christina, therefore, explained to KAEC that she would not teach the disabled child. Her refusal to engage with the collaboration became the turning point that introduced the

final part of her narrative. When the collaborative members realised that she would not teach the child without getting the support of a specialist teacher, they expedited the process and ensured the immediate appointment of that teacher. Following this, Christina was able to trust again the collaborative members and became a *collaborative member* accepting to teach Jenifer.

"I went to KEDDY and I met with the manager and the primary teacher who produced Jenifer's report. They told me that in the past the appointment of a specialist teacher took several months. However, they explained to me that the process was standardised and it shouldn't take more than two months. The manager reassured me that he would speak directly to the director of primary education in order to move the process forward quickly. The KEDDY teacher told me that she would help me until the appointment of the specialist teacher. They had satisfactorily answered all of my questions. How could I say no? -- I just couldn't!" (Third narrative part)

Discussion

This research has explored and incorporated personal narratives as a fresh methodological tool for the exploration of multiple identities in dynamic organisational contexts such as KAEC. Exploring the personal narratives of Rob, Maria, George and Christina the findings demonstrate that members did not hold a single and stable identity, as a part of the organisational identity research suggests (e.g. Corley et al., 2006; Whetten, 2006). In contrast, the identity of the KAEC members was always in a state of becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), subject to change based on the changing needs of the collaborative context they experienced (Watson, 2008). For example, Rob's personal narrative illustrates how he first brought forward his identity as a supportive collaborative member, then as a government

representative and finally as a rebel against the system. George's personal narrative shows how he moved between his identities as a frustrated father, concerned and caring father, in need of understanding and compassion, and supportive collaborative member. In her personal narrative, Maria first identified as a new collaborative member, then as an expert psychologist and lastly as an expert collaborative member. Finally, Christina told a narrative where she positioned herself as a newly-employed teacher, victim and collaborative member.

The personal narratives of the KAEC members illustrate that while members had brought forward a specific identity (collaborative, personal, professional, organisational), turning points - moments that indicated a fundamental shift in the expected course of collaborative work (Mishler, 1999) - made them reconsider that identity. From the pool of identities they had available, members brought forward different identities (Pratt and Foreman, 2000) in order to adjust to the changing needs of the organisation and achieve its aims (Haslam, 2001). For example, in the first part of her personal narrative, Christina identified herself as a newly-employed teacher who did not have knowledge of the collaborative process and relied on the KAEC members' experience and who reassured her that a specialist teacher would be appointed to assist her in teaching a disabled child. However, when Christina discussed this with her school colleagues, she realised that KAEC members were not honest with her since the appointment of a specialist teacher may take a long time, while the government may not approve the appointment at all. This was the turning point that made Christina reconsider her organisational identity. In the second part of her narrative, Christina brought forward the identity of the victim who had to protect herself from the distrustful members. She therefore refused to teach the disabled child. This moment offered another turning point in her personal narrative since, following her refusal, the specialist teacher was immediately appointed. In the last part of her narrative, Christina put in

the background her personal identity and identified herself as a collaborative member accepting to teach the child and, therefore, achieving the organisational aims.

Conclusions

This research has illustrated the integration of personal narratives as a new methodological tool into the qualitative research of organisational issues such as identity. It therefore addresses the methodological challenges for scholars in the organisational identity field and offers a fresh and richer methodological account for the exploration of identities in organisations. Particularly, the paper furthers methodological discussions in organisations in three ways.

It is broadly accepted that organisational members have more than one identity simultaneously (Pratt and Foreman, 2000). It is therefore important to find a methodological approach that allows the exploration of multiple identities that take place in organisations. Although it is quite common for organisational qualitative research to use narratives for the exploration of identity issues in organisations (Weick, 1995; Phillips and Hardy, 1997; Brown, 2006; Alvesson, 2010), this research commonly employs one type of narrative - macro, meso or micro- for the exploration of either cultural, organisational or personal identities that members may hold. As such, it fails to explore different types of identities at the same time. This paper addresses this methodological gap by suggesting and illustrating that personal narratives, as the cornerstones of our identities (Bruner, 2004), can be used in organisational studies as a methodological tool for the exploration of multiple (organisational, professional, collaborative, personal) identities. This study, therefore, furthers methodological discussions in organisations by responding to the need for a methodological approach that allows multiple identity exploration in organisations while it presents and

discusses personal narratives as a valuable and fresh methodological perspective within organisational research.

Secondly, it is common for organisational research to use organisational members' personal narratives as a methodological tool to explore the personal identities they hold while they engage in organisational work (Preuss and Dawson, 2009). However, in this research personal narratives have been used in a manner not previously achieved in organisational studies; for the exploration of personal as well as multiple (e.g. organisational, professional, collaborative) identities. In doing so, the study extends the methodological use of personal narratives for the in-depth qualitative study of complex organisational issues such as identity.

Thirdly, a large part of the organisational research suggests that meso-level narratives produce organisational identities (Kramer and Miller, 1999), persuade members to bring forward organisational identities (Herrmann, 2007) and constrain or enable members' engagement with the organisation (Eisenberg, 2007). This study challenges this research and stresses the boundaries of mainstream organisational research by illustrating that personal narratives can also be used as a methodological approach for the exploration of organisational identities.

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Appendices

------------------------------------- Appendix 1 here -------------------------------------

Table 1: Narrative analysis of Rob, Maria, George and Christina's personal narratives

Narrator	Main theme	Narrative Parts	Turning points	Multiple identities
Rob (Government representative) *Referral stage*	Between following the protocol and breaking it	Producing the report	Special consultant delays the examination of the child	*Supportive collaborative member*
		Asking the special consultant to refer a child to KEDDY	Special consultant's refusal to prioritise an urgent case	*Government representative*
		Referring the child to KEDDY	Overriding the protocol	*Rebel against the system*
Maria (KEDDY psychologist) *Diagnosis stage*	Working together	Entering KEDDY	Dealing with a case	*New collaborative member*
		One case, two diagnoses	Disagreement with the teachers about the diagnosis	*Expert psychologist*
		Being a psychologist	Proving the validity of the diagnosis	*Expert collaborative member*
George (Parent) *Negotiation stage*	Acknowledging responsibilities and roles	Facing the news about his child's disability	Meeting with KEDDY employees	*Frustrated father*
		Experiencing KEDDY	Dealing with an unfriendly social worker	*Concerned and caring father*
		Accepting the diagnosis	Social worker's diagnosis	*In need of understanding and compassion*
		Working with others	Supporting his son	*Supportive collaborative member*
		Exploring the ground	Discussions with colleagues	*Newly-employed teacher*

Christina (School teacher) *Implementation stage*	Building trust		about the appointment of a specialist teacher	
		Facing mistrustful members	Refusing to teach the child	*Victim*
		Teaching the child	Appointment of the specialist teacher	*Collaborative member*

Appendix 1: Complete thematic framework for KAEC emergent collaborative identity

	Referral	**Diagnosis**	**Negotiation**	**Intervention**
Scene and Purpose	Referring the child to KEDDY	Producing the child's report (diagnosis and educational plan)	Presenting the report to the parents and negotiating its disclosure	Disclosing the report, getting funding and implementing the report
Physical Space	School	KEDDY	KEDDY	School and ACDCPE
Agent/s	School (teachers and headteacher) and GRs (educational consultants)	GR (special educational consultant) and KEDDY	KEDDY and children's parents	GRs (ACDCPE), school (headteacher and teachers), KEDDY and parents
Act/Agency	Seeking assistance	Joining efforts	Developing tactics	Coordinating collaborative members and activities
Common challenges	- lack of coordination between school and GRs - school delays in seeking GRs help - GRs delays in examining the child - school is not aware of the CP - teachers are not aware of disability issues	- claims of expertise - disagreements - power games - incompatible diagnoses - members' separation based on expertise	- parents' resistance - parents' lack of knowledge - stereotypes for disabled children - stigma - insecurity and fears - expertise exercise	- resource shortages - power exercise - resistance to change - lack of trust - delays in receiving funding - bureaucracy

Common practices	- following the CP - seeking GRs assistance - being discreet - understanding children's disability - evaluating children's progress - working with the GRs	- diagnostic team meetings - co-production of report - expertise of diagnostic team - separating roles and field of expertise - seeking advice - finding common ground	- explanatory meetings with parents - being understanding - trusting KEDDY experts - obtaining knowledge of disabilities - supporting members - clarifying process	- production of documents - advising the CP - coordinating meetings with GRs, KEDDY, parents and teachers - explaining supportive process - offering advice
Salient categories	- helping the children - asking for help - being discrete - following the protocol	- compromising - being flexible - fulfilling roles	- being supportive and understanding -trusting the collaborative members - being honest	- prioritising the children - supporting the children - non-for profit - fulfilling promises

List of acronyms: KAEC (KEDDY Aitoloakarnanias Educational Collaboration), KEDDY (Centre for Differential Assessment, Diagnosis and Support), GR (Government Representative), ACDCPE (Aitoloakarnanias Central Departmental Council of Primary Education), CP (collaborative protocol).