

CHAPTER 8

COLLABORATIVE UNCOUPLING: HOW TO BREAK UP AND STAY TOGETHER*

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ABSTRACT

Divestitures and other forms of organizational separation are not commonly associated with continuity and ongoing collaboration in inter-organizational relationships. Instead, separation is often equated with terminating relationships and gaining independence. Here, the authors argue that achieving separation does not require terminating relationships and that ongoing collaboration between separating entities may actually contribute to successful separation. The authors base this argument on the assertion that the objective of organizational separation is to achieve organizational autonomy for all entities involved and that separating entities can enable each other's development of autonomy while remaining interdependent. The authors also discuss how collaborative separation may contribute to a range of benefits, as well as why it may nevertheless fail to emerge in practice. In this respect, the authors consider the relevance of ethical perspectives and emotional dynamics related to feelings of (dis)respect, (dis)trust, pride and shame. The authors conclude by discussing activities that may contribute to, and undermine, effective collaborative separation.

* We acknowledge and express our gratitude for the ideas of Saku Mantere in the earlier development of this manuscript and suggestions from participants at the PROS Conference, 2018, in Halkidiki, Greece.

Managing Inter-organizational Collaborations: Process Views
Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Volume 64, 185–210

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ISSN: 0733-558X/doi:10.1108/S0733-558X20190000064013

Keywords: Divestitures; organizational separation; autonomy; independence; interdependence; respect; trust; pride; shame

We all know that breaking up is hard. But breaking up and building a new relationship is much harder.

– Donald Tusk, President of the European Council (08/12/2017).

INTRODUCTION

In modern capitalist societies, the era of conglomerates is in decline (Nolan, Jin, & Chunhang, 2007). The alleged benefits of organizational specialization have driven organizations to focus on their core competencies. To achieve this focus, organizations, both private (e.g., multinational corporations such as General Electric and Phillips) and public (e.g., the UK National Health Service (NHS)), have been progressively divesting formerly integrated units (BCG, 2014; Bergh, Johnson, & Dewitt, 2008; Moschieri & Mair, 2012), replacing them with outsourcing agreements and strategic alliances. Meanwhile, separation processes are also evident with regard to nation states, such as Catalunya attempting to become independent from Spain, the United Kingdom negotiating an exit from the European Union and the United States threatening to quit the World Trade Organization. These processes are significant not only due to their prevalence, but also the managerial challenges they pose (Moschieri, 2011; Wiedner & Mantere, 2018). In particular, an important question that arises is: how can organizational entities separate while continuing to collaborate with one another?

Maintaining positive relationships is especially important when separating entities have become tightly integrated and expect to share resources with one another after formal separation – as occasioned, for instance, by a divestiture or the termination of a joint venture. The problem of managing this tension has so far received little attention from management and organization scholars, despite recognition that implementing organizational separation is often very complex and challenging. In fact, in contrast to the literature’s predominant focus on problems of organizational integration, such as those related to mergers and acquisitions (M&As), apparently “virtually all companies find that the divestiture process is far more difficult than an acquisition” (Cogen, quoted in Summerfield, 2015). According to an experienced management consultant specializing in M&A deals,

most divestitures encounter execution related hurdles due to the intrinsically complex challenges that materialize during the execution of the separation, many of which may not be apparent when formulating the separation strategy (Joy, 2018, p. 7).

The complexity associated with separation is apparent from studies that show that it takes on average three years for separating units to reap economic benefits from a divestiture (Fubini, Park, & Thomas, 2013).

Some of the problems related to implementing separation between interdependent organizational entities become obvious when we consider the challenges involved in other separation contexts. For instance, we intuitively recognize that

a divorce between individuals who share parental responsibilities and assets can be difficult and traumatic (Vaughan, 1990). Similarly, a region's secession from a nation state and a country's withdrawal from established international agreements are likely to be complex and marked by emotional calls for independence despite a lack of economic autarky. In recent times, "Brexit" – the United Kingdom's "divorce" from the European Union – provides fascinating analogies as it can be regarded as an extreme example of attempting to separate historically highly interdependent entities that would arguably benefit from maintaining close relationships with one another.

With these issues in mind, we draw from literature across a variety of domains, including management theory, social psychology, and economic development, to address the question of how organizational entities separate from one another while maintaining relationships. To do this, we first discuss what becoming a separate organizational entity means by comparing and contrasting organizational separation with organizational integration and examining relevant concepts, including autonomy and independence. Having clarified the objective of organizational separation as achieving autonomy for the entities involved, and how organizational autonomy, organizational performance, and inter-organizational relationships relate to one another, we then discuss when and how the separating entities may benefit from collaboration. In this respect, we also reflect on the relevance of ethical concerns. We follow this with a discussion of why separating entities may not collaborate, even when it appears that they would benefit from doing so. Finally, in accordance with our main argument that achieving organizational separation depends on establishing autonomy for the entities involved and that collaboration facilitates rather than inhibits the development of autonomy, we discuss how organizational entities can support each other in developing autonomy. Ultimately, we seek to conceptualize organizational separation as a *relational* process (Emirbayer, 1997) – one in which relationships are renegotiated between more or less interdependent entities over time, rather than treating separation as an event that creates independent entities.

DEFINING ORGANIZATIONAL SEPARATION

Relative to organizational integration, organizational separation is a term seldom used in common language, managerial discourse, and the academic literature.¹ The former is commonly associated with concerns about achieving effective coordination and collaboration between previously distinct units to generate and exploit synergies, while the latter is associated with the termination of relationships and the need for an entity that is being separated, or separating itself, from the rest of an organization to establish a new organizational identity (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Ferriani, Garnsey, & Lorenzoni, 2012; Moschieri, 2011; Sahaym, 2013).

We refer to organizational integration as eliminating or reducing boundaries between previously distinct organizational entities or units within an organization. Such processes may take place in the context of M&As, joint ventures, partnerships, and strategic alliances, as well as more informal arrangements. These processes are sometimes conceptualized as "additive" forms of change (Albert, 1992)

because the resulting organization or venture comprises the sum of assets, and is therefore larger than either of the previously distinct entities. By contrast, we define organizational separation as establishing boundaries between previously integrated organizational entities or units. This may occur in the context of divestitures, spin-offs, spin-outs, management buy-outs, government-mandated break-ups, or more or less formalized internal arrangements.

Organizational separation may be motivated by financial pressures, tax benefits, expected share price gains, regulatory constraints (such as anti-competition rulings), attempts to reduce unnecessary interference between organizational practices that are not directly dependent on or synergistic with one another (e.g., negative synergies in a conglomerate business), and/or efforts to make units more manageable or innovative (Brauer, 2006; Joy, 2018). A classic example of the latter is the development of “skunk works” – units tasked with innovating (or “exploring”) that are purposefully detached from other parts of an organization (tasked with “exploiting”) (Lavie, Kang, & Rosenkopf, 2011; O’Reilly & Tushman, 2004). Because separating a unit or multiple units from an organization reduces the size of the remaining entity, thereby limiting centralized control over resources, such processes are also known as “subtractive” forms of change (Albert, 1992). While the termination of partnership agreements (such as strategic alliances or joint ventures) could also be classified as a form of organizational separation, we mainly focus on divestitures because separation challenges are likely to be more complex when an integrated organization is split than when organizational entities that are already recognized as separate do not renew ongoing agreements. Nevertheless, several of the arguments we develop may be transferable to a variety of separation initiatives that involve the formal termination of organizational relationships.

While a large body of literature addresses processes of integrating previously separated entities, very few studies have explicitly examined organizational separation processes (see Wiedner & Mantere, 2018, for an exception). The vast majority of studies of organizational separation correlate antecedents with performance outcomes rather than provide insights concerning difficulties and opportunities that may arise during the separation process, how these may be dealt with, and how these attempts may effectively address, or generate new challenges and opportunities (Brauer, 2006).

The few studies that investigate dynamics that occur when organizational entities engage in some form of separation generally conceptualize organizational separation as a form of strategic change or organizational restructuring and theorize the challenges and practices that may arise as relevant for all types of large-scale organizational change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013). This raises the question of what, if anything, is unique about organizational separation and hence whether we need theory dedicated to this particular form of change at all. This matter is further complicated when we consider that separation and integration processes may co-occur in practice, such as when a unit is divested from one organization and acquired by another. In response to this question, we compare and contrast the change management challenges associated with implementing organizational separation with those

pertinent to organizational integration below (see [Table 8.1](#), for a summary of this comparison).

First, both organizational integration and separation involve introducing changes that risk causing significant disruption to ongoing operations and thereby undermining organizational performance. Organization members may be confused about which policies to follow, (partially) reconfigured systems may not perform as planned, and many other unanticipated problems may arise that undermine a smooth transition ([Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999](#); [Greenwood & Hinings, 1996](#)). A major managerial challenge is, therefore, to maintain stability throughout the change implementation process. These challenges arguably apply to both organizational integration and separation. However, the ability to cope with large-scale organizational disruption is especially difficult for organizations that lack relevant skills and financial resources. In this respect, a small divested unit – especially, if it needs to establish a name and reputation after separation – may struggle relative to a large, established organization that has more resources at its disposal to deal with such disruption. In other words, while the challenges associated with integration and separation may be similar, the abilities to address them may often be more limited in the case of separation.

Apart from dealing with disruption, the organizational change literature has emphasized the need to alter organization members’ cognitive orientations and habitual behaviors to improve performance ([Balogun & Johnson, 2004](#); [Bartunek, 1984](#)). A well-documented challenge is overcoming resistance to change, which is deemed to necessitate organizational members distancing themselves from past practices (also referred to as “sense-breaking”) and making sense of, as well as embracing, a new shared vision, mission, and identity ([Aula & Mantere, 2013](#); [Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991](#)). [Corley and Gioia \(2004\)](#) highlight that this challenge is likely to become especially salient in cases of subtractive change because newly divested units may have to establish a new identity without relying on traditional referents (i.e., the former organizational identity) and because they typically have to do so very rapidly. While taking small steps over a long time period may be

Table 8.1. Comparing Organizational Restructuring Challenges.

| Challenge | Organizational Integration | Organizational Separation |
|--|--|---|
| Maintaining performance while dealing with disruption | | Operational issues |
| Changing cognitive orientations and habitual behaviors | Sense-breaking (cutting links to past) and sense-making (developing new vision of future); developing new organizational identity. | |
| Changing relationships between stakeholders | Coordinating and collaborating across previously distinct groups or entities. | Negotiating new (mutually beneficial) relationships between previously integrated groups or entities. |
| Changing levels of autonomy | Relinquishing autonomy (de-individuation). | Undoing historical dependence on guidance and approval from other entity (individuation). |

viable in the context of organizational integration, such a strategy is not regarded as viable with regard to separation. This especially holds if a separated entity that has benefited from the protection associated with being part of a larger organization must adapt to competitive market pressures for the first time.

The metaphor that is often presented in the change management literature when rapid, radical change is called for is that of a “burning platform” that members must evacuate (Appelbaum, St Pierre, & Glavas, 1998); of a past that must be discarded as a means of creating readiness for change in the present and future (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993). Moreover, while the cognitive and habitual distancing process may be facilitated both in cases of organizational integration and separation by physically relocating, altering material artifacts (including branding), and communicating and enforcing new policies, achieving effective distancing may be especially difficult in cases of separation if members of separating entities continue to interact with one another. This is likely to be the case when informal relationships have been established over time between individuals and groups across the separating units that now stand to be disrupted.

This last point also highlights an important difference between organizational integration and separation, namely the nature of existing relationships and its implications for the negotiation process. In the case of integration, individuals or groups who may have a very limited history of working together must collaborate or, at the very least coordinate their activities, with one another, to achieve desired synergies. Separation meanwhile requires renegotiating existing relationships as formal boundaries are introduced that divide actors who may have aligned their practices with one another. We use the term negotiating in its loosest sense here, as in a ship’s captain negotiating the sea, rather than as an active or formal set of meetings to discuss and agree solutions. Renegotiating existing relationships may be more or less difficult than negotiating new relationships. However, these are fundamentally different processes because in the former past relationships between members of the entities involved inevitably cast a shadow over the negotiation process.

Finally, both integration and separation involve *loss* that goes beyond a potential drop in organizational productivity and members’ distancing themselves from the past. It is, therefore, potentially misleading to refer to forms of organizational separation as a *subtractive* process and organizational integration as *additive*. Specifically, in the case of integration, members of an acquired or merged unit may face the difficult task of relinquishing autonomy as they enter into a new social contract that comes with rules that may limit discretion. For instance, members of a small, entrepreneurial, and relatively young firm may have to adhere to unfamiliar and complex bureaucratic procedures as a consequence of the entity being acquired by a large established corporation. Potentially useful analogies, in this respect, are the domestication of a wild animal or of an individual becoming a member of a guild with strict codes of conduct. This adaptation to a particular social environment can be termed as a process of de-individuation (cf. Ziller, 1964).

Organizational separation, by contrast, requires that all separating entities can self-determine their paths and the allocations of internal resources. In other

words, they need to gain autonomy rather than rely on external guidance and approval for actions. This also requires that separating entities *grant* autonomy to each other, as continued control and interference inhibit the ability for others to develop autonomy. Again, we can think of analogies such as releasing a domesticated animal into the wild, of children becoming adults when they leave their parents' home, or of divorcees adapting to a situation in which they have to manage their own affairs. In social psychology, developing the ability to act without relying on another is referred to as individuation (Blos, 1967). While gaining autonomy, and limiting external control and interference, may always be an organizational concern, it is likely to be especially acute during a process of separation when a unit or part of an organization becomes an organization in its own right – as organizational *autonomy* has to be *established* rather than maintained.

The comparison of organizational integration and separation challenges above demonstrates that there are not only differences in degree (such as the difficulty of dealing with disruption, and the speed with which a new identity needs to be developed), but also in kind. Because organizational separation necessarily involves renegotiating relationships and developing capabilities to behave autonomously, organizational separation processes and their management merit being studied in their own right rather than being treated as simply a form of strategic change. Moreover, the fact that organizational separation involves separate organizational entities negotiating with one another highlights the importance of managing, rather than simply viewing separation as the definitive termination of, inter-organizational relationships.

RELATIONS BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL AUTONOMY, PERFORMANCE, AND INTERDEPENDENCE

Due to its centrality to the process of organizational separation, it is important to define, and therefore clarify the meaning of, autonomy – a concept that is often equated with related terms such as independence, self-control, and sovereignty in common and academic discourse (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan, 1991).

Autonomy refers to performing practices without requiring approval or guidance from others. It is synonymous with exercising discretion and self-directed behavior. Because autonomy relates to performances of specific practices, an actor can simultaneously be autonomous and non-autonomous, depending on the practices that he or she is engaged in. For instance, a university professor may have discretion over which research projects to work on but not over how to claim expenses. Referring to an actor as autonomous is therefore shorthand for claiming that they direct their own behavior with regard to many or significant practices in a particular domain.

While autonomy is often associated with independence, there is a subtle but essential difference between these concepts (Ryan, 1991; Wiedner & Mantere, 2018). Importantly, independence does not only relate to having discretion over how to perform specific practices, but also to performing practices without being influenced by others. Returning to the example of the professor autonomously

pursuing particular avenues of research, she may make choices independently of the interests of certain colleagues. Nevertheless, these choices will be informed by experiences that will have involved others. For instance, she may regard particular topics as interesting based on informal conversations with friends or news stories delivered by reporters on television. Hence, complete independence is a myth.

While influences, including past, present, and expected future interactions with our environment, shape our behavior in a myriad of complex ways, these interactions do not necessarily limit our abilities to enact discretion. In fact, they may provide opportunities to think and act in novel ways, thereby enhancing our abilities to exercise discretion. This point of interactions contributing to the development of autonomy is encapsulated in the term “autonomous interdependence” (Ryan, 1991) and well established in education studies (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Littlewood, 1999). The merits of simultaneously encouraging autonomy and interdependence are also increasingly recognized in the domain of intra- and inter-organizational relations, as evidenced by the recent popularity of terms such as co-opetition (e.g., Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018), and ambidexterity (Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996).

Moreover, autonomy is central to organization theory, not least because it is a defining characteristic of organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). For instance, legal boundaries define spheres of accountability (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2005) and in order to be held accountable for certain actions, an organization must have some degree of discretion over them. A completely non-autonomous organization (and, therefore, an entity whose performances of practices are completely reliant on the guidance and/or approval of others) is an oxymoron (Wiedner & Mantere, 2018).

One might argue that the question of whether an entity acts with sufficient autonomy to merit being called an organization is irrelevant in practice as long as it performs well. Indeed, most organizational theories are principally concerned with predicting or explaining performance rather than autonomy (with the notable exception of resource dependence theory, see Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). However, with regard to assessing the effectiveness of organizational separation, this question is important. While we may judge the success of organizational integration on the basis of generated synergies (and use performance metrics as proxies), we can ultimately only evaluate whether a separation effort has been successful on the basis of whether separating entities have detached themselves effectively from one another and, hence, whether they have achieved autonomy. Importantly, regardless of subsequent performance, a lack of autonomy at the end of the process would create separate formal entities but *not* separate organizations.

Viewing autonomy as a central organizational concern, in addition to achieving performance and developing relationships (i.e., interdependence), is aligned with the social psychologist Richard Ryan’s (1991) claim that organizing inevitably involves striving for “autonomy, competence and relatedness” (p. 209). In the context of organizational separation, a separating entity may be overwhelmed with the simultaneous challenges of developing autonomy, managing inter-organizational relationships (including those with the entity or entities it is separating itself from) and achieving satisfactory performance while dealing with potential

disruption and the need to change cognitive orientations and habitual behaviors. These three fundamental organizational objectives (autonomy, relationships, and performance) may, therefore, mainly appear to be in conflict with one another by competing over limited resources. However, a closer examination of relationships between them highlights that they may also reinforce each other and that achieving one has positive implications with regard to achieving others, thereby supporting the development of autonomous interdependence.

For instance, exercising discretion depends on developing competence. Without competence, interventions may be called for. As an example, a regulator will scrutinize a hospital's or an accountant's practices in detail or revoke a license if it fails to meet certain performance standards. Conversely, the willingness to assume responsibilities depends, in part, on the belief that one can competently perform relevant practices. Furthermore, as scholars of professions highlight (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001), the ability to self-regulate reduces others' ability to evaluate performance. Ultimately, as Bourdieu emphasizes with the concept of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), a very high degree of autonomy allows one to define performance standards – to regulate what counts as good performance and what counts at all.

Moreover, establishing and maintaining certain relationships can provide the necessary support to develop competence and autonomy. A teacher can help students learn how to perform autonomously by making them attentive to certain techniques, when these could be used, and for what purpose. Perceived competence and autonomy, in turn, may attract respect from others (including the teacher), thereby facilitating the development of relationships (Ellemers, Doosje, & Spears, 2004). Meanwhile, the inability to demonstrate competence and autonomy, or the perceived unfair restriction of autonomy, may result in feelings of disrespect (Miller, 2001; Rogers, Corley, & Ashforth, 2017), undermining the development of relationships that could be supportive.

Wiedner and Mantere (2018) have shown that these dynamics are relevant in the context of organizational separation in their study of a divestiture within the English NHS in which the provision of community healthcare services was separated from a regional government healthcare management agency responsible for contracting local public healthcare services. The findings, and in particular the escalation of tension between the separating entities that ultimately resulted in the partial reintegration of services, demonstrate that neglecting any one of these elements may be detrimental for achieving the others. This suggests that a relational perspective – one in which matters of autonomy and performance shape, and are shaped by, the evolving relationships between separating entities – is key to understanding organizational separation processes.

BENEFITS OF COLLABORATIVE SEPARATION

Having clarified relations between performance, interdependence, and autonomy, as well as the separating entities' challenges associated with pursuing these objectives, we can explain why these entities may benefit from collaborating with

one another. At the heart of this explanation is a relational view that considers organizational entities as inextricably tied to an evolving ecology of relationships. The nature of value creation and appropriation is not seen as a zero-sum game but as a positive sum game (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1995). This entails shifting from an “egocentric” view based on perceived self-interest and a transactional mindset to an “allocentric” view that emphasizes collaborative interactions among the parties involved (Ansari & Munir, 2008; Lado, Boyd, & Hanlon, 1997). Below, we discuss implications concerning (immediate) organizational performance, access to resources (that may generate options for future use), autonomy, and ethics.

Increasing Performance

First, it may be in the separating entities’ immediate interests to continue to share certain resources with one another as long as they all expect to appropriate some of the *performance* gains resulting from this collaboration. For instance, two entities may decide to share IT infrastructure post-separation via a lease agreement because this would minimize migration costs for one and incur a stable revenue stream for the other. Such resource sharing agreements may be restricted in time to the organizational separation process or continue thereafter. In fact, Moschieri and Mair (2012) have shown that it is not unusual for separating entities to maintain ties even many years after a divestiture has been completed because entities may benefit from continued proximity to potentially relevant innovations. These ties can be informal or formalized via dual director positions (Feldman, 2016).

Accessing Resources

The previous point highlights that collaboration may generate options for access to valuable resources in the future – whose benefits may have been uncertain in the present. In particular, maintaining a positive relationship and providing ongoing support to the other separating entity may generate social capital in the form of unwritten obligations to return favors (Bourdieu, 1986; Krause, Handfield, & Tyler, 2007). Naturally, the expectation that a favor will be returned is based on trust and beliefs in reciprocity and mutual support, which reinforce *interdependence*. Moreover, trust plays a role beyond the separating entities. Not supporting a divested unit may reflect badly on the divesting organization and have material consequences with regard to securing deals in the future. A McKinsey report (Fubini et al., 2013) suggests that companies that gain a reputation for producing “unhealthy offspring” (i.e., not supporting divested units) will fail to maximize returns when selling units in subsequent divestitures because investors may expect deficiencies to materialize that demand significant post-acquisition investments. A potentially useful analogy in this respect is that of a PhD supervisor recommending other institutions to employ his/her students. Employers may attribute their subsequent dissatisfaction with any one of these candidates to the student not having received sufficient support during his/her PhD. They may, therefore, become wary of employing other students from the particular institution in the future.

Developing Autonomy

We have highlighted the potential benefits of separating units maintaining ties with one another. However, maintaining ties does not equal collaboration. Ties can be used to support or control. However, opportunities to provide and receive support are limited without direct interaction. Maintaining ties is, therefore, a necessary but insufficient condition for collaboration. As already alluded to above, gaining *autonomy* depends on the development of skills and collaboratively engaging with others can facilitate this development. Specifically, it is not unusual for skills shortages to arise when entities part ways (Wiedner & Mantere, 2018). This is because new roles are likely to be created that need to be filled. For instance, if the divested unit has historically relied on the HR department of the divesting organization then it will have to develop its own HR team (or reach an agreement with an external provider). While the unit may successfully recruit HR staff externally, members of the HR department of the divesting organization may be in possession of valuable knowledge that the divesting unit would benefit from in terms of rapidly developing its own effective HR function. Hence, continued collaboration may provide opportunities for a separating entity to develop autonomy. Additionally, continued information sharing between the separating entities may help clarify roles and responsibilities, and therefore help negotiate the new organizational boundaries. This clarification can contribute to greater autonomy because members of the separating entities know when they should “let go” and refrain from stepping in – even when their intentions may be to help each other. Failing to let go can undermine autonomy, especially if the other entity subsequently relies on interventions. Significant problems can arise if these interventions cease.

Consider a manufacturing firm that distributes (some of) its products via its former parent or child organization and partly relies on the latter for quality control instead of fully developing its own quality control procedures. Such reliance may ultimately threaten the survival of the firm if severe quality issues later appear. The difficulty of letting go and the associated negative consequences are well understood in cases of divorce and of family members struggling to adapt to a shift in responsibilities when children become adults. It is also documented with regard to nurses transitioning from a clinical, toward a managerial, role (in which delegation becomes necessary) (Lalleman, Smid, Lagerwey, Shortridge-Baggett, & Schuurmans, 2016; Reay, Golden-Biddle, & Germann, 2006) and aid agencies acting as experts rather than allowing the communities they are trying to help to develop their own initiatives and implementation plans (Ellerman, 2006).

Benefitting Ethically

Finally, the benefits of collaboration may extend beyond maximizing self-interest. Specifically, considering autonomy, it is worth noting that this concept plays a central role in several approaches to ethics. For instance, according to Kant (1959), we not only have an obligation to minimize interference in others’ lives but we also have an obligation to support the development of autonomy in others (i.e., enable them to stand on their own feet) – regardless of whether this autonomy

may benefit us personally. Ultimately, society benefits from the development of its members. While Kant was referring to individual autonomy and society, we argue that adopting such an approach with regard to organizational entities – which, after all, consist of human practices – merits consideration. Similarly, ethics of care approaches stress the value of helping others address feelings of vulnerability and insecurity regardless of self-interest (Tronto, 1994). Contemplating such ethical approaches in the context of inter-organizational relations that do not necessarily involve charities or aid agencies may seem unorthodox. However, departing from predominant economics-based approaches that typically begin with assumptions of self-interest allows us to develop richer conceptualizations of inter-organizational relations (cf. Bell, Oppenheimer, & Bastien, 2002) and assert that continuing collaboration and enabling weaker separated entities to develop autonomy is also humane. This allows us to recognize organizational entities as actors that bear societal responsibilities and that are deeply embedded within social systems in which ethical questions inevitably arise.

REASONS FOR LACK OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN SEPARATING ENTITIES DESPITE POTENTIAL BENEFITS

The preceding discussion has highlighted how collaboration between separating entities may generate value in several ways. Nevertheless, separating entities do not always collaborate with one another in practice. This raises the important question of why collaboration may not occur. In this section, we briefly discuss seven different (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) potential explanations related to regulations, (mis)assessments of levels of interdependence, emotional factors, and tactics.

Regulatory Compliance

Perhaps, the simplest reason for separating entities to eschew collaboration is the perceived threat of sanctions. This is likely to be the case when organizational separation in the form of a government mandated break-up has been triggered by anti-competition concerns. The separating organizational entities must demonstrate to regulators that they have erected “Chinese walls” in order to prevent the exchange of information and collusion. A classic example is the Glass-Steagall act that in 1933 mandated the separation of investment banking from commercial banking (which was eventually repealed in 1999).

Other examples of mandated break-ups are not as straightforward. For instance, Jarzabkowski and colleagues (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013) examine the impact of splitting a telecommunications company into separate infrastructure and service delivery units. While the units were not allowed to grant each other more favorable terms than to other companies in the market, it was not clear to members what this meant with regard to acceptable levels of collaboration between the two separated units going forward. This

ambiguous state of affairs triggered breakdowns that eventually led to a spate of board meetings intended to resolve these issues. This demonstrates that even in cases in which collaboration between separating entities initially appears to be unacceptable, relevant stakeholders (including the government) nevertheless may eventually recognize it as necessary.

Apart from deeming collaboration efforts unacceptable, members of separating organizations may also simply consider them unnecessary or even wasteful. We consider possible motivations behind such interpretations below.

Perceived Lack of Interdependence

A relatively straightforward reason for eschewing collaboration is not recognizing any benefits from continued interaction. For example, because the divesting organization may not have integrated a recently acquired unit to a notable extent before divesting it, members of the separating entities may perceive past, present, and future expected interdependencies as low or non-existent. Similarly, future interdependencies may be limited if the separating entities are able to acquire all relevant resources to perform well, especially if they move into markets of which the other entity has little to no experience. For example, a spin-off may be based on a new technology and cater to customers that have no relationships with the other entity.

However, assessing interdependencies is difficult because future needs are unpredictable and current practices may involve substantial informal or tacit arrangements. For instance, after having spun off a unit it may emerge that members of that unit contributed to the functioning of other parts of the organization by having aligned their own work in ways that may be difficult to replicate or unacceptable to those asked to replace them. In other words, the value of maintaining ties may only become apparent once they have been disrupted or are broken. Moreover, as already mentioned, organizational separation may generate multiple, urgent demands that especially a small, divested unit may initially struggle to cope with on its own. Herein lies a risk in foregrounding issues related to strategy, internal processes, developing new market relationships and easily quantifiable targets (Mazmanian & Beckman, 2018; Ridgway, 1956) while backgrounding the maintenance and renegotiation of existing relationships between the separating entities.

Apart from not seeing any need, members of separating entities may also refuse to engage in collaborative efforts due to associating the other entity, and/or continued interdependence, with something negative or undesirable. In particular, disrespect, lack of trust, shame, and pride can trigger emotional responses that undermine collaboration in the context of organizational separation.

Feeling Disrespected

We have probably all heard of cases of “messy divorces” characterized by acrimony and heightened emotions. But how applicable are these to instances of organizational separation? Emotions, in fact, have been shown to be relevant in several cases of spin-offs and management buy-outs in which managers of

the separating entity yearn to free themselves from the perceived constraints of, and/or lack of support from, the parent organization (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Moschieri, 2011; Walter, Heinrichs, & Walter, 2014; Wiedner & Mantere, 2018). Some of the United Kingdom's Members of Parliament (MPs) who have advocated simply terminating all existing relationships with the European Union (and thereby achieving a “clean break” or insisting that “no deal that is better than a bad deal”) despite obvious dire national economic consequences, appear to be at least partly motivated by this perception of not having been treated with sufficient respect. Inter-organizational relationships are managed by human beings and emotions can, therefore, not be brushed aside (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994), especially with regard to potentially contentious issues, such as resource allocations across the entities involved (e.g., does the spin-off retain ownership of patents and copyrights related to innovations that its members initiated or were involved in?).

In particular, feeling disrespected can result from a perceived lack of appreciation of one's concerns (i.e., the interests of the separating unit) or lack of appraisal of one's contributions (i.e., the efforts by members of the separating unit, as well as associated skills and outcomes) (Darwall, 1977; Rogers & Ashforth, 2017). Feeling disrespected, in turn, can trigger disengagement or vengeance (Miller, 2001). Consider the case of a company that invests heavily in a unit, spins it off, and then suspects the spin-out to be competing with it over certain projects or deals with external suppliers. Members of the divesting company may regard such competition as disrespectful (and a betrayal) due to the spin-out's lack of acknowledgement of the support it has received. This may, as shown by Walter et al. (2014) trigger “parent hostility” in the form of attempts to punish the spin-out, such as by lobbying key industry players not to enter into any agreements with it.

Lacking Trust

Lack of trust, by definition, impedes collaboration. Trust is a concept that is related to, but not the same as respect. Organizations develop bonds and form a positive attitude regarding each other's goodwill and reliability, which lays the foundation for trust (Larson, 1992). Importantly, one can respect one's enemies (in terms of acknowledging their efforts or skills) without trusting them. One's willingness to collaborate with another crucially depends on expectations that any information or other resources provided will not be used by the other in ways that could do harm to oneself (Das & Teng, 1998; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). Rather than risking betrayal, an entity may expect and prepare itself for competition by limiting communication (which is a basic prerequisite for collaboration) with the other separating entity. This is especially likely to be the case when a divested unit is sold to, or, at some point in the future is expected to be acquired by, a direct competitor.

On the other hand, competition does not necessarily rule out collaboration, as joint ventures between direct competitors have shown (e.g., the development of the digital compact disc by Sony and Philips). The belief that supporting another

entity that may engage in some form of opportunistic behavior or competition (e.g., over staff or clients) will hurt your own organization appears to disregard the potential benefits that competition can generate, such as triggering innovation. Due to this mistrust, collaboration may not be forthcoming or remain limited to specific practices and projects.

Moreover, while the assessment that another separating entity could engage in competition may be accurate, it appears to negate any *influence* of organizational entities' actions on each other's future competitive behavior. It seems to rule out the ability to negotiate – antitrust laws allowing – an effective arrangement to not directly compete with one another.

Why would members of separating entities – who probably know much more about each other than about members of other organizations – not trust each other? Discourse associated with negativity used in contexts of divestitures, including terms such as “divorce,” “split up,” and “break up,” may play a role in generating anxiety, “us vs them” feelings (e.g., [Balogun & Johnson, 2004](#)), and thereby sow seeds of distrust. Personal fall-outs between members of the separating entities, potentially arising from unmet expectations (which link back to feelings of being unfairly treated and, therefore, disrespected) concerning divestiture related compensation, may further fuel animosity.

Associating Dependence with Shame and Independence with Pride

The potential role of language in shaping relations between separating entities – such as viewing organizational separation as a divorce that is generally associated with a zero-sum game (recent attempts to replace separation with more positive terms such as “conscious uncoupling” notwithstanding) in which former partners fight over who gets what – is also relevant when we consider terms such as dependence and independence. Notably, these terms are heavily value-laden in contemporary Western society. As Sennett highlights by referring to the “infantilization thesis” ([Sennett, 2002](#), pp. 102–107), since the Enlightenment period, dependence has been associated with immaturity, while independence has been linked to pride, rational judgment, and adulthood. Continued dependencies in adulthood are often regarded as weaknesses that are dishonorable and shameful. Independence is treated as the ideal that we should all aspire to.

Yet, as we noted earlier, complete independence is a myth, as every entity is dependent on its environment for survival. Autonomy risks being conflated with independence (as it indeed is in common language), even though the former need not deny the existence of interdependencies when it simply refers to exercising discretion. This conflation is especially likely to occur when feelings of disrespect or distrust are involved and when members of a separating entity (who might be compared with rebellious teenagers) view separation as an opportunity to finally make decisions they had not been able to make previously.

Hence, we suggest that cultural norms play an important role concerning both separation and independence and that these link back to issues of respect and trust. While all individuals involved in the separation process may subscribe to the ideal of independence, they may equally expect (apart from those classified

as direct competitors or enemies) to be informed by the other of any actions that may affect them (such as by having to expend resources in order to respond). An example that exemplifies separation related norms in many cultures around the world is that of a fiancé requesting permission from his future in-laws to marry their daughter. Even if all parties agree that the fiancés are entitled to make their own decisions concerning their marriage, formally requesting permission may serve the purpose of showing respect by informing the parents of the decision and thereby helping them adjust to changes to their family.

Interpreting Continued Interdependence as Antithetical to Change

Just as continued interdependence may be associated either consciously or unconsciously with shame, it may also be regarded as inhibiting an effective transition to a new state of affairs. Recall, for instance, the claim that a divested unit needs to rapidly develop a new organizational identity in order to perform well (Corley & Gioia, 2004). This call for a rapid transition is aligned with change management theories that emphasize the benefits of disruption to help members break with past behaviors and cognitive schema (Armenakis et al., 1993; Kotter, 1995).

Here, just as in the case of autonomy and independence, actors risk conflating two similar but analytically distinct concepts; specifically, actors risk simplistically equating the other separating entity (or entities) with, or seeing it as symbolizing, the past. Since returning to the past is undesirable, so is the other entity. Hence, attempts to break with the past may be conflated with breaking up wholesale with the other entity. Such a view is, of course, simplistic, not least because effectively renegotiating relationships and, hence, moving toward a desirable future involves actively engaging with the past (i.e., discussing and agreeing what needs to be changed, why and how). Nevertheless, due to the simplicity of seeing oneself as embracing the new (i.e., associating oneself with progress) and the other as representing the old, it may prove compelling, especially for a divested unit whose members look forward to having to deal with fewer bureaucratic constraints. Moreover, simply walking away, rather than engaging in the laborious process of attempting to align existing relationships with new organizational demands, may appear easier.

The above explanations are all based on separating actors' intentions of not collaborating with one another. However, an alternative is also conceivable – not collaborating as a tactic to stimulate increased collaboration. We elaborate this possibility below.

Strategic Ploy to Demonstrate Continued Dependence

A separating entity may eschew collaboration as part of an attempt to demonstrate to the other entity that it is highly dependent on it (and thereby aim to alter the perceived lack of interdependencies mentioned earlier). This is a common (albeit perhaps controversial) parenting technique: after children have protested about not being allowed to do something, the parents teach their children that they are heavily reliant on their support by telling them they can do whatever they want but cannot expect to receive any help at all going forward (perhaps, going as far as not allowing the children to enter the home). The hope is that such

measures lead the children to reassess their situation, recognize their dependencies, and subsequently engage in collaboration. Of course, children may attempt to use this tactic themselves, for instance, by running away from home in the hope that the parents will experience loss and subsequently pay more attention to them. Attempts to demonstrate dependence can be seen in many contentious negotiations, such as the UK's exit from the European Union in which both sides occasionally have threatened to walk away and prepare for a "no deal" scenario. From the EU's perspective, such a tactic of demonstrating its power with regard to these parting entity's dependencies may also be an attempt to prevent other existing members from contemplating separation and hence may be used as a signaling device to deter other defections.

The above-mentioned explanations suggest that in some cases, collaboration may not be straightforward because it could violate regulations. It may also not be perceived as beneficial for the entities involved if they do not require each other's assistance. Moreover, helping each other may not only be seen as amounting to wasted efforts, but also as potentially supporting a (future) untrustworthy competitor. However, in other cases the lack of collaboration may be motivated by emotional responses and the failure to recognize (present or future) interdependencies. In other words, subjective interpretations, emotions and cultural norms may play a role in shaping subsequent inter-organizational dynamics. Hence, we suggest that relationships between separating entities may not be the outcomes of objective economic calculations of costs and benefits and that being able to break up while maintaining positive relationships requires efforts to build mutual respect, develop trust, and disassociate dependence with negative characteristics, such as shame and lack of progress. This suggests that research on organizational separation processes should take into account the history of interactions between the separating entities and the backgrounds of the individuals involved rather than assume that such processes follow the same trajectory and that issues can be addressed successfully by following a standard change management template. Nevertheless, given our identification of developing autonomy for all separating entities as the core objective of organizational separation (because without autonomy, the separating entities lack the necessary discretion to qualify as separate organizations) we conclude by considering what a successful collaborative process of supporting autonomy involves.

THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS OF SUPPORTING AUTONOMY

As [Ryan \(1991\)](#) notes with regard to individual autonomy, "although [personal] development may appropriately be described through a relatively invariant sequences of stages ... it is still done by some 'one' through moment-to-moment intentions, willings, and motives" (pp. 211–212). In other words, autonomy does not simply develop by itself – it is an ongoing achievement. It is, therefore, useful to unpack the process of developing autonomy in some detail. For this purpose, we draw on [Ellerman's \(2006\)](#) work on assisting developing nations and, specifically,

his emphasis on the “indirect approach” which is inspired by Dewey’s writings on active learning, as well as several strands of both Western and Eastern philosophy.

Ellerman distinguishes between the “doer” (the party that is responsible for solving a problem or leading a practice and therefore needs to claim autonomy) and the “helper” (the party that assists the other with regard to claiming autonomy, which may involve having to grant autonomy and, therefore, relinquish control). In the case of a divestiture, the “helper” may be (members of) the divesting and/or divested unit, depending on the distribution of skills and other resources across the newly defined formal organizational boundaries.

The indirect approach – which Ellerman also refers to as “autonomy-respecting assistance” – recognizes that we cannot teach others to become autonomous if they do not want to gain autonomy (i.e., “you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink”). According to this approach, the only way to effectively encourage autonomy is to find existing motivations and encourage them. Moreover, telling others how to deal with a particular problem or situation can, by itself, only result in limited autonomy, as the “doer” may be able to perform routine tasks without requiring further guidance but may struggle to deal with novel situations. Hence, developing autonomy beyond a limited set of repetitive tasks requires the “doer” to reflect on, and generate their own, methods of dealing with problems. These points appear to be directly aligned with [Moschieri’s \(2011\)](#) finding that at the heart of a successful divestiture is the emergence of a “sense of opportunity” among members of a divested unit and that this sense of opportunity requires members’ direct involvement in aspects of the separation process, as well as sufficient freedom to define their own organizational activities, strategies and identities.

While these points appear straightforward in theory, they are often complicated in practice. This is because a divesting unit may be unwilling to give up control until a formal separation process has been completed (and perhaps even afterwards), and because members of a divested unit may be unprepared for (some of) the challenges associated with managing a transition from an integrated unit toward a separate organization. Hence, members of one unit need to learn to let go of, while members of another unit need to learn to accept, certain responsibilities. As we have emphasized throughout, collaboration facilitates renegotiating relationships as part of this transition. However, collaboration between separating entities, by initially reinforcing interdependencies, may appear to undermine autonomy (because autonomy is commonly equated with independence) and may, therefore, be resisted.

Ellerman draws on [McGregor’s \(2006\)](#) Theory Y (which views individuals as seeking intrinsic rewards at work) to develop a five-step approach of supporting autonomy. Below, we describe these steps, which we have modified slightly for our purpose of understanding organizational separation.

*Step 1: Starting from the Doer’s Problem and Incrementally
Building on an Existing State*

First of all, as [Ellerman \(2006\)](#) notes with regard to projects aimed at supporting developing nations, those tasked with providing development assistance (and in some cases, those seeking it) often assume that the easiest way to encourage

development is to start with a blank slate. Existing institutions in the area requiring development (such as certain rituals in a rural area lacking basic infrastructure) may be regarded as problems that need to be eliminated. However, existing traditions, norms, and values are usually resistant to change and often cannot be replaced without causing unanticipated, and often negative, consequences. The belief in the benefits of fundamentally breaking with the past mirrors our discussion of the central tenets of mainstream organizational change management approaches (i.e., “evacuating the burning platform”).

Moreover, there is a tendency for the more powerful entities (who may regard themselves as “experts”) to identify problems rather than letting those who need help to do so themselves. This can lead to overlooking important problems, targeting efforts, and substantial amounts of resources toward solving problems that may not actually exist, and undermining the “doer’s” ability to recognize problems in the future. In other words, developing autonomy requires those directly involved in practices to identify problems themselves rather than being told by outsiders – who may not appreciate the complexities that insiders are confronted with – what is, and what is not problematic.

In the context of organizational separation, these issues appear in various forms. For instance, members of a large divesting unit may provide advice to members of the divested unit about setting up certain functions in ways that are inappropriate. They may recommend, for example, the replication of certain bureaucratic structures that are suitable for large organizations without considering their applicability to a much smaller organizational entity. On the other hand, neither the divesting nor the divested unit may fully recognize the difficulty of quickly making large-scale changes and the need to engage in an extensive review of existing practices, followed by a lengthy transition period required for successful change implementation.

The first author observed an example that highlights these problems in the context of the separation of a unit providing community healthcare services from a government agency responsible for procuring adequate healthcare services for its local population in England (see [Wiedner & Mantere, 2018](#)). According to a member of the divested community care unit, members of the government agency were unhappy when a request to continue to provide certain services at a discount rate was refused. While the divested unit’s decision to discontinue to provide certain expected services may be regarded as a sensible rebuttal that showed its ability and willingness to exercise autonomy rather than adherence to potentially unsuitable external guidance, it arguably failed to recognize the government agency’s difficulties with regard to adapting to new arrangements. Hence, the divested unit did not support the divesting unit’s incremental adaptation to new practices. Instead, it triggered anger and resentment that ended up undermining the divesting unit’s transition toward autonomy. In fact, the resulting tension led to discussions among members of the government agency of how to regain control of certain services from the divested community healthcare provider. This issue leads us to the next step of supporting autonomy, which is principally concerned with developing empathy ([Sennett, 2002](#)).

Step 2: Seeing the Problem Through the Doer's Eyes

Apart from allowing “doers” define their own problems, “helpers” need to understand these definitions if they are to be in a position to provide support with regard to solving them. Such an understanding can only be developed via communication between a doer and helper.

Returning to the example mentioned above, members of the divested community healthcare provider apparently routinely dismissed complaints from members of the divesting government agency and attributed them to “immaturity” and “incompetence.” This changed, however, when newly appointed managers at the divested unit personally met with government agency members to discuss specific issues that they were concerned about. As a result, they learned about problems that could be addressed relatively easily by adjusting some of their own practices or by clarifying why practices had to be changed. Understanding each other's issues, rather than imposing their own interpretations of problems, alleviated tension and increased the divesting unit's members' acceptance of the organizational separation. Apart from resisting the urge to impose one's own interpretation of other's problems, it is also necessary to resist the urge to impose predetermined solutions, which is central to the next step of supporting the development of autonomy in others.

Step 3: Helping the Doer Pursue Their Own Ends to Solve the Organizational Problem

Once a helper understands the doer's perspective with regard to defining a problem, he/she may be tempted to provide a solution. However, this undermines autonomy because the doer is prevented from generating his or her own solutions. This step is, therefore, marked by the helper's absence of action (apart from raising awareness of certain issues and possibilities), openness to the doer's experimentation, and acceptance of failure as part of the doer's learning journey.

Getting experts to resist the urge to step in and voice their own opinions is not always easy. Providing readymade solutions can project authority and may be expected from those who occupy higher social positions. Proposing a solution rather than encouraging the doer to develop their own may satisfy a follower's need for direction, reduce the time needed to implement the solution, and become a habitual practice. For instance, in the case of the separation of the community healthcare unit from the government agency, a member of the former complained in an interview that a situation had developed in which “every time there is a problem, [we think:] ‘let's run to mommy’ or ‘let's run to daddy’ or ‘let's tell on each other.’”

Apart from undermining autonomy, the direct approach of providing solutions can also trigger animosity. For instance, members of the community healthcare provider complained in interviews that the government agency was akin to an abusive father who “gives us a good kicking and says: ‘You're not doing it well enough! You need to do this, this, and this!’” rather than recognizing that “we have all got good heads on our shoulders; we could come up with a really good solution, if you give us the opportunity.”

Failing to complete steps one and two can also explain why, despite expectations that the other should be pursuing their own ends to solve organizational

problems, such efforts may appear to be lacking. Notably, managers at the government agency routinely complained about the apparent unwillingness to “innovate” at the community healthcare organization – despite not having actively and consistently encouraged it.

Step 4: Helping the Doer to Implement, Test, and Refine the Doer’s Solution

The fourth step involves assisting the doer with regard to implementing, testing and refining the designed strategies. Instead of the helper providing resources, this may require actively removing implementation barriers (similar to [Kotter’s \(1995\)](#) advice on managing change). In the organizational separation case mentioned above, one example was the (temporary) removal of certain terms and conditions in a contract between the separating entities that all parties involved eventually recognized as limiting the ability to increase the flexibility of a certain service.

This step crucially relies on the previous steps having contributed to inter-organizational trust. In contrast to the previous step, the fourth step of collaboratively supporting autonomy requires more from the helper than active listening and increasing awareness of potential issues and possibilities. It entails active efforts to support initiatives by the other organizational entity. Without such active support, there is the risk that one or several parties prematurely assume that autonomy already has been developed and that they fail to recognize any barriers that may still need to be removed in this respect.

Step 5: Helping the Doer Take Responsibility for the Solution

Finally, it is important for the doer to assume responsibility for the devised solutions – and for the helper to resist claiming any responsibility for them. However, it may be difficult for a helper to resist the urge to take credit for success. This step is necessary for the doer to develop a sense of ownership and for the helper to accept giving up control. In the context of organizational separation, the importance of members of a divested unit developing a sense of ownership is highlighted in particular by [Moschieri’s \(2011\)](#) analysis of successful spin-offs. This step is assisted by formalizing and monitoring the boundaries of roles and responsibilities between the separating entities.

All of the steps mentioned above may be required to support the development of autonomy for a potentially very large number of organizational practices, depending on the extent to which the separating entities have been integrated prior to the initiation of separation. This complex process of disentangling multiple interconnected practices without causing severe disruption entails work in terms of planning and ongoing communication.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To paraphrase our opening quote, breaking up is hard to do but building a new collaborative relationship following a break up is even harder. The typical suggestion in the case of organizational break-ups is to have a “clean break” from the

past, achieve closure, and go separate ways without being stuck in the shadow of past relationships. This is because it is deemed important for the separating party to become “independent” and stand on its own feet. Not shedding the relics of the past may be regarded as antithetical to good and effective change management.

A clean break and abrupt termination may be feasible and desirable under certain circumstances, such as when ongoing collaboration is unlawful, when parties have very little to gain (and, perhaps, much to lose) from continued communication due to limited future interdependencies or existential threats emanating from potential competition, or when existing relationships have turned irreversibly toxic. Notwithstanding such circumstances, we suggest an alternative route to navigating organizational separation that emphasizes ongoing collaboration and recognition of potential interdependencies between the separating parties. We adopt a relational perspective based on a collaborative paradigm, whereby separation is an ongoing *process* in which voids emerge, are identified and collaboratively addressed, rather than viewing it as a cataclysmic *event* that terminates relationships. Our relational perspective vis-à-vis organizations separating *and* staying together is consistent with a “duality view,” where apparent opposites such as stability and change are seen to be fundamentally interdependent – both contradictory and complementary – rather than incompatible and mutually exclusive as a “dualist view” would suggest (Farjoun, 2010; Smith, Erez, Jarvenpaa, Lewis, & Tracey, 2017).

However, despite the many benefits of forging collaborative relationships, separating parties often find it difficult to collaborate in practice. These difficulties arise from implicit assumptions that are prevalent in guides to effective change management (e.g., the need to evacuate the “burning platform”), and economic underpinnings of much of the strategy literature concerning inter-organizational relations that tends to adopt a self-interested perspective and dismiss emotional dynamics. We argue that these assumptions have deep roots that are partially reflected in common language, resulting in terms such as “separation” and “termination,” as well as “independence” and “autonomy,” often being used interchangeably. Teasing out differences between them and questioning the common association of dependence with shame in Western society can help us recognize that collaboration may enable, rather than undermine, autonomy.

A relational perspective highlights that complete independence is a myth as every practice involves interaction with, and is therefore dependent on, an environment. However, this perspective does not rule out the ability to act autonomously, defined more narrowly as exercising discretion (i.e., being able to perform a practice without requiring guidance or approval from others). Achieving autonomy does not necessitate severing all ties and may in fact involve strengthening them because these ties may facilitate learning how to deal with problems. This does not mean that we advocate that separating entities necessarily maintain or even increase interdependencies. Rather, we suggest that interdependencies should be recognized as potential bases of support for achieving organizational autonomy and, therefore, for achieving (according to our definition) successful organizational separation. In sum, organizational separation need not be treated

as a definitive event wherein both parties achieve a “clean break,” from the past, but rather an ongoing process, where both parties evolve and can benefit from forging collaborative relationships even after formal separation.

We have argued that we can develop a deep understanding of organizational separation related phenomena by clarifying how we can assess its successful implementation (i.e., achieving autonomy) and how and why actors’ behaviors may positively contribute to, or inhibit it. Due to the paucity of organizational separation process studies, more empirical research is needed to further develop these arguments and identify boundary conditions. In particular, we see opportunities to further tease out the roles of actors’ underlying assumptions, emotions, language (including metaphors) and ethical perspectives related to separation dynamics. Decisions to collaborate or not in the context of separation are not only based on rational and deliberative reasoning, but may also be influenced by whether something “feels” wrong or right (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015; Sonenshein, 2007), triggering potential tension between dispassionate rational arguments and affective judgments (Maitlis, Vogus, & Lawrence, 2013).

The potential for separation to trigger animosity has important implications for a wide range of settings in which inter-organizational collaboration is necessary or beneficial, such as the management and provision of previously integrated public services and flexible supply chains (in which one entity must quickly adapt to others to ensure uninterrupted production). A close examination of organizational separation processes may provide insights regarding the subsequent emergence of friction, which, without considering historical interdependence, may be difficult to explain. This is evident in the current Brexit impasse marked by continual frictions and emotional rhetoric even if arguably, it has become increasingly evident that a “clean break” from the European Union may be an illusion and forging collaborative arrangements would benefit both parties. Moreover, studies of temporal trajectories of separation may identify when, how and why certain dynamics may alter relationships in ways that contribute to, or undermine, reconciliation and subsequent collaboration. In this respect, scholars may also wish to explore the role of temporal sense-making and how actors engage in retrospection and incorporate prospective futures into constructing their lines of action (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Schultz & Hernes, 2012). This last point allows us to see historical (pre-separation) relationships as intersubjective and changeable constructions. In other words, the past is explorable and open to multiple interpretations: “It’s never too late [for a separated entity] to have a happy childhood” (Robbins, 2001).

NOTE

1. A Clarivate Analytics Web of Science topic search on July 5, 2018 for “organizational separation” yielded only 10 management and business related publications, compared to 126 for “organizational integration” across the entire database (all years: 1900 to present).

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