How to not lose oneself: the case for relational identity in collaborative supply relationships

Oskari Rintala

Operations and Supply Chain Management, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

Abstract

Purpose – For a long time, researchers have stressed the importance of identity for collaborative supply relationships. Accordingly, it has been proposed that supply relationships may be efficiently managed by establishing a shared collective identity among partners. However, this strategy may challenge the partners' individual distinctiveness and thus lead to adversarial relationship outcomes. In this article, it is argued how and when establishing an intergroup relational identity may be a better choice than building a collective identity.

Design/methodology/approach – The conceptual research is based on an analysis of previous literature. Relational identity theorizing and the theory of intergroup leadership are applied to build on and extend previous views on identity in interorganizational contexts.

Findings – It is proposed that when supply chain actors are subject to identity threats in collaborative supply relationships, such threats are driven by the imbalance of power between or among the parties. Therefore, establishing an intergroup relational identity should be preferred over a collective identity in situations characterized by a high identity threat.

Research limitations/implications – Future studies could support this article's theoretical suggestions with empirical evidence.

Practical implications – Intergroup relational identity preserves the distinctiveness of all parties involved in a collaborative relationship and is based on their individual contributions. Managers could support a collaborative environment and promote a shared vision between or among organizations through appropriate rhetoric.

Originality/value – This study contributes to an understanding of the relational aspects of interorganizational behavior by adapting social psychological theories to this area of research.

Keywords Supply chain, Social identity, Relational identity, Collaboration, Intergroup relations, Identity threat, Power

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

By definition, supply chain management (SCM) is concerned with the strategic coordination of business functions both within and across companies (Mentzer *et al.*, 2001). Accordingly, over a long period, researchers in the field have been interested in studying factors related to collaborative efforts between and among supply chain partners (Min *et al.*, 2005). On the bright side, creating and maintaining functional relationships across the supply chain are associated with improved capabilities and performance on both organizational and supply chain levels (e.g. Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000; Min *et al.*, 2008; Terpend *et al.*, 2008; Carey *et al.*, 2011; Johnson *et al.*, 2013). There is also a "dark side" to supply chain relationships; too much of a good thing poses the risk of firms' diminishing returns on performance (Villena *et al.*, 2011). Other detrimental factors associated with too close a relationship include, but are not

limited to, a reduced ability to adapt to changes (Uzzi, 1997), impeded knowledge acquisition (Cousins *et al.*, 2006) and opportunistic behavior (Granovetter, 1985). Thus, supply chain managers are faced with the challenge of finding a balance between promoting successful collaboration and maintaining sufficient organizational distinctiveness (Huang *et al.*, 2020).

Researchers in the field of social psychology have grappled with similar themes and shown how intergroup relations tend to manifest various biases, such as ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination (e.g. Brewer *et al.*, 1993). These phenomena are expounded on in studies using the concepts of identity and identification, which serve as means to promote and maintain individuals' positive self-images (Leary, 2007; Vignoles, 2011). Following the social identity approach, people categorize themselves and others in terms of social groups, identify with some of the groups and maintain a positive social identity via differentiation from other groups (Postmes *et al.*, 2001; Hornsey, 2008). In this regard, several strategies for reducing intergroup bias and strengthening collaboration are proposed, such as redefining group boundaries (Gaertner *et al.*, 1993; Hornsey and Hogg, 2000, Öberg, 2016) and considering leadership as an identity management process (Rast *et al.*, 2018).

SCM has followed suit by acknowledging the significance of shared visions, norms and goals between supplier and buyer organizations for better performance. Accordingly, it has been suggested that these characteristics are reinforced in collective identities shared among supply chain exchange partners, which in turn support the desired cooperative action (Ireland and Webb, 2007; Min *et al.*, 2008; Corsten *et al.*, 2011). Then again, this line of research has often disregarded the bias associated with intergroup behavior. Establishing common ground among parties with different backgrounds, goals and interests is often met with difficulties (Ungureanu *et al.*, 2020), and threats of changes to organizational characteristics may initiate resistance to the collaborative enterprise (Fawcett *et al.*, 2015). Accordingly, it has been shown that those involved in supply relationships may experience feelings of vulnerability and find their "selves" threatened in encounters with external stakeholders (Fawcett *et al.*, 2008; Ellis and Ybema, 2010). The problems are indicative of risks that have been conceptualized as identity threats, defined at the individual level as "*experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity*" (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 644). As Hogg *et al.* (2012) argue, interorganizational encounters may threaten the distinctive identities that social actors aim to maintain, thus hindering their collaborative behavior.

How, then, should such behavioral complexities relevant to changes in supply relationships be managed? In their theory of intergroup leadership, Hogg *et al.* (2012) state that effective interorganizational leadership is based on the development of a positive intergroup relational identity, "*the self defined in terms of the relationship between one's own group and a specific outgroup*" (p. 239), in the collaborative enterprise. In contrast to a collective identity, such a relational identity does not assume similarity between the groups but is focused on the relationship between them. A collective identity among the members of supplier and buyer organizations would entail a sense of "us" or an intuition that the events affecting the other group would also affect oneself (Corsten *et al.*, 2011). In the case of intergroup relational identity, the group boundaries would not be dissolved in this way, as the notion of self would be based on how an actor viewed oneself and one's contribution in relation to a mutually collaborative relationship with another. The expression "*we are in this together*" would translate to "*both(/all) of us have a significant role in this.*"

Defining the self in such relational terms rather than as part of a collective helps organizational members retain their valued distinctiveness, thus alleviating the problem of an identity threat (Rast *et al.*, 2018; Kershaw *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, intergroup relational identity is based on the recognition of the groups' equal worth in their collaboration, whereupon it mitigates the risk of relatively disadvantaged groups becoming undermined in relationships characterized by differences in power (Hogg *et al.*, 2012). Power asymmetries

also involve a social dilemma common to supply relationships, where power exercised by one party over another may negatively affect their collaborative behavior (Nyaga *et al.*, 2013).

This paper contributes to the understanding of how parties involved in supply relationships may better gain the benefits associated with collaborative behavior. The aim is fulfilled in a twofold manner. First, the concept of intergroup relational identity is applied to examine how identity in supply relationships may be characterized in relational terms. Along the lines of the relational view outlined by Dyer and Singh (1998), the concept directs attention to a relationship as the focal unit of analysis in explaining interorganizational behavior and the mutual advantage it generates. Second, this study draws from the theory of intergroup leadership to propose how supply relationships that vary in terms of power should be managed, with consideration to identity threats. Here, the study also touches on the issue of *who* manages the relationship. Overall, this conceptual research extends previous literature via theory synthesis and adaptation (see Jaakkola, 2020); identity theorizing is applied to structure previous research findings as well as explore novel aspects of the SCM domain.

2. Supply chain collaboration and identity

Supply chain collaboration is the contemporary way to refer to business-to-business relationships that vary in terms of form, scale and context, where the parties share mutual goals and work together to achieve them (Huang *et al.*, 2020). Formally, it is defined as "*a long-term partnership process where supply chain partners with common goals work closely together to achieve mutual advantages that are greater than the firms would achieve individually*" (Cao *et al.*, 2010, p. 6617). The collaboration may extend beyond the dyadic level, as supply chain actors usually interact with many other firms, either directly or indirectly in a network of interconnections (Braziotis *et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, from a relational perspective, the relationships between pairs or among networks of firms are potential sources of competitive advantage, driven by collaborative behavior, such as making relation-specific investments and sharing knowledge (Dyer and Singh, 1998).

Research on identity has been concerned with identity and identification as important facilitators of such collaborative behavior. Here, particular attention has been paid to views rooted in the social identity approach, based on which the social world may be classified into various categories and their characteristics in relation to which social actors identify themselves (Hornsey, 2008). The group classifications relevant to the social actor make up the actor's social identity (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), whereas identification is related to the process in which the actor assumes an identity as a partial definition of oneself (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). Then, to maintain a positive social identity, people tend to think better of the groups where they belong (the ingroups) than of other groups (the outgroups). For example, an organization's identity is signified in its central, enduring and distinctive characteristics (Whetten, 2006). The organization's members may then identify with it, whereupon they become likely to exhibit cooperativeness toward their co-members (i.e. the ingroup) and competitiveness toward people outside the organization (the outgroups) (Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Steinman *et al.*, 2000).

The intergroup challenges become emphasized in interorganizational settings where the pursuit of integration often meets heterogeneity in organizational goals and attributes (Ungureanu *et al.*, 2020). To overcome the heterogeneity, research has given weight to the importance of engendering and maintaining a sense of collective identity based on implied similarity between groups (see Brewer and Gardner, 1996). Particularly, it has been suggested that groups should aim to establish a shared collective identity where individuals come to recognize themselves as part of a superordinate category consisting of two or more groups (Gaertner *et al.*, 1993). The process involves recategorization, where boundaries between initially distinct groups are dissolved and homogeneity in the common superordinate group

is emphasized. The idea derived from the social identity approach maintains that when the groups are perceived as one, there is less intergroup bias fueled by a social categorization process where people differentiate between their own group and other groups.

The significance of a collective identity for interorganizational behavior is evident in previous studies on the topic. Here, in conceptualizations of interorganizational identity, the importance of identities built in collaborative action and shared among partners is referred to as strategic group identity (Peteraf and Shanley, 1997), district identity (Sammarra and Biggiero, 2001), (strategic) network identity (Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000; Bonner et al., 2005), corporate identity (Melewar et al., 2005) and collaboration-level identity (Öberg, 2016). The supply chain context becomes explicit in the work of Ireland and Webb (2007), who maintain that firms in a supply chain may form a common identity based on shared characteristics such as values, norms, and goals. Accordingly, Min et al. (2008) describe supply chain identity salience as "*the extent of a firm's sense of belonging to a particular supply chain*" (p. 288). They argue that similar to individuals, a firm may have a social identity, which is embodied in the attributes common to the members of a particular supply chain and has the capacity to guide organizational behavior when activated. Elsewhere, Corsten et al. (2011) explore how supplier-to-buyer identification, "*the perceived oneness of a supplier organization with a buying organization*" (p. 551), is a key precursor of operational performance through trust and information exchange in a mediated relationship.

While the previous descriptions of identity in the supply chain context may be understood as instances of collective identity, social psychological research has paid attention to identity as a relational concept. According to this view, the self is construed not only in terms of the perceived similarity between oneself and other individuals (i.e. the personal self) or groups (the collective self) but is also derived from one's role relationships with specific others (Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Lord et al., 1999; Epitropaki et al., 2017). Sluss and Ashforth (2007) argue that the nature of these interdependent role relationships, such as manager–subordinate or coworker–coworker, constitutes one's relational identities and colors one's experience and behavior as role incumbents. For example, a manager–subordinate relational identity is based on the interaction of expectations related to the roles ("What is it to be a manager [subordinate] to a subordinate [manager]?"), as well as the qualities that the individuals enacting the roles bring to the relationship ("What kind of a manager [subordinate] am I?"). These factors contribute to the individual's conception of one's role, whereby the individual may come to define oneself in terms of the role relationship.

Hogg et al. (2012) extend the idea by considering how groups are often defined by their relationships with other groups, that is, their intergroup relational identities. The concept presumes that individuals may have mental representations of the kinds of relationships that groups (such as managers and subordinates) have vis-à-vis each other on the collective level. It is a definitive characteristic of the collective, as the relationship between the groups would be very different if it was not for the relationship (e.g. there would be no manager without someone to manage). Furthermore, intergroup relational identity is maintained by the groups' shared views of their mutually promotive relationship that reinforces collaborative action. Rast et al. (2020) validate the intergroup relational identity construct with a scale measuring the self-definitional aspect of a relationship. The following are examples of the measurement items: "*The relationship [ingroup] has with [outgroup] is part of who we are.*" "*The collaborative relationship between [ingroup] and [outgroup] is part of what makes us who we are*" (ibid., p. 964).

It can also be argued that supply relationships provide a sound foundation for (intergroup) relational identities. In general, research has shown how relationships are definitive aspects of (inter)organizational identities. For example, Scott and Lane (2000) describe organizational identity in terms of manager–stakeholder relationships, where the nature of the identity is based on role expectations and how the parties enact them. In this respect, previous studies on

interorganizational collaborations indicate how such relationships distinguish firms from others in the market, endure over time and are central to firm performance (Chen *et al.*, 2004; Ungureanu *et al.*, 2020). Likewise, perceptions of partner roles and collaborative behavior have been found to be important for the success of supply relationships (Nyaga *et al.*, 2013; Skippari *et al.*, 2017). Views on resource interdependence between parties in supply relationships have also been found to be positively related to their collaborative communication (Cai *et al.*, 2009).

The ways that supply chain partners define themselves in terms of the relationship between their organization and some supplier or buyer organizations may be further illustrated in a few examples. First, consider the Japanese industrial *keiretsu* business groups, characterized by long-term business relationships and interlocking shareholdings. Often, the distinct firms advance the aims dictated by the large corporations at the top of their respective *keiretsu* in a collaborative fashion. For example, Dyer and Nobeoka's (2000) study showed how Toyota shaped its suppliers' identities by fostering impressions of economic interdependence and mutual advantage. The relevance of the relationship between Toyota and its suppliers is also exemplified in the significant sales volumes of the suppliers committed to Toyota, as detailed by Aoki and Lennerfors (2013). Such exclusiveness implies that a specific firm within the collective of Toyota's supplier network may be defined by its relationship with Toyota.

Identity may also facilitate self-definition by stating what relationships are not definitive of one. For example, take the case of the now-liquidated Nygård International, the Canada-based apparel and fashion company with almost 40 million garments shipped annually at its prime, according to the company's LinkedIn page. However, in recent years, the company has been associated with socially irresponsible sourcing and allegations of sexual assaults committed by its founder, Peter Nygård. In the wake of these events, Dillard's, the large United States (US)-based department store chain and distributor of Nygård products, cut ties with the company that Dillard's perceived as acting in opposition to its core values (Bergen, 2020). The distributor's behavior points to disidentification, where a social actor creates a cognitive distance from another and thus states "who it is not" (cf. Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). While relational disidentification may hinder a collaborative relationship through negative expectations and withdrawal from the partner, it serves as a means for self-enhancement by clarifying the boundaries of the self (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007).

3. Supply relationships and threatened identity
3.1 Identity threat as an interorganizational challenge
Forming or breaking away from interorganizational identities is not a challenge-free process. The process may introduce the involved organizations with aspects that were not previously part of their identities, whereupon their members cope by employing various cognitive strategies (Wenzel *et al.*, 2020). In other words, the modifications that interorganizational relationships bring to organizational boundaries drive their members to undergo an adaptation process where they must reconstruct and renegotiate their existing self-concepts to include the new identities (Methot *et al.*, 2018). Meanwhile, those responsible for the relationships work with the aim of bringing closer together what their organization is and what it aspires to be (Ungureanu *et al.*, 2020). Deriving from Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory, if this kind of gap exists between *the actual self* ("what I am") and the *ideal* ("what I would like to be") or *ought self* ("what I ought to be"), it might impede the basic need for continuity and lead to discrepancies in one's identity.

The challenges related to reworking one's identity were previously addressed with reference to identity threats. The attempts to establish an identity between groups face a serious obstacle to collaborative performance when social actors perceive the new identity as

a threat to their previously established and distinct social identities (Hornsey and Hogg, 2000). Continuity of experience is important for self-preservation, while altering one's identity may threaten this goal by causing uncertainty (Solomon *et al.*, 1991; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) and may require a cognitive effort that inhibits the integration of complex social identities (Roccas and Brewer, 2002). Accordingly, when group members perceive an outgroup as too similar to their ingroup, they may find their sense of distinctiveness threatened, leading to increased differentiation between the groups (Schmid *et al.*, 2009). Likewise, threats to the distinctiveness of an organization could compromise its members' sense of belonging to the organization and even the individual members' selves where they define themselves in terms similar to the organization (Dutton *et al.*, 1994). In this vein, Ellis and Ybema (2010) portray how supply chain managers' distinctive personal and/or organizational identities may be threatened when exposed to external stakeholders' opinions and judgments. This may further elicit feelings of vulnerability, as in the case of the interviewed managers who had to balance between gaining the benefits of collaboration and being vulnerable to counterproductive measures (Fawcett *et al.*, 2008).

The existence of identity threats can be further justified in the treatment of power in supply chains. For example, views rooted in the resource dependence theory and transaction cost economics state that when firms in a supply chain embark on a relationship to acquire resources, they become more or less interdependent and hold power over each other (Ireland and Webb, 2007). The amounts of resources and bargaining power of firms vary, whereupon supply relationships are characterized by power asymmetries in which the supplier and the buyer have unequal abilities to influence the other's behavior (Cox, 2004; Brito and Miguel, 2017). It is argued that perceptions of threat and conflict follow from such asymmetries, as the weaker party is at risk of being exploited or feeling resentful, while the stronger party may fear a shift in the status quo (Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero, 2007). In this vein, studies on organizational merger situations show how the relative premerger position of one's organization is linked to the perceived identity threat and identification with the postmerger superordinate group (e.g. Amiot *et al.*, 2012; Lipponen *et al.*, 2017).

3.2 Theory of intergroup leadership as an interorganizational solution
Intergroup relationships pose a threat to the involved groups' distinctiveness when these blur group boundaries by proposing a similarity between initially distant groups. In such situations, group members may use the differences between the groups to legitimize the differentiation between the ingroup and the outgroup (Jetten and Spears, 2003). Despite this challenge, previous works on identity in the supply chain context have been principally based on the social identity approach and have thus emphasized establishing a collective identity, implying similarity between the chain partners. For instance, following the argument of Min *et al.* (2008), supply chain identity salience is a function of factors traditionally associated with group formation, such as similarity, proximity and shared goals between the partners (see Ashforth and Mael, 1989). However, these characteristics may be difficult to acquire in the supply chain context where collaborating firms may be culturally and spatially very distinct from each other and therefore aim for different goals (Huang *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, putting such emphasis on the likeness between partners is particularly challenging in situations where the parties hold unequal power. Establishing a collective identity poses the risk of the dominant group projecting its identity onto the collective, which the members of the subordinate group may find difficult to come to terms with (Hogg *et al.*, 2012).

Then again, group members may perceive other groups as too similar to their ingroup; identity threats and differentiation may be triggered when bringing together groups with previously established identities under a superordinate category (Jetten and Spears, 2003). In this regard, the hardships of collective identity are evident in how previously established

intraorganizational and interorganizational identities can become threatened and thus create inertia in the event of organizational change. For instance, Öberg (2016) found that companies' distinct precollaboration histories might create inertia in establishing a shared identity between companies. Additionally, challenges could ensue if a company that had a previously shared collective identity with a supplier or a buyer were to embark on new collaborative supply relationships. Given that firms in supply relationships develop ingroup bias for their own organization (Steinman *et al.*, 2000), the creation of a shared sense of "us" with a particular supplier or buyer might correspondingly hinder the development of a collective identity in relation to other suppliers and buyers. Although the identities are not necessarily exclusive, as "*firms possess multiple identities and play different roles with different degrees of supply chain identity salience in different supply chains*" (Min *et al.*, 2008, p. 285), each relevant supply relationship pertains to its own organizing logics (Flynn *et al.*, 2016). Thereby, they may be challenging to manage in a concurrent fashion and may negatively affect the focal firm through incompatible identity claims and the exclusion of those outside a particular relationship (see Whetten, 2006; Ellis and Ybema, 2010).

The above argument relates to a situation where the formation of collaborative relationships is possibly impeded as a firm has to be selective in what relationships to invest in. On the other side of the continuum, there are situations where too many resources are invested in a relationship that subsequently becomes too close. Uzzi (1997) calls this the "paradox of embeddedness," referring to how embeddedness may become a liability to an organization, for instance, when the actor loses an important relationship and has a hard time adjusting because it has tied its resources to what is now lost. Social identity processes related to collective identity involve a depersonalized sense of self, where an actor perceives oneself as belonging to a group rather than as a distinct individual entity (Brewer *et al.*, 1993). Accordingly, if the actor defined oneself in terms of one's similarity to the members of another organization (i.e. established a collective identity), ending the relationship could jolt the very values on which the actor's identity was based. Forming a collective identity means identifying or equating oneself with others in terms of some attributes, whereupon disidentifying is an act of disidentifying with attributes definitive of the self, thus posing a threat to the self.

Hogg *et al.* (2012) address the problems of identity threats and power asymmetries in their theory of intergroup leadership by arguing that collaborative intergroup (i.e. interorganizational) performance can be facilitated through the development of a sense of intergroup relational identity. Intergroup leaders ought to aim for establishing an identity where the groups define themselves as distinct from one another and acknowledge intergroup differences yet perceive their value in working toward common goals in a mutually collaborative relationship. Intergroup relational identity is not necessarily based on intergroup similarity and therefore neither challenges one's existing identity nor incites resistance associated with identity threats to the same extent as a collective identity would. Moreover, leaders would find advantages in focusing on intergroup relational identity, as this would not require them to be "one with the group" as premised for effective leadership in theories on collective identity. Instead, they should emphasize the intergroup *relationship* and its significance for their organization.

Thus, embarking on a new collaborative relationship or detaching oneself from one is, in general, more likely to be successful when group identity is described in terms of intergroup relational identity rather than collective identity. Accordingly, intergroup relational identity better accounts for asymmetries in power by clarifying the roles of the parties in the supply relationship. In other words, it may help the parties perceive themselves as more equal in the relationship by emphasizing their unique values to the collaboration while not engendering identity threats related to distinctiveness. Intergroup relational identity thus supports the creation of a mutual understanding of an identity shared among organizations, whereupon it

legitimizes the use of power by making its aims better known to the partners in the collaboration (Ireland and Webb, 2007). Recent studies (Rast *et al.*, 2018; Kershaw *et al.*, 2021) on the effects of identity management on intergroup attitudes and evaluations of leaders who do not belong to one's ingroup support these arguments. Particularly, intergroup leadership based on collective identity is more suitable for situations characterized by low identity threats, whereas intergroup relational identity works better when the identity distinctiveness threat is high.

4. Management of intergroup relational identity in supply relationships

Research suggests that identity is built in communicative action in interorganizational collaborations. The parties involved in collaborative partnerships construct common realities in conversations where they become connected to the common cause around which the collaboration is organized and directly to one another (Hardy *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, communication may transmit various stimulus cues, such as symbols, visual images and words, which prime a particular identity and thus heighten sensitivity to identity-related stimuli (Forehand *et al.*, 2002). Communication is also related to the process of organizational socialization where individuals assume organizational roles and learn the associated practices (Cousins *et al.*, 2006). Conversely, a lack of communication may result in role ambiguity of the collaborative partners in a supply relationship (DeCampos *et al.*, 2022).

In line with the previous arguments, Gambetti and Giovanardi (2013) suggest that communication supports cultural cohesion and knowledge transfer and is thus essential for identity management in supply chains. Hogg *et al.* (2012) elaborate on the notion by emphasizing the importance of a leader's rhetoric in intergroup collaboration. They approach leadership as a sensemaking process directed at shaping the followers' understanding of group identity and building identification, whereupon intergroup leadership has to give meaning to the intergroup collaboration. In practice, leadership based on intergroup relational identity is intended to instill a sense of distinctive yet valued contributions of each group to the goals of a superordinate group, a sense of distinctive group identities and a sense of defining the groups partly by their collaborative relationship (Rast *et al.*, 2018). In SCM terms, the individuals involved in a supply relationship should be prompted to acknowledge their distinctive roles in relation to the other parties with whom they are involved. They should understand both how they contribute to the goals of the supply chain collaboration and how the collaboration is essential for achieving the outcomes valued by the individual organizations. Supply chain collaboration is associated with the feeling that "*we are in this together*" (Min *et al.*, 2005, p. 243); additionally, it would be beneficial to emphasize how differences among the parties are key to make the collaboration thrive.

The theory of intergroup leadership is built on the assumption that intergroup collaborations require effective intergroup leadership to develop to their full potential. Likewise, SCM research has not dismissed the importance of the leadership function required to realize the advantages in supply chain collaboration. Leadership is essential in facilitating intrafirm supply chain orientation, referring to the recognition of the systemic relatedness between the firm and its supply network, and subsequently, in improving collaboration across firm boundaries (Mentzer *et al.*, 2001; Esper *et al.*, 2010). Leadership in the SCM context naturally extends to the interorganizational level and is further concerned with one supply chain member firm's exercise of power over another (Mokhtar *et al.*, 2019). However, it has been acknowledged that power is not the only possible source of leadership in the context that is more broadly concerned with a supply chain partner's possible influence on another through behavior (Defee *et al.*, 2009). In other words, one does not need power to act like a leader and influence others.

Regarding who may have influence in a supply relationship, the analysis of collaborative action ultimately stresses the importance of boundary spanners, referring to actors in roles

situated at the interface between an organization and its external environment (Chakkol *et al.*, 2018). These individuals both create and maintain interorganizational ties through repeated interactions with those akin in different roles that connect two or more social networks together (Hogg *et al.*, 2012; Dekker *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, boundary spanners in supply chains form personal relationships with one another, which have been shown to be both meaningful to the individuals themselves and to increase the chances of achieving the collaboration's objectives (Gilgor and Autry, 2012; Ekanayake *et al.*, 2017).

The boundary spanners who are most likely to influence supply relationships are often recognized as managers, ranging from those on the "frontlines" to those on the middle and the top levels of organizational hierarchies (Ellis and Ybema, 2010), and often hold positions in organizational functions related to procurement, operations, logistics and such (see Ojha *et al.*, 2018). Ellis and Ybema (2010) label such leaders of interorganizational relationships as "boundary bricoleurs" who draw organizational boundaries in an identity talk that articulates similarities and differences among supply chain actors. In turn, Fawcett *et al.* (2008) have applied force field analysis to explore how managerial actions may balance the forces driving and resisting the change required to move from being an individual firm to being a collaborative supply chain partner. In this regard, Hogg *et al.* (2012) propose that when a leader is perceived as having strong relationships with all parties involved in an intergroup arrangement, it lends credibility to the leader's rhetoric. Even better, the relationship could be led by a coalition that would include leaders from all organizations involved, given that people receive a message more easily when it comes from one of their own. These suggestions resonate with the practices that have been found to support supply chain collaboration, such as including key personnel from the collaborating organizations in regular meetings to discuss issues and opportunities relevant to the collaboration (Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000; DeCampos *et al.*, 2022).

In their research, Dekker *et al.* (2019) note how both boundary spanners' relational behavior and interorganizational control mechanisms may have a positive effect on collaboration success. The leader's rhetoric may take place in terms of both. Regarding behavior, Hogg *et al.* (2012) mention speeches and visionary communication as ways to emphasize complementarity in intergroup collaboration and activate members' conceptions of intergroup relational identity. The behavior may then be further manifested in the execution of the interorganizational controls that include holding meetings for setting and discussing the targets for the collaborative relationship (Dekker *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, Gambetti and Giovanardi (2013) emphasize the importance of conventions, functional meetings, plant visits, seminars and workshops as tools for identity management in supply chains. Moreover, Ireland and Webb (2007) suggest the creation of a strategic roadmap for the collaboration, based on all involved partners' views, to facilitate the development of a common identity in the superordinate group.

5. Discussion and conclusions
5.1 Theoretical propositions and managerial implications
Supply chain actors are often confronted with ambiguity in their relations with other people across the supply chains, engaging them in perceiving, withstanding and reacting to uncertainty (Flynn *et al.*, 2016). While the necessity of collaborative relationships in business has been long acknowledged for mitigating the individual efforts in this regard, problems often arise from the collaborations. If a relationship is too distant, the benefits of collaboration may remain minimal, whereas if a relationship is too close, the initial synergies may become outweighed by risks related to locked-in co-dependency, inefficient decision-making, malfeasance and such (Cousins *et al.*, 2006; Villena *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, resolving the related tensions may become cumbersome due to the decision-makers' tendency to resist change (Fawcett *et al.*, 2015).

Following the identity theorizing presented here, these problems may be associated with issues fundamental to human psychology, that is, those of identity and identity threats. People want themselves and their groups to stand out from others as they strive for positive distinctiveness. In case the distinctiveness is not sustained, social actors may find their identities threatened and face subsequent disadvantageous outcomes (Hornsey and Hogg, 2000; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Ellis and Ybema, 2010). These challenges are relevant to collaborative supply relationships where the parties often come from different backgrounds and have different aims in business, whereupon unifying operations may be perceived as a threat to any previously established identity. Correspondingly, ending business relationships represents a change in organizational activity and stipulates a redefinition of the organizations involved. Based on the arguments provided, the first theoretical proposition is put forth:

P1. Supply chain actors may find their identities threatened when they engage in or detach themselves from collaborative supply relationships.

Establishing a collective identity, a sense of "us," among initially distinct organizations is one strategy to avoid biases related to ingroup *vs* outgroup divisions and to foster intergroup collaboration. However, the strategy derived from the social identity approach may be viewed critically as it emphasizes similarities among groups where these do not necessarily exist. In other words, collective identity may disregard and thus threaten the distinctiveness of the subgroups participating in the collaboration.

This becomes a problem particularly when the groups hold unequal power, whereupon the collaborative relationship may be based on terms dictated by a dominant party and leave those with relatively less power to a more reactive role (cf. Cox, 2004). Supply relationships are often characterized by such asymmetries where a firm needs more resources from another firm than the other way around, whereupon the one less in need may exercise power to control the other's access to its resources on terms favorable to itself (Reimann and Ketchen, 2017). In this regard, the aspiration to bolster one's power to emphasize one's distinctiveness and mitigate uncertainty is found on both sides of collaborative supply relationships. For example, Wilhelm (2019) describes how Toyota has invested in its suppliers to introduce competition in its supplier base and thus reduce the uncertainty related to the suppliers' ability to dictate prices. In turn, the findings of a study (Touboulic *et al.*, 2014) in the United Kingdom food industry show how suppliers may initiate horizontal collaborations with one another and thus boost their bargaining power vis-à-vis buyers. The latter further implies how sometimes, the efforts to distinguish oneself from an actor can lead to collaboration with another one.

Both the stronger and the weaker parties in supply relationships may adopt different governance mechanisms to strengthen their positions in relation to those of others. For instance, Brito and Miguel (2017) propose that stronger parties in collaborative supply relationships prefer contractual mechanisms (e.g. formal contracts) to reduce their dependence on their suppliers. In turn, the weaker parties tend to seek relational mechanisms (e.g. agreements based on personal relationships and social norms) to build dependence and thus reduce uncertainty. Nonetheless, situations demarcated by power asymmetries are challenging when it comes to safeguarding against potential identity threats. The power bases that a firm may hold are numerous (i.e. mediated and nonmediated power and their subtypes; Reimann and Ketchen, 2017), and these situations make it possible for the firms to use their power to the detriment of others. In terms of identity, the dominant party has the interest to maintain its position (i.e. reduce threats to its identity) and may consequently project its subgroup identity to the others involved in the collaboration. As for the weaker party, it may lack the means (power) to reduce uncertainty and may find itself vulnerable to potential threats. Accordingly, the second theoretical proposition is presented:

P2. Identity threats in collaborative supply relationships are more likely to occur when there are asymmetries in power between the supplier and buyer parties.

The theory of intergroup leadership responds to these problems that are characteristic of supply relationships (Hogg *et al.*, 2012). The theory is based on the concept of intergroup relational identity, which captures how the individual self is extended by the relationships between the groups where one belongs and other groups. Accordingly, based on the previous SCM literature, supply relationships are important for the identities of both the organizations and of the individual decision makers within them.

Compared to collective identity, identity management based on intergroup relational identity then shifts the focus from shared attributes, such as values and norms, to the roles of the collaborators, with emphasis on the significance of distinct and unique contributions to common goals. This helps the parties involved in the supply relationship understand their roles in relation to one another, whereupon they are less likely to find their identities threatened than when a shared collective identity is emphasized. Leadership based on intergroup relational identity therefore "invests in people's emotional safety"— recommended by Fawcett *et al.* (2008, p. 102)—as a strategy for coping with feelings of vulnerability in collaborative supply relationships.

In practice, identity management in supply relationships is based on the behavior of boundary-spanning individuals. Those responsible for managing the relationships may elicit an intergroup relational identity by communicating in ways that consider all parties involved in the collaborative supply relationships and does not prioritize one party over another. Moreover, the rhetoric may be conveyed effectively across various forums to which the collaborating parties have access (e.g. meetings, seminars and workshops). Based on the arguments provided so far, the third theoretical proposition is formulated:

P3. The higher the identity threat is in a relationship, promoting an intergroup relational identity through interorganizational communication becomes a better leadership strategy for facilitating collaborative supply relationships compared to leadership strategies aimed at building a collective identity.

The current research contributes to an understanding of how the interactions of individuals and groups relate to supply chain phenomena; thus, it provides a sought-after mesolevel approach to bring together different levels of analysis: the individual, the firm and the supply chain (Schorsch *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, the discussion on relational identities has implications outside the considered scope of supply relationships. For example, regarding the individual level, it has been proposed that supply chain managers should possess communication skills to overcome challenges related to changes in cross-functional and interorganizational settings (Ellinger and Ellinger, 2014; Dekker *et al.*, 2019). In establishing and managing intergroup relational identities, the managers should have the ability to create platforms for interaction and disseminate an understanding of "*What do our relationships tell about us?*"

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that promoting an intergroup relational identity may facilitate building a collaborative environment among those not directly involved in a supply relationship. For instance, Methot *et al.* (2018) highlight how the organizational human resource function can participate in disseminating shared perceptions of the work environment and people's roles in it. They note that team-building opportunities, individual training and promotion of information sharing, *inter alia*, may be used to foster relational identities in the organizational context. Finally, the results may have implications regarding supply chain-level dynamics. Previous research has shown how an impact on one area of the supply chain may propagate and affect others through the so-called domino effects (also the bullwhip and the ripple effects). For example, the diffusion of adverse effects across a chain is linked to dysfunctional behavioral dynamics and requires the resilience developed

in collaborations in order to be overcome (Dolgui *et al.*, 2018). Framing supply relationships in terms of intergroup relational identity could intervene by coping with the sources of threats associated here with the collaborations and thus strengthen the relationships alongside other collaborative practices, such as information sharing and trust development.

5.2 Future research opportunities

Future research endeavors could use the propositions put forth here to further develop ideas related to issues of identity and identification in the SCM context and gather data to test the propositions in practice. Regarding the methodology, many possible approaches could be adopted when studying questions of identity and identification. Researchers have previously employed interviews to investigate how social actors understand a focal identity object (e.g. organization, partnership, etc.) and the factors contributing to such understanding (e.g. Ungureanu *et al.*, 2020; Wenzel *et al.*, 2020). In the SCM context, interviews could be used to identify relevant boundary-spanning functions, roles and practices, as well as inquire how boundary spanners perceive the interpersonal or interorganizational relationships in which they are involved (see Chakkol *et al.*, 2018). From a more positivist angle, researchers could apply existing survey instruments (Rast *et al.*, 2020) or use previous experimental designs (Rast *et al.*, 2018; Kershaw *et al.*, 2021) as models to study intergroup relational identity.

Future studies should also pay more attention to the temporal dynamics of identity formation in supply relationships. On the interpersonal level, Sluss and Ashforth (2007) describe how relational identities residing in dyads are in reciprocal interaction with generalized perspectives of a given relational identity. For example, the manager in a manager–subordinate role relationship may possess little initial knowledge of what it takes to be a manager, which then develops into a more nuanced view as one enters into more corresponding relationships. In this regard, it would be interesting to find out if the individual boundary spanners in supply relationships would form such generalized schemas on what it would take to be a supplier or a buyer *sensu lato* and how they would enact this understanding.

On the intergroup level, Hogg *et al.* (2012) refer to the generalization process with the notion of transference. With the concept's roots in the psychoanalytic theory, it has been applied mainly to describing a process in a therapeutic relationship where the patient projects qualities gleaned from past relationships to the analyst (Horvath, 2000). In terms of intergroup relational identity, individuals may project their cognitive representations of existing intergroup collaborations to new ones (Hogg *et al.*, 2012). Accordingly, researchers could study whether and in what ways perceptions of past supply relationships would surface in newly established collaborations. The findings could further shed light on why consumers sometimes hold a focal firm liable for its suppliers' unsustainable behaviors (Hartmann and Moeller, 2014). Perhaps when a firm's relationship with one of its suppliers is perceived as unfavorable, the perception is projected to other relationships as well, and the firm as a whole is viewed in a negative light.

Finally, relational identity applied as a method theory could support research in domains outside supply chain collaboration (Jaakkola, 2020). While this study has focused on collaborative supply relationships, the relationships between a focal firm and its other stakeholders deserve attention. For instance, it would be interesting to find out whether the cooperation between competitive firms (i.e. "coopetition"; see Wilhelm, 2019) could be enhanced with the ideas presented here. Furthermore, studies on supply chain risk management could benefit from a better understanding about the management of relational identities in response to the individual tendency to deflect risk information as a defensive response to prospective identity threats (cf. Kahan *et al.*, 2007). Overall, the current research echoes the ongoing call for researchers to continue applying psychological theories to study SCM-related issues in the future (see Swanson *et al.*, 2017).

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Corresponding author
Oskari Rintala can be contacted at: aomrin@utu.fi