Managing collective social enterprises: A review and research agenda from a paradox perspective

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Abstract

Over the last decades, a fast-increasing community of management scholars have explored the different paradoxical tensions organizations are faced with (Putnam, Fairhurst & Banghart, 2016; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). While most “paradox” research focuses on the study of mainstream, conventional for-profit organizations, we observe a growing interest for social enterprises (see for instance Smith, Gonin & Besharov, 2013), and for the study of how these organizations pursue both social and business objectives. This is an important step towards the diversification of explored organizational contexts and an opening towards the consideration of third-sector organizations. However, we argue that this focus on “social enterprises” is too often confined to for-profit social businesses and to social/commercial paradoxical tensions.

After the presentation of a review of the literature on paradoxes and/in social enterprises, we put forward a research agenda that allows for a broader conceptualization of social enterprises (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010), encompassing nonprofits and co-operatives – hence the term “collective social enterprises”. Not only can these organizations (and scholars studying them) benefit from adopting a paradox perspective (as early suggested by Cornforth, 2004), we argue that collective social enterprises, due to their managerial and governance complexity, can also enrich the paradox perspective. The research agenda will also highlight the importance of considering the role of management tools in collective social enterprises dealing with paradoxes.

Keywords: Paradox, tensions, social enterprise, social economy, third sector, management
1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, a fast-increasing community of management scholars have explored the different paradoxical tensions organizations are faced with (e.g. Putnam, Fairhurst & Banghart, 2016; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Whether we think of autonomy/control, social/economic objectives, collaboration/competition, what has traditionally been framed as opposites might benefit from a paradox perspective, i.e. one that admits “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p.382). While most “paradox” research focuses on the study of mainstream, conventional for-profit organizations, we observe a growing interest for social enterprises (see for instance Smith, Gonin & Besharov, 2013), and often for the study of how these organizations pursue both social and business objectives. This is an important step towards the diversification of explored organizational contexts and an opening towards the consideration of third-sector organizations. However, we argue that this focus on “social enterprises” is too often confined to for-profit social businesses and to social/commercial paradoxical tensions.

Guided by the central question of finding out what has been published at the intersection between the “paradox” and “social enterprise” literatures broadly defined, we conducted a literature review at the crossroad of these two streams. What types of organizations within the “social enterprise” umbrella and what types of paradoxes have been explored? Through what methods? We present the results of this review and a research agenda that allows for a broader conceptualization of social enterprises (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010), encompassing nonprofits and co-operatives – hence the term “collective social enterprises”. Not only can these organizations (and scholars studying them) benefit from adopting a paradox perspective (as early suggested by Cornforth, 2004), we argue that collective social enterprises, due to their managerial and governance complexity, can also enrich the paradox perspective. Indeed - and in addition to managing dual, social/economic goals - collective social enterprises’ democratic governance (with multiple stakeholders participating in decision-making) and mixed resources (with market revenues, potential State support, donations and volunteer work) allow for the exploration of other paradoxes (Audebrand, Camus & Michaud, 2017), including those between the emergent/institutionalized dynamics of the social innovations collective social enterprises may sustain.

In what follows, we first introduce the two “umbrella” concepts that are central to our review, namely paradox and social enterprises/social economy, and related terms. We then describe the methodology used to conduct the review and our findings. A discussion and conclusion follow, opening up for the development of an emerging research agenda.

2. Literature review

2.1 Organizational paradoxes: a brief overview of definitions and types

According to different reviews (e.g. Putnam, Fairhurst & Banghart, 2016; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011), paradox, contradictions, dualities, tensions and associated terms are
generating a vivid interest amongst management and organization theory scholars, at least based on the growth of related publications. Hahn and Knights (2021) note that scholars now seem to have reached a consensus around the definition of organizational paradox as “persistent contradictions between interdependent elements” (based on Smith & Lewis, 2011).

For quite a while, however, a lack of clarity was observed around the paradox concept (Putnam, Fairhurst & Banghart, 2016 ; Schad et al., 2016 ; Smith & Lewis, 2011), often confounded with other associated, similar phenomena such as tensions, contradictions and dialectics. This led Putnam and colleagues (2016) to distinguish them as follows:

Table 1 – Paradox and related constructs, adapted from Putnam, Fairhurst & Banghart (2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Putnam, Fairhurst and Banghart’s (2016) definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tension</td>
<td>Stress, anxiety, discomfort, or tightness in making choices, responding to, and moving forward in organizational situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dualism</td>
<td>The existence of opposite poles, dichotomies, binary relationships that are able to create tensions, but can be separated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duality</td>
<td>Interdependence of opposites in a both/and relationship that is not mutually exclusive or antagonistic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradiction</td>
<td>Bipolar opposites that are mutually exclusive and interdependent such that the opposites define and potentially negate each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialectics</td>
<td>Interdependent opposites aligned with forces that push-pull on each other like a rubber band and exist in an ongoing dynamic interplay as the poles implicate each other. Focuses on the unity of opposites and the forces or processes that connect them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradox</td>
<td>Contradictions that persist over time, impose and reflect back on each other, and develop into seemingly irrational or absurd situations because their continuity creates situations in which options appear mutually exclusive, making choices among them difficult.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More concretely and with regards to organizational paradoxes, Lewis (2000) and Smith and Lewis (2011) put forward that they can be categorized under the following four different types (with possible intersections between them). First, learning paradoxes are related to knowledge, and “surface as dynamic systems change, renew, and innovate” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p.383). Second, belonging paradoxes or “tensions of identity”, are associated to identity/interpersonal relationships, and individual/group dynamics or to role conflicts. A third
category is comprised of organizing paradoxes. They “surface as complex systems create competing designs and processes to achieve a desired outcome” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, pp.383-384). Fourth, we find performing paradoxes, which “stem from the plurality of stakeholders and result in competing strategies and goals” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p.384).

2.2 Social enterprises/social economy and related terms

The term social enterprise refers to a variety of meanings and definitions which are not stabilized either in literature or in institutional environments. It can be broadly defined as the use of market-based approaches to address social issues, or bringing “business” sources of revenue for third sector organizations (Kerlin, 2010). Various other terms are associated – and sometimes taken for equivalent to – social enterprises: purpose enterprise, social business, social venture, social purpose organization, community interest company, nonprofit organization, voluntary organization, cooperative, community-based organization. These notions can be placed on a continuum between socially responsible for-profit enterprises to entrepreneurial community nonprofit organizations. It would however be hazardous to find their exact positions on this continuum as their definitions still vary and are sometimes also contested (Nicholls, 2010). Without delving into the exegesis of the notion (see for e.g.: Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Kerlin, 2017) or into the controversies about the meaning of its popularity in the recent socioeconomic context (see for e.g.: Nicholls, 2010; Teasdale, 2012) it can be observed that the term is generally used to name a ‘new’ or ‘hybrid’ aspect of an ‘old’ or ‘unaltered’ phenomenon: enterprises going social, social activities going entrepreneurial.

A distinction can be made between collective and non-collective social enterprises. The notion of collective social enterprise (CSE) refers to a subset of social enterprises that are either collectively owned by their members or that have no individual ownership. Typically, CSEs are cooperatives and nonprofit organizations that produce goods and services, and that are democratically controlled by members (users or citizens) without them benefiting financially from their investment in money or in other forms (time, donations). Jointly with the concept of nonprofit, the concept of “limited profitability” (Coheur, 2019) and that of participative democracy (Pestof & Hulgård, 2016) can be used to mark the difference between CSEs and privately owned for-profit social enterprises (social businesses, social entrepreneurship, B-Corps, etc.).

CSEs are “social” in the sense that they pursue a social goal (service to members and/or service to society) but also in the sense that they share distinguishing organizational features overarched by their social purpose: democratic governance; restricted or prohibited distribution of surplus; autonomy and independence from the State; and the organized production of goods or services (Bouchard, Cruz Filho & Zerdani, 2015; Bouchard, Ferraton & Michaud, 2008). CSEs are also a subset of what is called the social and solidarity economy (SSE) in countries of Western Europe and of Latin America (and some parts of Canada, namely Quebec), a notion that covers cooperatives, associations (or nonprofit organizations), mutual societies, and in some countries also foundations and other enterprises with a social purpose and limited profitability (Monzón & Chaves, 2017).
In the context of this work, we deliberately included concepts associated to CSEs as well as to the broader spectrum of social enterprises, in order to see if and how the collective dimensions of CSEs make a difference when analyzing them through a tensions and paradox perspective.

3. Method for conducting the review

3.1 Sampling strategy

We undertook our review with a very broad scope, using a boolean strategy intersecting “paradox” and “social enterprise” and their respective related terms in the title, abstracts and keywords of databases (ABI Inform Collection, Business Source Complete and Scopus). This first strategy generated thousands of articles, many of which were not relevant to our research focus. Going back to review papers, we then discovered the method used by Schad et al. (2016) and adapted it for our own project. Basically, Schad et al. (2016) limited the span of their review to papers that referred to at least one of the “foundational paradox texts” (i.e. Lewis, 2000 ; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989 ; Quinn & Cameron, 1988 and Smith & Berg, 1987).

Following a similar yet adapted approach to capture the intersection between, on the one hand, paradox (and related terms) and, on the other hand, social enterprises (and associated terms), we limited our search in Scopus to papers quoting Lewis (2000), Putnam, Fairhurst & Banghart (2016), Schad et al. (2016) or Smith and Lewis (2011). We selected those papers given their importance in the paradox scholarship community, more specifically for management scholars interested in organizational paradox and related phenomena. From an initial sample of 2,560 papers referring to at least one of the selected four papers, in October 2020, we then refined our search by adding the following 39 search words in the whole text:

- social enterpr* OR "social entrepr** OR "social business" OR "social-business" OR "social venture" OR "social purpose" OR "social economy" OR "solidarity-based economy" OR "social and solidarity enterprises" OR coop* OR co-op* OR "collective enterpr* OR "nonprofit" OR "non profit" OR "not for-profit" OR "not for-profit" OR "not-for-profit" OR "not for profit" OR associat* OR "third sector" OR "third-sector" OR "social sector" OR "collective enterprise" OR "alternative enterpr* OR "alternative organi* OR "alternative business" OR mutual* OR "hybrid organi* OR "social purpose enterprise" OR "social purpose enterprise" OR "Voluntary organi* OR "Voluntary sector" OR "Member-owned business" OR "NGO" OR "non-governemental organi* OR "nongovernmental organi* OR "community-based enterprise" OR "community-based org* OR "community interest company"

This yielded a total of 1,881 documents. When restricting the results to journal papers, we were still left with 1,458. We therefore needed to refine further the search, especially as a large number of papers were not related to our research questions. We then again added some more precision by selecting and looking for the previous social enterprise-related terms as keywords within the 1,335 papers. Based on this strategy, we were then left with 74 papers. Based on our reading of the abstracts, we eliminated some papers which were not relevant. Our final sample comprises 49 papers published between 2011 and 2020. All 49 papers were downloaded in a common bibliography using Zotero and basic information for each (including for instance authors, title, year of publication, abstract) was copied in a shared Excel file. The 49 references are listed in a distinct bibliography at the very end of this paper.
3.2 Analytical procedures

After having jointly decided and defined our codes (as per Table 2, below), we divided the set of papers amongst ourselves (i.e. five coauthors). In order to make sure we all understood the codes in the same way (inter-rater reliability), we planned multiple reading and coding sessions together, during which we worked independently, read the papers in parallel, and then discussed our coding. As we were reading and coding on our own (including during joint work sessions), we also kept track of emerging questions and issues in a common Excel file. This allowed us to discuss our coding along the way and adjust accordingly when needed, for consistency. Indeed (and similar to Laplume, Sonpar & Litz, 2008, p.1156), each working session led to discussions that enriched our codebook “to improve interpretive validity and interrater reliability for future coding”. This process led us to go back a few times in each article to add information according to the revision of our codes. Thus, while all papers were read by only one co-author, any question or issue related to the coding was addressed and clarified amongst us five, ensuring common understanding and consistency in the application of the coding scheme.

Table 2 - Coding scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of article</td>
<td>Theoretical - Empirical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical framework</td>
<td>Theoretical approaches the authors draw upon in their paper. Up to five different approaches could be identified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of organization</td>
<td>What types of organizations are studied, in the words of the authors (i.e. social enterprises, hybrid organizations, etc.).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Profit & Profit distribution of studied organizations | For-profit – Not-for-profit – Limited distribution of profits (coops & mutuals) – Unknown  
A “collective enterprises” category was then created by joining not-for-profit & limited distribution |
| Method                                          | Quantitative – Qualitative – Mixed |
| Design                                          | Survey, Case study, QCA, ... |
| Data collection methods                         | Interviews, survey, documents, etc. Up to five different methods could be identified. |

Sample size | Size of the sample studied, i.e. number of organizations/individuals.
---|---
Tensions/Paradoxes | Tensions and paradoxes identified or found in the name of the authors.
Paradoxes | Interpretation and categorization by the coder of the tensions and paradoxes identified in the paper, along the four paradoxes of Smith and Lewis 2011: belonging, organizing, performing and learning.
Strategies | Strategies to address tensions and paradoxes presented in the paper (if some).

At the moment of submitting the conference paper, our analysis relies mainly on descriptive statistics using Excel; further analyses are required.

In parallel, and in order to give us an idea of the terms most used to qualify and describe the paradoxes and tensions, we proceeded to a word frequency query using the NVivo software. The query was performed on the original excerpts of the articles where the authors presented the type of paradox and tensions in their own words. Our query did not stop at the exact matching words, but also considered groups of words with the same stem like performance and performing. We have considered for our analysis the 16 words (and groups of words with the same stem) that are named at least 5 times within the 49 articles.

4. (Preliminary) Findings

In what follows, we present the main preliminary findings from our review, based on the previously introduced coding scheme used to code the papers, namely the types of papers and methods used for empirical papers; the organizational settings studied; the theoretical and conceptual approaches mobilized, and the types of paradoxes observed. These results, in mostly descriptive terms, will be briefly discussed further in the next section.

4.1 Types of papers and methods

Out of the 49 papers we analyzed, 7 (14,3 %) were theoretical or conceptual and 42 (85,7%) were empirical. Within the latter, we find 36 papers relying on qualitative methods, 3 on quantitative and 3 on mixed methods. Considering that a paper can be based on more than one data collection method, we note that interviews are used in 32 of the 42 empirical papers. Apart from 5 papers in which they constitute the sole data collection technique, interviews are typically used in combination with other methodological approaches, namely observation and document analysis.
4.2 Organizational settings studied

Based on the words used by the authors to refer to the organizational settings studied, we created a set of categories. A few words must be said here about the limitations of our approach: although it was created using the terms used in the papers *per se*, we must acknowledge that some terminology might have been favored for different reasons. In that sense, some “social enterprises” might indeed be nonprofits, but since this precision has not been made in the paper, it cannot be accounted for in our categorization.

That being stated, as can be seen in the following figure, we observe a predominance of “social enterprises” (including “social business” and “social venture”), in 21 out of the 49 papers (i.e. 42.9% of the sample). Co-ops follow in 9 papers, then we find 7 papers referring to NGOs/Nonprofits, and 7 for hybrid organizations. In the 5 remaining papers (“Other”), we find 3 cases of partnerships/networks, a foundation and “entrepreneurial projects”.

Figure 1 - Organizational settings studied

![Organizational settings studied](image)

4.3 Theoretical and conceptual approaches

In terms of theoretical and conceptual approaches, the most common lenses used in the 49 papers are paradox (paradox and related perspectives were explicitly referred to in the literature section of 36 papers), followed by hybridity/hybrid organizations (18), institutional theory/institutional logics or institutional complexity (12), and organizational identity (5). We also find a very important number of “other” heterogeneous approaches and theories, mobilized in only one (1) or two (2) papers (e.g., social innovation, dynamic capabilities).

Paradox is rarely the central and sole theoretical approach (in 4 papers only). One step further, we observe that the most frequent theoretical or conceptual combination found is paradox and hybridity (found together in the literature section of 10 papers), followed by paradox and institutional theory (in 3 papers).
4.4 Types of paradoxes

Based on the words used by the authors, we created emergent categories of paradoxes. Unsurprisingly, the “social/economic” paradox category dominates. It is found in 28 of the 49 papers and expressed in different terms. Indeed, this category includes terms such as: “social/commercial”, “social welfare/financial returns”, “community/business”, just to name a few. As we can appreciate in the word frequency query results (see Table 3), the words that are used 10 times or more by the authors to define the paradox discussed in their article all refer to the performing paradox or to the term they use to define paradox as “tensions”, ”logic” and “paradox”.

Table 3 – Word frequency query results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Weighted percentage</th>
<th>Regrouping other words as...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>social</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6.48%</td>
<td>social, socially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tensions</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5.60%</td>
<td>tension, tensional, tensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>performance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.28%</td>
<td>performance, performing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>logic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.10%</td>
<td>logic, logics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organization</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.10%</td>
<td>organization, organizations, organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paradoxes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.93%</td>
<td>paradox, paradoxes, paradoxical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>economic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.75%</td>
<td>economic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commercial</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.58%</td>
<td>commercial, commercially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>identity</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.40%</td>
<td>identities, identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mission</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.40%</td>
<td>mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goals</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.23%</td>
<td>goal, goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>business</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.05%</td>
<td>business, business’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>belonging</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.05%</td>
<td>belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>managerial</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.05%</td>
<td>managerial, managerialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizational</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.88%</td>
<td>organizational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stakeholders</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.88%</td>
<td>stakeholder, stakeholders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, the terms used by “foundational texts” to refer to different types of paradox (learning, belonging; organizing and performing) are used less frequently in the articles analyzed. Our analysis of other paradoxes is undergoing and needs to be pushed further to see whether certain types of organizational settings are more likely to host certain types of paradoxes. For instance, we need to validate whether paradoxes related to democratic (or grassroots, political) vs. hierarchical organizing are found in specific contexts such as cooperative or nonprofit or NGO settings. We also need to dig further into the heterogeneous set of paradoxes identified in order to potentially open up new paradoxes to further explore.

In line with the predominance of “social-economic” (and related terms) paradoxes, when using the Smith and Lewis (2011) categories of paradoxes to code the paradoxes in the words of the authors, we also note a predominance of “performing” paradoxes (in 35 of the 49 papers), followed by “belonging” (27), “organizing” (26) and learning (14). Given our method (checking each category when it was observed), these results do not translate the complexity of intersecting paradoxes (for instance, tensions between performing and organizing) but still give us an idea of the most common types of paradoxes found overall.

5. (A brief) Discussion/conclusion

As previously noted, analyses are still ongoing. Before we offer an overview of some of the reflections and ideas we want to further develop based on our work, we want to acknowledge a few limitations. First, as a response to the initial overload of papers for our review (see section 3.1), our sampling strategy (as a reminder, we searched in Scopus papers that quoted either Lewis, 2000; Putnam, Fairhurst & Banghart, 2016; Schad et al., 2016 or Smith & Lewis, 2011) greatly narrowed the scope. Second, the screening was also restricted to English language journals, yet we are fully aware of non-English language publications that could have been incorporated should we have opened up the search for papers in French, Spanish or Portuguese. We now highlight here some interesting avenues for development, at the crossroads of paradox and social enterprises literatures.

5.1 Towards clearer descriptions of (social enterprise) organizational settings

Identifying more precisely what type of empirical context was studied in terms of organizational types was a challenging endeavor for us. Indeed, in many papers, we could not find any indication of legal status. As already argued, the “social enterprise” umbrella can cover many different types of contexts, from enterprising nonprofits to social (corporate) businesses. As we started our review, we aimed at discovering links between certain types of organizations and certain types of paradoxes. However, the lack of information with regards to the former has made our analytical project extremely difficult. We kept asking ourselves questions such as what is behind the “hybrid organization”, or what type of social enterprise is this?

This blind spot in social enterprise literature may only be the reflection of the lack of institutionalized definition for this form of organization. But it can also be the sign that the paradox and the social enterprise scientific communities remain unaware of the ontological
difference between collective and non-collective forms of enterprises, even if those share common characteristics. This can be a serious impediment to deepening our understanding of tensions and paradoxes associated to hybrid form of enterprises. More worrisome, academic research could, consciously or unconsciously, contribute to the conceptual fuzziness around the idea of corporate social responsibility.

In this light, we urge third sector scholars to be more explicit with regards to the organizational settings they explore, in order to allow for more conceptual clarity. We argue that taking into account the collective or individual dimension of the organization studied will help to refine the analysis of paradoxes in companies that seek to respond to a social mission.

5.2 Towards more engagement with the paradox literature

Despite the presence of “paradox” in the theoretical or conceptual framework of many of the reviewed papers, we observe a certain lack of engagement with the paradox literature. Admittedly, paradoxes were not the focus of all of the papers. Yet in many of them, we find a somewhat superficial mobilization of the concepts related to paradox, and we are often left at the stage of “paradox identification”. For instance, while we initially aimed at coding the strategic responses to paradox, we found ourselves unable to locate them in the papers.

We would argue that social enterprises broadly defined (encompassing coops, nonprofits, etc.) are rich settings for the study of paradox and that we must tease out the intricate paradoxical dynamics and experiences to push further our understanding of the concrete practices through which organizations and their actors construct and live with paradoxes, as well as the influence of more systemic paradoxes on social enterprises and third sector organizations.

We also identified a few stimulating, original paradoxes such as “trilemmas” (more specifically, the social/commercial/cultural trilemma; Jones et al., 2019, or social-social tensions (Siegner, Pinkse & Panwar, 2018), just to name a few. Such intriguing phenomena may offer avenues for third sector scholars to contribute to the paradox literature in novel ways.

On a final note, from a critical perspective, the paradox literature has recently been challenged for not accounting for power dynamics. As a case in point, Berti and Simpson (2021) noted that actors do not always have full agency in their response to paradox, and suggested that power inequalities be considered in the study of pragmatic paradoxes. Since we observe the presence of paradoxes related to managerialism and professionalization in the list “in the words of the actors”, we believe such contexts may offer rich settings to explore how oppositional, contradictory forces behind paradoxes may be embraced… but also potentially resisted.
References


List of papers reviewed


3. Audebrand, L. K. (2017). Expanding the scope of paradox scholarship on social enterprise: the case for (re)introducing worker cooperatives. *M@n@gement*, 20(4), 368. https://doi.org/10.3917/mana.204.0368


