

Economic Sectors as Discursive Resources for Civil Society Collaboration

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This study explores the communication processes of civil society collaboration, with particular attention to the ways in which sectoral differences are managed communicatively and how sectoral differences among members are implicated in the processes of collaboration. Findings from a 10-month qualitative investigation of a civil society collaboration of social service providers indicate that sector differences are discursive resources that people draw upon to make sense of uncertainty and frame arguments. Findings also demonstrate how sector differences are managed communicatively through practices of recognition, resistance, translation, and mediation. This study builds on previous scholarship that conceptualizes civil society collaboration as a series of communicative processes and discursive practices (versus economic or structural characteristics), as well as research that advocates a processual approach to the study of organizational collaboration.

Keywords: Civil Society Collaboration; Organizational Communication and Collaboration; Organizational Discourse

Organizational collaboration is a significant feature of today's civil society sector. The complexity and interdependency of so many social issues—from poverty and education to immigration and criminal justice reform—necessitates the input and involvement of numerous stakeholders who all lay claim to some aspect of these

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issues. Civil society collaborations are distinct interorganizational forms, comprised of representatives from nonprofit, government, and business organizations who organize around focal problems to leverage resources and accomplish goals that could not be achieved alone.¹ The pervasiveness and popularity of civil society collaboration is well documented in both management and policy literatures (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012; Gray, 2000; Innes & Booher, 2010), especially for the provision of social services, the management of natural resources, and the implementation of community development initiatives.

Despite the prevalence and importance of civil society collaboration, empirical evidence suggests that civil society collaborations are fraught with complications (Huxham & Vangen, 2005), frequently do not solve the specific problems they set out to resolve or achieve their intended goals, and sometimes even create bigger problems than the ones they intended to solve (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006; Huxham & Vangen, 2005). One of the biggest challenges of civil society collaboration is the sheer diversity that exists across stakeholders and partner organizations as they try to develop and manage productive relationships towards some form of collective action. Civil society collaboration often brings together organizations from different economic sectors (i.e., government, nonprofit, business) with different values, norms, and ways of seeing the world (Austin, 2000). Furthermore, collaborations lack the traditional authority relations of bureaucratic organizations that discipline and coordinate work, nor does collaboration depend on price mechanisms (the market) or control through legitimate authority (the state). Instead, collaborations rely on a series of voluntary and democratic social practices to guide their operations. Consequently, a fundamental issue for civil society collaboration is how to create and sustain a viable social infrastructure among diverse partners across economic sectors in order to generate collective action that results in meaningful solutions.

Unfortunately, previous literature is not well-suited to understand this critical aspect of collaboration. This is because much of the extant literature approaches collaboration from a systems perspective with a focus on resource dependencies, transaction cost efficiencies, and the macro-level characteristics of individual organizations and interorganizational domains (see Bryson et al., 2006; Selsky & Parker, 2005; for reviews). Though useful, these systems approaches privilege the antecedent conditions, subsequent outcomes, and organizational properties of collaboration but overlook the important social processes that comprise the actual work of collaboration, essentially “black boxing” human interaction in favor of more abstract structural explanations. The problem is that resource dependency and macro-economic theories tend to conflate structure and process, which results in a sterile conception of communication as a linear exchange of information—communication is just another variable to be managed. Alternatively, a more discursive approach to civil society collaboration emphasizes the constitutive and emergent potential of communication and focuses on social interaction as a key site for the management of sectoral differences.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore the communication processes of civil society collaboration members, with particular attention to the ways in which sectoral differences are managed communicatively and how sectoral differences among collaboration members are implicated in the processes of civil society collaboration. After situating my analysis in the literature on collaboration, communication, and sector differences, I present the results of a 10-month, qualitative investigation of a large civil society collaboration that focuses on social service provision and community development. Data show that sector differences are discursive resources and interpretive frameworks that collaboration members draw upon to make sense of events and frame their arguments, especially during times of uncertainty and conflict. I explain communicative practices of managing sector differences that emerged from my analysis, which contribute to the ongoing constitution of civil society collaboration and provide an impetus for collective action.

Literature Review and Research Questions

Communication and Civil Society Collaboration

Previous collaboration literature often presents a limited view of communication based on message transmission and information exchange where communication is a tool to accomplish instrumental ends (e.g., Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Williams, 2007). Alternatively, communication scholars offer a more complex view of human interaction and collaboration. Previous communication research has addressed concepts such as dialogue (Zoller, 2000, 2004), collaborative spirit (Heath & Sias, 1999), bona fide groups (Keyton & Stallworth, 2003), framing (Brummans et al., 2008), coordinated action (Eisenberg, 1995), translation and articulation (Cooren, 2001), ideology (Ruud, 2000), democracy (Heath, 2007), and meaning management (Dixon & Dougherty, 2010), which provide a more robust understanding of the role of communication for collaborative relationships between organizations and other stakeholder groups. Much of this communication scholarship on collaboration is rooted in a constitutive or meaning-centered view of communication (Craig, 1999; Deetz, 1992), which conceptualizes communication as generative of social realities, and that organizations of all types are constituted in and through processes of meaning construction (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). From this perspective communication is not just the exchange of messages and information within a pre-existing collaborative structure; it is the fundamental organizing process that calls organizational forms into being and sustains their existence (Kuhn & Ashcraft, 2003).

Lewis (2006) provided one of the most recent and extensive review of previous research related to communication and collaboration. She offered a theoretical model of collaboration that synthesizes previous research and highlights the central issues of collaborative interaction across contexts. The value of Lewis' model is the attention given to the processes of collaboration, which she referred to as the "management of reciprocal interdependence" (p. 237). However, the shortcoming

of this model is the continued reliance on an input-process-output systems framework for understanding collaborative interaction. This way of thinking perpetuates an uncritical distinction between initial inputs, social processes, and subsequent outcomes, where the results of collaboration are attributed to the intentional efforts of collaboration members to convert *a priori* initial conditions into specified outcomes. Yet questions still remain about the value of emergent and unexpected outcomes, as well as the ways in which communicative processes are implicated in the constitution of collaborative inputs and a collaboration's socially constructed separation from its "external" environment.

Heath and Frey's (2004) review of the collaboration literature results in a conceptual framework for ideal community collaboration and is also committed to an input-process-output model of collaboration. However, they do spend considerable time explicating communicative processes of collaboration and argue for the centrality of a process-oriented approach to understanding community collaboration. They also advocate a constitutive view of communication as the *sine qua non* of collaboration, though it is unclear how communication fulfills this constitutive role when communication process are seen as distinct from the inputs, outputs, and external environment that an input-process-output model suggests. Keyton, Ford, and Smith (2008) offered one of the most developed models of interorganizational collaboration from a distinct communication perspective. They critiqued previous collaboration literature as overly focused on structural explanations, which simplify communicative processes and treat communication as given (vs. emergent), do not adequately account for human interaction at the individual and group levels, and generally are not sufficient to explain the actual work of collaboration. They also critiqued collaboration literature that is "process friendly" (e.g., Gray, 1989; Stohl & Walker, 2002) but does not focus on interaction per se. Their model problematizes communication (vs. accepting communication as given), acknowledges that inter-organizational collaborations often cross sector boundaries, and recognizes that collaborations exist as loosely coupled and nested arrangements that are in a continual state of change. Their work calls for more empirical investigations into the actual communicative practices of collaboration members and how these social processes help constitute the organizational forms of civil society collaboration.

Outside the communication literature, other scholars have explored processes of human interaction in collaboration from the complementary perspective of discourse analysis.² The most developed line of research from this camp comes from Hardy and her colleagues Lawrence, Phillips, and Grant. They theorized collaboration as the product of conversations that draw upon existing discourses (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005). By "discourses" they referred to collections of interrelated texts—as well as related practices of text construction and distribution—that bring social realities into being. Their model depicts a recursive relationship between collaborative tensions and conversational activity. That is, conversations among collaboration members surface the inevitable tensions that arise in collaboration (such as loyalties to home organizations vs. the collaboration, general vs. particular

membership ties, or public vs. private constructions of key issues) and the ways in which these tensions are managed produce discursive resources that members draw upon in subsequent conversations. Collective action is generated through social productions of meaning, which are managed conversationally (Hardy, Lawrence, & Phillips, 1998). Thus, collaboration can be thought of as a “discursive accomplishment” (Lawrence, Phillips, & Hardy, 1999, p. 488), held “precariously in place” (Hardy et al., 2005, p. 73) by the continuous struggles among collaboration members who manage a host of dialectical tensions through ongoing conversations.

Sector Differences and Interorganizational Collaboration

One of the biggest challenges of collaboration recognized in previous literature is the complications of managing numerous organizational representatives with varying interests, motivations, economic resources, and capabilities (Hardy, Lawrence, & Phillips, 2006). This is confounded even more when collaboration members represent organizations from different sectors of society (i.e., business, nonprofit, and/or government), which have contrasting rationalities, values, and ways of seeing the world. The nonprofit sector tends to focus on service delivery, social entrepreneurship, civic or political engagement, and religious faith (Frumkin, 2002). The governmental sector is most concerned with political constituencies, the provision of public goods (e.g., education, public safety, etc.), and taxpayer accountability. The business sector is primarily about profitability, competition, and efficiency (Bush, 1992). When not in partnership with other organizations, members resort to these taken-for-granted norms and values of their particular sectors in order to accomplish their normal day-to-day operations.

Surprisingly, economic sectors have received little attention in previous literature. To be sure, numerous studies do comment on the importance of paying attention to sector differences, or not taking for granted the fact that different sectors have different values. However, sector types are usually just descriptive attributions to qualify the types of organizations involved in a particular collaboration; little insight is offered into how sector differences are managed or how they show up in the ongoing processes of civil society collaboration. Bryson et al.’s (2006) widely-cited review of the cross-sector collaboration literature briefly mentions the competing institutional logics of different economic sectors but merely states that competing institutional logics may influence the extent to which collaboration members agree, offering no analysis of “sector” as a concept or how competing logics influence the collaborative process.

A small number of studies do deal with sectoral differences in a more nuanced way. Parker and Selsky’s (2004) theoretical framework for cause-based partnerships offers a detailed list of a priori sectoral differences that people should consider. Although still primarily descriptive, their list does provide ways to think about how sector differences could influence collaborative processes. Ruud’s (2000) analysis of a regional symphony examines how decisions were framed within sectoral ideologies

(business or artistic). His research shows how the ideological positions of different economic sectors are embedded in and sustained through the discourse of the organizational members and provide rhetorical strategies to advance certain positions. Finally, Palmeri and Tuten (2005) demonstrated how different professions (or sectors) can be thought of as discourse communities that share assumptions about knowledge, authority, and rationality and that collaboration members were strongly influenced to identify with their professional discourse communities instead of the collaboration. The present study responds to their call for more empirical investigation into the ways in which collaboration members manage these differences communicatively and the ways in which discursive communities influence collaboration processes.

In summary, this literature review demonstrates that the concept of *sector* needs much more rigorous analysis to better understand how sectoral differences influence collaborative processes and how members manage sectoral differences in civil society collaboration. Though analytically distinct, in practice, the key issue is how sectors intersect and overlap. Additionally, the literature reviewed above on communication, discourse, and collaboration suggests that we should investigate sectoral differences at the individual and group levels of collaboration operation, with special attention to conversational activity between members. Accordingly, the present study focuses on the intersection of sectoral differences and conversational activity in collaboration, with particular attention to the ways in which sector differences are managed communicatively in collaborative processes and how these communicative practices contribute to the constitution of civil society collaboration. The following research questions guided this investigation:

RQ1: How are sector differences manifest in collaboration member conversations?

RQ2: When and how do collaboration members draw upon sector differences?

RQ3: How do collaboration members respond to sector differences and manage these differences communicatively?

Methods

Research Site

Data for this research came from a 10-month qualitative investigation of a civil society collaboration called City Partners,³ which focuses on social service delivery and community development. City Partners operates in a mid-sized metropolitan area of the southwestern United States. The goal of City Partners is to achieve sustainable social, health, educational, and economic outcomes by coordinating public, private, and individual actions and resources. This is done by forming partnerships among organizations throughout the city to focus on specific issues like literacy, poverty, aging services, mental health, workforce development, victim services, and criminal recidivism. City Partners has 13 active subcommittees devoted to these specific issue areas, as well as a larger governing council that oversees the overall work of City Partners. City Partners has a small staff of paid workers, but the majority of this collaboration is comprised of members from partner organizations

who volunteer to fulfill various roles in City Partners. At the time of this study City Partners had been operating in its current form for roughly 10 years. It consists of 25 partner organizations, including the chamber of commerce, several school districts in the region, the city public transportation provider, private foundations, private health providers, large nonprofits like Goodwill Industries and the United Way, faith-based organizations, and regional government agencies. The mix of representatives from business, nonprofit, and government sectors is relatively balanced, depending on the level of involvement of certain partner organizations at any given time. City Partners bylaws also require a certain level of representation from organizations in each sector for the governing council and other major committees.

Data Collection

Data for this study came from two primary sources: field observations of City Partners meetings and interviews with a sampling of City Partners members. This allowed me to gain insights about individual- and group-level communication processes. Various City Partners documents (i.e., meeting minutes, flyers, listserv emails, etc.) were used to supplement the observations and interviews as a measure of interpretive validity. Seventy hours of field observations of 35 City Partners meetings were transcribed, resulting in 85 single-spaced pages field note text. I did not have permission to record these meetings, but rigorous field notes and follow-up conversations enabled me to capture the essence of the interactions. Also, a City Partners representative took detailed minutes for each meeting (some even assisted by recording equipment), which also helped me document these meetings more accurately. Theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was utilized to collect interview data, including people from all 13 City Partners subcommittees, representatives from each City Partners planning body, and all members of City Partners staff. Fifty-three interviews with City Partners members were conducted: 34% ($n = 18$) of the interviewees were male, 66% ($n = 35$) of the interviewees were female. Interviews averaged 60 minutes in length and were recorded digitally for transcription and analysis, resulting in 663 pages of single-spaced text. After 10 months of observations and interviews, the field work had become “theoretically saturated” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 110), meaning that new observations and interviews were adding limited value to the concepts under investigation and my explanation of the data, thus justifying leaving the field.

Data Analysis and Validation

This study used thematic analysis to identify key themes based on their forcefulness, recurrence, and repetition. The field observations and interview transcript data were analyzed via the constant comparative technique and followed Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) three-stage process for coding qualitative data. First, transcription incidents were assigned emergent codes, resulting in 162 overall codes broadly related to

communication, collaboration, sectors, interaction, etc. Second, axial coding was used to reduce the initial emergent codes to 16 codes of higher abstraction. Finally, selective coding was used to rename and collapse the axial codes into the themes that are presented in the results section. As an additional measure of validation, analysis ensured that all the coded data were represented at the axial and selective category levels. These methods also provided a measure of triangulation because comments from interview transcriptions could be compared with field note observations and City Partners documents, meaning that most of the data was evaluated in relation to at least one other data source. When triangulation was not possible (and even when it was), two other important steps were taken to strengthen the validity of this analysis. First, negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was completed by going back to the data throughout the project in order to see if there were any instances that contradicted the developing results. Second, a member validation test (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010) was performed to see how City Partners members responded to the research findings. Interviewees were emailed copies of the preliminary results to solicit feedback, which helped clarify the final outcome of the analysis.

Findings

Sector Differences as Resources for Sensemaking and Framing

One of the most consistent and frequent observations in my field work was how moments of contention, uncertainty, and ambiguity led to conversations that were marked by sector differences. City Partners brought together representatives from nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and private businesses to make decisions about resource allocation, organizational strategy, and policy implementation. City Partners members usually discussed a number of alternatives in an attempt to reach some sort of agreement or consensus about a particular decision. In general, as these conversations became more intense and involved, they tended to break along sector lines. That is, City Partners members advocated positions that were consistent with the norms and values of the sectors (not just the organizations) they represented. This was especially true in situations where there was no clear solution but rather a number of competing solutions with uncertain outcomes. This led to my interpretation that sector differences were discursive resources that members drew upon to make sense of vague and ambiguous circumstances, as well as to frame their arguments in conversation. Sector differences are *discursive* in that they exist within structured collections of texts, interactions, cultural practices, and ways of thinking about the world; *resources* in that members draw upon them to assist in the accomplishment of instrumental ends.

Though space precludes a full reporting of all these instances, here I describe two situations where City Partners conversations were marked by sector differences in attempts to make sense of uncertainty, frame arguments, and make decisions. The first situation involved the publication and distribution of a comprehensive immigration assessment report conducted by the Health and Human Services division of

the county government, a City Partners member organization. During the time of my field work with City Partners this immigration report was being vetted to several stakeholders to solicit feedback for the final document and to decide how best to present this information to policy makers and the general public. Immigration was a sensitive topic and this report had the potential to be very controversial, given its honest assessment about immigration issues (legal and illegal) in the county. In this instance City Partners members were meeting to discuss the feedback they had received during the vetting process and make a final decision about how to release the immigration report. After small talk and announcements, members began discussing their reactions to the report. Consider the following episode from this meeting:

- 1 **Sheryl (city government)**: This report should only be like a snapshot, a picture.
- 2 Don't provide any recommendations, it shouldn't tell anyone what to do.
- 3 **Vinnie (nonprofit executive director)**: But we won't be able to identify any targeted
- 4 solutions from this aggregate data.
- 5 **Raymie (county government)**: We see the purpose of this report as mainly starting a
- 6 conversation.
- 7 **Andrew (nonprofit representative)**: But I think this report should be trying to make
- 8 a point, not just start a conversation.
- 9 **Vinnie (nonprofit executive director)**: Yes, make a point.
- 10 **Samuel (business representative)**: Whatever the case, I'd like to see more action-
- 11 oriented conclusions in this report.
- 12
- 13 *Lots of crosstalk between several members*
- 14
- 15 **Blain (county government)**: But our job is just to do research; it's up to other people
- 16 to take action to do something about it.
- 17 **Vinnie (nonprofit executive director)**: I see this report through the lens of social
- 18 equity education, workforce development, etc. not just a narrow lens that leads to silos.
- 19 **Nancy (nonprofit representative)**: Yes, but even if we see this as a neutral
- 20 document, most people will not and there are issues in this report that are
- 21 controversial, so we need to control the frame.
- 22 **Richard (nonprofit representative)**: Immigration is a huge issue and this report
- 23 needs to slap people in the face. But right now it doesn't do that.
- 24 **Susan (nonprofit representative)**: So who is the audience for this report?
- 25 **Raymie (county government)**: Everyone...a broad audience.
- 26 **Sarah (business representative)**: No, this can't be a broad document. We can't be all
- 27 things to all people. This is for policy makers and the movers and shakers.
- 28 **Blain (county government)**: Yeah, but before we get too far we need to talk with all
- 29 the key stakeholders about this report.

Notice several things in this conversation. First, representatives from different organizations tended to display the general values and rationales from their particular economic sectors in their response to the uncertainties of the immigration report. Government representatives focused on neutrality and inclusion of all stakeholders, nonprofit representatives centered on advocacy and influence, and business representatives were concerned with action and solutions. Second, City Partners members did not agree about the contents of the immigration report or

how it should be released. The report is certainly open to interpretation, and the members reveal a reliance on sector norms to help them make sense of the ambiguity. For example, in Line 5, Raymie implies a stance of neutrality consistent with a governmental approach, while in Lines 22 and 23, Richard interprets the report in terms of advocacy, consistent with his role as a nonprofit executive director. In this way, the norms and values of different sectors help these City Partners members make sense of the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the development and release of the immigration report. Finally, members drew upon sector norms to frame arguments supporting their positions about the report. In Lines 10 and 11, Samuel advocated a more action-oriented approach to the contents of the report, while in Lines 15 and 16, Blain responded with comments about separating research from action.

This particular meeting resulted in a stalemate. Even though the expressed purpose of the meeting was to make a final recommendation about how to proceed with the immigration report, no decision was made, further delaying the release of the report. I spoke with one of the attendees after the meeting who told me that everyone always seemed to be in agreement about the basic idea of the immigration report, but when it came time to make real decisions about implementing the report, people became less collaborative and narrower in their focus. Of course the location of this collaboration—the Southwest United States—certainly influenced this deliberation, but that is exactly the point. Civil society collaborations are formed to address difficult regional issues like immigration, and I suggest the strong opinions on these sorts of issues serve to magnify sector differences in ways that clarify the analysis.

A second example of sector differences concerned the planning of a community forum to showcase partner organizations and present opportunities for further development of City Partners. Once again the meeting brought together a diverse group of members from different sectors and organizations. However, the meeting was fairly contentious and did not result in any sort of workable plan to move forward with the community forum. In fact, in a subsequent meeting, the facilitator reported that plans for the community forum had been canceled because of the inability to present a collaborative proposal that most partners could support. The main source of tension was between government and nonprofit representatives who conceived the forum in terms of inclusion, process, and participation, versus business representatives who saw the forum as a vehicle for action, focus, and results.

The meeting began with a discussion about what community issues should be highlighted at the forum. The nonprofit and government representatives described many community topics until they had developed a list of over 30 issues to include at the forum. A representative from the business community spoke up saying, “This won’t work.” She went on to explain how her experience in the health care industry taught her that organizations must focus on a few key issues if they want to accomplish anything. Whether or not her point was correct, notice the negative framing of her response and her justification based on the rationale of her business

experience. Her comments magnified the difference between economic sectors instead of working to develop coordinated action between these organizational partners. A representative from a nonprofit organization responded by explaining that many people in City Partners are concerned that they (and their work) will get overlooked if the forum only focused on a few main issues. The concern was that the forum would not be successful without broad participation from all partners. This attempt at a constructive response was stymied when a representative from a government agency added, "Yeah, this is *all* about participation" in a fairly smug and defiant tone, seemingly aimed at those who would question the idea of broad participation. This follow-up comment implied further separation between members because it reinforced differences and implied the superiority of certain sector values.

As the meeting continued, the representatives from the business community began to express noticeable frustration that there was significant focus on the process of the forum but very little discussion about outcomes. At one point one of the business representatives sighed and said, "No action" sarcastically under her breath but clearly loud enough for everyone to hear. Another representative spoke on behalf of the broader business community, saying, "Our interest is in the driving force behind what you are trying to *accomplish* here," emphasizing the word "accomplish." The representative from a nonprofit organization who was facilitating the meeting responded quickly by saying, "But *our* job is to coordinate a community improvement planning *process*," using a circular hand gesture when she said the word "our" and emphasizing the word "process." She went on to explain that their focus was on process, not necessarily outcomes. This exchange highlighted the interest of accomplishment versus the goal of process. Also, notice the *our/your* framing in their interactions that implied separation instead of cooperation. The conversation revealed not only the perceived motivations of these members but also how they situated these motivations within the larger responsibilities of their sector ("interests" and "job"). Conversation in this instance served to further separate City Partners members such that no agreements were reached and plans for the forum were canceled. Several people mentioned that this was a notable failure for City Partners because an important community event was not going to happen.

Again, we can see evidence of sector differences in the ways that City Partners members made sense of the situation and framed their arguments. The disagreements in this meeting were not just about basic details and logistics but rather a clash of paradigms and perceptions about how the organizational world should work, rooted in the norms and values of different economic sectors. Both of the instances are examples of failure in City Partners, an inability to work through differences and generate collaborative solutions. This demonstrates the potential danger of sector differences—that they can become self-referencing rationalities that keep members separate when they need to cooperate. When sector differences are privileged, ideas that exhibit the values of other sectors are simply "wrong" by default. Instead of discussing the substantive issues about the forum, City Partners members in this meeting mainly just argued about why certain ideas did not live up to the standards

of certain sector norms and values. Instead of cooperating to plan the forum they debated competing ideologies about how and why a forum like this should exist in the first place.

My first two research questions asked about how sector differences manifest in conversations and how and when collaboration members drew upon these sector differences. Data from City Partners show that sector differences arose during times of disagreement, ambiguity, and uncertainty. One explanation is that during these times, City Partners members reached for established interpretive frameworks that already made sense and that they were comfortable with, and the norms and values of, their respective sectors provided this sensemaking security. It is not the case that people who work in a particular sector automatically displayed the norms and values of that sector when collaborating with others but rather that sector norms were comfortable rationalities to draw upon in times of uncertainty and ambiguity. Sector norms and values also gave City Partners members a familiar foundation from which to advocate their positions (and critique the positions of others). However, the problem is that a continual deference to sector differences means that collaboration members could remain separated in the safety of their own rationalities instead of finding cooperative ways to work together. Sector differences are inherently contrasting, so continual appeals to sector norms and values will only perpetuate division and stifle collaboration. The excerpt above from the indicators meeting is an example of moving towards compromise, but the question remains: How can collaboration members respond to and possibly transcend these sector differences? Further data from City Partners reveals four specific themes of overcoming sector differences.

Managing Sector Differences: Recognition, Resistance, Translation, and Mediation

Sector differences are intrinsic to many civil society collaborations and certainly were a salient feature of City Partners. Therefore members had to find ways to manage (vs. eliminate or ignore) the sector differences that comprised their collaboration. Data from my investigation revealed four subthemes related to how City Partners members managed sectoral differences communicatively: recognition, resistance, translation, and mediation.

Recognition

Several City Partners members I interviewed were acutely aware of the sector differences in their collaboration and how these differences affected their operation. One way they managed these differences was simply to recognize their reality when communicating in meetings and personal interactions. The executive director of a nonprofit organization explained:

So, for example, the public sector. They bring a scale to it. But they're very risk averse. They're not going to push the envelope because people don't let them. The non-profit sector has much more flexibility. But we'll kill a topic, meaning we'll

talk about it until who knows when and we don't get the action. The private sector says, "When are we going to get this done?" There's a sense of urgency there. But they don't have the knowledge. They want us to use outcome measurements, but how you measure outcomes in business is very different.

This member recognized the strengths and weaknesses each sector brought to City Partners, how different sectors "hear" things differently, suggesting that a challenge for collaboration members is to speak in a language that is meaningful to other members. He and other members accepted the reality of sector differences throughout City Partners and the need to acknowledge these differences within the ongoing conversation activity of the collaboration.

Recognizing sector differences can also help diffuse some of the tensions that can arise when different norms and values intersect. Some City Partners members recognized sector differences in meetings by calling attention to their own sector identities to qualify their statements, sometimes in light-hearted and even self-deprecating way. In one meeting, a member of the Chamber of Commerce said, "I hate to be the big, bad business person, but eventually we do need to think about increasing the efficiency of this program." Her recognition of how others might perceive her sectoral interests brought a few laughs, creating a safe environment for her to express her concerns. Another member poked fun at her own government position when responding to a request for more information. "Well, I do work for a government agency, so you know we'll have to form a committee and poll the electorate before I get back to you on that," he said. Perhaps comments like this perpetuate stereotypes about sectoral differences and further divide collaboration members, but my observation was that in City Partners these comments of recognition served to remind members about the reality of sector differences and diffuse tension that may exist between representatives from different sectors.

Resistance

A focus on managing sector differences does not imply that civil society collaborations must always balance all sector interests equally. There may be times when the norms and values of a particular sector are more appropriate or effective in certain situations. Other times the interests of a particular sector may come to dominate the conversation at the expense of other valuable perspectives. In these situations, City Partners members practiced a form of resistance by challenging sector differences when communicating in meetings—not just challenging the substance of a particular idea but also the rationality or values of the idea as related to a particular economic sector. At one meeting about affordable housing, a long-time city official spoke up to express frustration about recent housing policies that privileged the interests of the Chamber of Commerce and commercial developers. "We all know what works," he appealed to government and nonprofit representatives:

We've been doing it for 30 years. I'm tired of people in the business community saying, "show me something that works and I'll fund it." That's a load of crap.

We've been showing them ways that work for a long time, they just don't listen.
We have to find a way to frame it for them so they see it the way we do.

He was resisting comments made by business representatives claiming that they would be happy to support housing projects that "work," which to them meant programs that were efficient and had objective, quantitative outcome measurements. In another housing meeting, a representative from the business community spoke up to express frustration about the way the government representatives were running the meeting. "We're getting bogged down in this process. If you want to improve housing, then go improve housing. Don't tell me about it, go do it," again, not just objecting to a specific idea but also communicating resistance against the perceived values of a particular sector (process and talk versus action).

It remains to be seen whether or not resistance has a positive or negative effect in civil society collaboration, though it is likely to be a complicated mix of both. Resistance certainly raises the tension and conflict among collaboration members, but also is representative of the "assertive talk" (Hardy et al., 2005) or "collaborative thuggery" (Vangen & Huxham, 2003) often needed to keep collaboration moving towards collective action. In City Partners, resistance to sector differences did marginalize some people as having only narrow, sectoral interests. But at other times, resistance served as a catalyst to explore new ways of thinking and get people engaged.

Translation

A third subtheme related to the communicative management of sector differences involved a process of translation from one sector to another. Translation happened when the ideas and concerns of one sector were converted into the language, values, or norms of a different sector. The most common instances of this in City Partners happened when representatives from nonprofit organizations translated their interests and issue into economic and financial terms valued by the business community. For example, there was one nonprofit partner organization in City Partners that focused on higher education and getting more high school graduates to attend college, especially students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. They believed they needed help from the business sector to accomplish their goals, but they had a very difficult time engaging members of the business community to be involved in this type of educational program. As one member explained in an interview, "Part of it is because they're business leaders and they're not as focused on social issues. They're focused on economic development." Consequently, this nonprofit organization began a new campaign where they translated their educational and social concerns to economic interests. They worked with the state budget office to calculate figures about reduced tax revenues and lost economic opportunities that happen when high school graduates do not attend college. They developed a new talking point that became part of their discourse in public meetings and private conversations: "If we don't enroll sixty thousand students in college by 2015 we'll lose \$8 billion in our state economy."

This got the attention of many business professionals, and the nonprofit organization credited this message as a key aspect of their ability to get more people from the business community involved in their program.

Another example of translation came from a city official who worked in the office of Housing and Urban Development. He focused on developing low-income housing for needy citizens. One of the challenges his office faced was working with business representatives and community members who were not in favor of public money being used to create housing for people who did not “deserve” public assistance. In an interview, he said that when he works with people who come from this position, he has to take a very economic, pragmatic position in order to “speak their language.” He explains to people how research demonstrates that it is much more cost-effective to treat people within the safety net (public housing) than it is to treat them apart from the safety net (prisons, emergency rooms, etc.). When working with people from other sectors, he foregrounds the financial arguments in favor of public housing in order to relate to partners from different economic sectors, especially when the success of his program depends on support from people in other sectors. In City Partners, the communicative practice of translation enabled the productive management of sector differences by developing shared meanings and establishing a common basis for action.

The translation examples listed so far involved discussing social issues in economic terms, but translation also happened in other directions. For example, when a group of contractors and landscape design business owners helped negotiate a new day-labor site with city government officials and community members involved in City Partners, in meetings they framed their arguments in terms of worker safety and equality (not purely economic and financial concerns). Similarly, a City Partners representative from a government agency said that it was important to use the term “poverty line” when talking about social conditions with nonprofit members, even though he and his government colleagues would prefer using “median family income.” He said that the term “poverty line” seemed more human and compelling, whereas “median family income” seemed too calculated, detached, and wonky. In these examples the communicative practice of translation enabled City Partners members to move towards collaboration in ways that may not have been possible had they remained committed to the specific norms and values privileged by their individual sectors.

Mediation

A final communicative practice that helped City Partners members manage sector differences involved a process of mediation between different economic sectors through specific organizational representatives. Sector mediators are collaboration members who have experience and credibility in multiple sectors so they can speak effectively with multiple audiences. Conversational activity is more than just the words used in discussion; it also includes the full range of symbolic resources

available in a given context. That means the actual people involved in a particular conversation can make a big difference. As Hardy et al. (1998) explained, many outcomes in collaboration are contingent upon who is speaking to whom in what context. In City Partners, this involved choosing a specific person to facilitate an important meeting, or asking a specific person to make a follow-up phone call.

Several of the interviewees from City Partners identified certain people they thought did a good job of transcending sector boundaries because of their experiences working in multiple sectors. One person many people mentioned was Mike, a former computer company executive who retired early because of his business success. He then sought a position as the president of the school district because of his passion for education and youth development. Consider how Mike perceived the role of mediation in a collaboration:

Sometimes getting different people who have a business background means somebody who can actually talk the language of business more effectively with the Chamber [of Commerce], or groups like the Business Roundtable. You get some people from business that are very philanthropic, keeps them socially conscious. A lot of business people appreciate it, but they don't have the patience to deal it. They don't talk the language. Sometimes it's getting the intermediaries that can say: "I can facilitate conversations between—I can have one foot in the sort of non-profit social services sector of the City Partners, but I also understand what the business people want so I can potentially help enable conversations to occur between different groups"...because they just don't speak the same language.

Mike was recognized as a valuable mediator in City Partners because he had credibility among the business community and was also trusted by the nonprofit community because he understood social issues. During my field observations, Mike's name was often suggested when City Partners needed someone to establish a connection with the business community or when members of the business community needed to convey an important message to nonprofit representatives.

Another example of a mediator was Michelle, a county judge who presided over one of the district criminal courts and previously served on City Partners' governing council. Several people I talked to mentioned her as a valuable "go-between" amongst law enforcement, politicians, and community activists. As a former prosecutor, she had credibility with police officers, and since her father was the former district attorney for the county, she had connections with lawmakers and leaders in the business community. She also earned the respect of social service providers because of her work on community issues. Specifically, she established the city's "community court," an alternative legal mechanism for collaboratively addressing public disorder offenses in the downtown area, which usually involved the homeless. Her professional experiences and status meant she could speak credibly to a variety of audiences, particularly when sector interests were in conflict and collaboration was needed.

For instance, Michelle helped broker an agreement between city officials, jail management, and a group of social workers all concerned about the increasing number arrests and subsequent incarceration rates for crimes related to substance abuse, especially among the homeless. The issue was the lack of treatment options

available for offenders. City officials were irritated because they did not think law enforcement was doing enough to keep the streets safe, jail management was frustrated because they did not have the resources to offer substance abuse treatment, and social workers were upset because people would not voluntarily enter treatment programs once released from jail. Everyone blamed each other for the problem. As Michelle recounts:

I was finally able to get everyone at the table, I think, because they trusted that I understood their perspectives. The social service folks knew I understood what substance abuse was really about and the law enforcement people knew I wasn't just being soft on crime....Plus the city representatives had no idea there wasn't a treatment program in the jails, so I could speak to them since I knew what was going on because I was talking as a court official, not just a jail manager continuing to complain about lack of funding.

Eventually they created and implemented a substance abuse treatment program in the jail that helped reduce recidivism rates and decreased the number of habitual offenders. A similar mediation happened with the related issue of jail overcrowding. Michelle was able to negotiate the deal for a weekend work release program called SWAP (Sheriff's Weekend Alternative Program), where non-violent offenders were released from jail on weekends to do community service. This freed important jail space for the "rush" of drunk driving, domestic violence, and other incidents that tended to increase on weekends. Michelle explained that this was widely supported by people throughout City Partners, but they had a difficult time persuading some law enforcement and city officials who saw this as just another "hippie liberal group" coddling inmates and being soft on crime. She was able to speak credibly about the merits of this work release program and mediate the discussion that eventually led to its implementation.

The point is that Michelle had fluency with multiple sectors and thus was able to facilitate more collaborative conversations amongst contrasting perspectives. This practice of mediation was another way in which sector differences were managed communicatively in City Partners. It goes beyond the concept of boundary spanning that is common in much of the collaboration literature, which usually focuses only on spanning between organizational—not sectoral—boundaries (see Finet, 1993; Harter & Krone, 2001; Marrone, 2010; Stephenson & Schnitzer, 2006). The process of mediation I describe here is more than just balancing the interests of various organizational representatives but also involves navigating between the competing ideologies and values of economic sectors in order to maintain productive relationships between representatives from different sectors.

To summarize, my third research question asked how collaboration members respond to sector differences and manage these differences communicatively. Data from City Partners revealed four subthemes related to the communicative management of sector differences: recognition, resistance, translation, and mediation. Together these communicative practices enabled City Partners members to manage the inevitable challenges that arose from trying to collaborate with members who represent organizations from different economic sectors. This does not mean that

members always got along, that everyone was happy with every decision, or that City Partners was always productive, but it did enable the collaboration to sustain a trajectory of progress and collective action.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore communication processes of civil society collaboration, with particular attention to the ways in which sectoral differences are managed communicatively and how sectoral differences among collaboration members are implicated in the processes of civil society collaboration. Furthermore, the need to manage these sector differences creates a healthy struggle among members that is necessary to sustain collaboration and foster collective action. A fundamental issue for civil society collaboration is how to create and sustain a viable social infrastructure among diverse partners in order to generate collective action that results in meaningful solutions. One important aspect of this issue is managing the sector differences that exist between collaboration members and influence the collaborative process. The danger of sector differences is that they can become ends into themselves, meaning that collaboration members no longer have to justify their positions but only demonstrate that other ideas do not meet the standards of their own sector norms. An idea can be wrong simply because it is not “business like” or “politically viable,” which is just another way of saying that an idea does not fit within the norms and values of a particular sector. A key aspect in creating and sustaining a viable social infrastructure, therefore, is to mitigate the tendency to exhibit *sector discourses* and perpetuate their self-referencing rationalities. Instead *collaborative discourse* should wrestle to recognize, translate, mediate, or even resist the negative aspects of sector differences. It is in this struggle that collaborative solutions are forged. Thus a primary contribution of this research is to theorize sector differences as more than just structural properties of civil society collaborations but also as discursive resources that members draw upon to make sense of uncertainty, frame arguments, and otherwise constitute civil society collaboration.

Theoretical Implications

The present study supports previous research that focuses on communication and conversational activity as the essence of collaboration and the key site for understanding collaborative processes and operation (Hardy et al., 2005; Heath & Frey, 2004; Keyton et al., 2008) but also builds on this research in important ways. First, Hardy et al. (2005) called for empirical research to “examine the impacts and dynamics of particular discourses within which a collaboration is enacted” (p. 72). The present study does just that by identifying and theorizing the discursive resource of sector differences within the conversational activity of a civil society collaboration. Data from City Partners show how sector differences are managed communicatively to foster ongoing collective action and

reach collaborative solutions. Second, this study provides insight about collaborative failures. The majority of the collaboration literature is normative and prescriptive, paying little attention to instances of collaborative failure (see Keyton et al., 2008 for a notable exception). The examples from City Partners above demonstrate that successful collaboration is not just about getting the right people to the table or having the necessary economic resources but instead about drawing upon the full range of symbolic resources to co-create a meaningful social reality among members that generates collective action and sustained participation. This requires conversational activity that channels the tensions of sector differences in productive directions, not allowing sector representatives to merely exist safely apart. Third, this study adds to our understanding of interorganizational boundary spanning (Isbell, 2012). Much of the collaboration literature focuses on boundary spanners as important people who navigate the ambiguous territory between organizational boundaries and balance the dual roles of organizational representative and collaboration member. The practice of mediation discussed in this study goes beyond managing organizational boundaries to consider unique individuals who can cross sectoral (not just organizational) boundaries and have credibility with people from multiple sectors. Thus mediators can be thought of as a special type of boundary spanner who is able to understand and articulate the norms and values of multiple sectors in order to keep collaborative conversations going.

This study also has important implications for how we can think about the communicative constitution of interorganizational collaboration (Koschmann, Kuhn, & Pfarrer, 2012). The conversational activity of City Partners shows how communication is more than just a linear exchange of information but also has constitutive force of its own and the power to influence the emergence of collaboration. The struggle to manage sectoral differences reinforces member identities, and these identities become part of the social infrastructure of collaboration. From this perspective, we can see that civil society collaborations depend on decisions to cooperate that are based on social productions of meaning among members, not just the structural properties or economic factors surrounding a collaboration. Creating and sustaining a viable civil society collaboration entails certain kinds of conversations that move a collaboration towards meaningful collective action. Additionally, this analysis demonstrates that communication is not just epiphenomenal, merely pointing to sector differences, but rather that communication is constitutive of the sectoral interests perpetuated in City Partners. Sectoral differences exist in communication and are continually reproduced (or transformed) in communicative practices. Therefore this study contributes to the “constitution question” (Ashcraft et al., 2009) by providing further evidence that we can find the essence of interorganizational collaboration within the conversational activity of its members, especially their communication practices that manage sector differences.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the important implications of this study there are limitations that should be addressed in future research. Most notable is the need for more empirical data of actual interactions that demonstrate how economic sectors provide discursive resources that collaboration members draw upon in conversation. The emergent and constitutive nature of civil society collaboration is best seen in the conversational exchanges among members, the normal give-and-take of everyday talk, and the negotiated order that arises through discourse. The present study provides some important examples of this phenomenon but is limited in other areas where I had to rely on interview data and retrospective accounts for situations where observation data were not possible (such as the examples of *mediation* described above). The present study does identify four communicative practices that are important for managing sector differences in civil society collaboration. However, an important next step in this line of research is taking these practices as points of departure for more in-depth analyses of collaboration discourse to further investigate the communicative constitution of civil society collaboration.

I began this study by explaining the need for a more complex understanding of collaboration member interactions that can account for communication's constitutive and emergent potential. Collaboration members who represent different organizations and different economic sectors wrestle with competing norms, values, and rationalities in order to co-create an understanding of their problem domain that motivates collective action and maintains continual involvement. In contrast to the prescriptive advice in much of the collaboration literature, communication that is merely open, clear, and consistent is not enough to create and sustain interorganizational collaboration because this assumes that collaborative structures have an existence apart from social interaction. But human communication does more than just *reflect* a priori social realities; communication also *produces* these realities, which means the transmission and exchange of information is never a simple problem that can be solved through different amounts or channels of communication. As Deetz (1992, 1995) explained, with increased participation and disagreement over fundamental meanings, informational views of communication based on message transmission are not helpful. Instead, we need to see communication as the negotiation and creation of meaning. We need to investigate the conversational activity of civil society collaborations to see how these interactions constitute a social infrastructure that in turn reflects back on the members—influencing their future conversations and shaping the emergence and sustainability of the interorganizational forms needed to address today's complex social issues.

Notes

- [1] I use the term civil society collaboration to capture a variety of interorganizational relationships described in the literature, such as cross-sector social partnerships (Nelson & Zadek, 2000; Seitanidi, 2008; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Waddock, 1989, 1991); multistakeholder

- collaboratives (Turcotte & Pasquero, 2001); cause-based partnerships (Parker & Selsky, 2004); social, collaborative, or multiparty alliances (Berger, Cunningham, & Drumwright, 2004; Stone, 2000; Zeng & Chen, 2003); multi- or cross-sector collaboration (Gray, 2000; Hardy et al., 2006); social service partnerships (Takahashi & Smutny, 2002); public-private partnerships (Linder, 1999; Lund-Thomsen, 2008); business city partnerships (Loza, 2004); cross-sector partnerships (Koschmann et al., 2012); and business or government nonprofit partnerships (Austin, 2000; Gazley & Brudney, 2007).
- [2] It is worth noting that much of the collaboration literature uses the terms “communicative” and “discursive” interchangeably (e.g., Keyton et al., 2008; Lawrence, Phillips, & Hardy, 1999).
- [3] All organizational and personal names in this study are pseudonyms in order to ensure confidentiality.

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