

Toward a Communicative Model of Interorganizational Collaboration: The Case of the Community Action Network



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The widespread scarcity of resources in virtually every sector of our society means that some form of organizational cooperation is essential for managing uncertain organizational environments (Eisenberg 1995). As former General Electric CEO Jack Welch once said, “If you think you can go it alone in today’s global economy, you are highly mistaken” (Harbison and Pekar 1998, p. 11). This way of thinking applies to almost every aspect of organizational activity in our society, from strategic alliances among corporations to public/private partnerships that involve government agencies and nonprofit organizations. Increasingly, organizations are recognizing that relationships with other organizations are critical to future success and survival (Byrne 1993), yet managing these interorganizational relationships can be very difficult. In fact, failure rates of interorganizational relationships have increased from 50 percent in the 1980s (Borker, de Man, and Weeda 2004; Harrigan 1988; Porter 1987) to nearly 70 percent in the early 2000s (Borker et al. 2004, Hughes and Weiss 2007). Even though working with other organizations is more important than ever, it is also increasingly complicated.

In addition to important resource and economic factors, interorganizational relationships involve ongoing social processes of communication and human interaction. This is especially true in interorganizational collaboration (IOC), where organizations must work together in order to leverage resources and develop cooperative solutions. However, most research to date de-emphasizes communication and downplays communication processes in IOCs. Though some scholars have incorporated a communication perspective (e.g., Heath and Sias 1999; Keyton, Ford, and Smith 2008; Kumar and van Dissel 1996; Tucker 1991), previous research simply does not take into account “the ‘generative,’ ‘processual,’ and ‘embedded’ nature of communication” in IOCs (Stohl and Walker 2002, p. 251).

The problem is not communication per se, but our conception of communication. Traditionally communication has been understood from a rational, modernist perspective that sees communication as a linear process of message exchange, rooted primarily in Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) model of information transmission. This way of thinking

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focuses on sources, channels, and receivers of information with the goal of maximizing message efficiency through clarity and precision. Though useful for the technical world of telecommunications (where Shannon and Weaver worked) this model oversimplifies the process of human communication, especially in terms of representing the symbolic co-construction of social realities that influence human interaction. In the case of IOCs, traditional conceptions of communication focus attention on the sending and receiving of messages between organizational partners, but ignore important aspects of how communicative processes actually create and sustain collaborative partnerships through dialogue, collective action, and symbolic representation. Instead, more attention is needed to understand the ways in which communication *constitutes* collaboration between organizations, and what this concept means for the study and practice of interorganizational collaboration.

The purpose of our case study is to explore the communicative processes of IOCs, with an emphasis on the constitutive role of communication practices that create and sustain these organizational partnerships. Our goal is to utilize a case study methodology to build organizational theory (Eisenhardt 1989) to better understand the important context of interorganizational collaboration. We focus specifically on IOCs in the nonprofit sector, given that collaboration between multiple organizational partners has become a hallmark of the nonprofit sector in recent years (Einbinder 2000, Wuichet 2000). We begin with an overview of research on organizational partnerships in order to situate and highlight the importance of collaboration in the nonprofit sector. Next we report the results of a ten-month case study of a nonprofit IOC in order to develop a constitutive model of communication and interorganizational collaboration. We focus on the communicative processes of participation in IOCs and the resulting tensions that emerge from the involvement of multiple stakeholders. We conclude by explaining the conceptual value of our model, including theoretical propositions, directions for future research, and implications for practice.

BACKGROUND ON INTERORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION AND THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

Organizations in all sectors of society form relationships with other organizations to develop competitive advantages through shared resources and knowledge (Doz and Hamel 1998, Dyer and Singh 1998). Interorganizational collaboration (IOC) is one type of organizational relationship in which organizations can work together to address problems and manage their changing environments. These are cooperative relationships that develop between organizations to leverage resources and solve problems beyond the scope of any single organization. Lawrence, Hardy, and Phillips (2002) distinguish collaborations from other forms of interorganizational relationships where cooperation is purchased (like a business supplier relationship) or based on legitimate authority (such as a partnership between a government regulatory agency and an organization working within its jurisdiction). Instead, IOCs tend to be more decentralized and less hierarchical than traditional organizational forms, requiring more mutual exchanges of resources. As Heide (1994) points out, this means that IOCs depend more on informal socialization processes and internal monitoring.

This is especially relevant for social service delivery in the nonprofit sector, where over the last quarter century major changes have shaped the way nonprofit organizations (NPOs) and government agencies provide social services to local communities. In

contrast to the New Deal and Great Society policies that shaped the twentieth century, recent political developments emphasize a decentralization of government functions (Formicola, Segers, and Weber 2003; Wolpert 1993). Consequently, the welfare reforms of the Clinton administration and the faith-based initiative of the Bush administration elevated the role of NPOs that provide health and human services to their communities (Black, Koopman, and Ryden 2004). This creates high expectations for NPOs to provide critical resources and services, yet funding cuts initiated during the Reagan administration pose significant challenges for these organizations to fulfill their responsibilities to society. One result of these developments has been increased pressure from private and public funders for NPOs to work together (and with government agencies and business organizations) to develop collaborative solutions to society's problems (Einbinder 2000; Foster-Fishman, Salem, Allen, and Fahrbach 2001; Mizrahi and Rosenthal 2001).

Communication and Interorganizational Collaboration

Much of the previous research on collaboration and interorganizational relationships tries to understand these organizational partnerships in terms of material resources, economic transactions, financial strategies, antecedent conditions, and performance outcomes. This focus has "enhanced our understanding about the preconditions for collaboration, how resources and dependencies are distributed among collaboration members, and collaboration outcomes" (Keyton and Stallworth 2003, p. 239). Yet these themes have overly dominated investigation of IOCs while focus on process and interaction among participants has received far less attention (Guo and Acar 2005, Starnaman 1996, Wood and Gray 1991). This leads scholars to argue that IOC processes are the "black box" in the research on collaborations, the part least understood (Thomas and Perry 2006, Wood and Gray 1991). What is missing is more attention to the social and process-oriented aspects of human interaction in IOCs.

One particular developmental process that has not been adequately examined in IOCs is the role of communication (Miller, Scott, Stage, and Birkholdt 1995), even though communication is vital to any IOC. Lawrence et al. (2002) suggest that collaborations involve relationships that are negotiated in ongoing *communicative* processes that do not necessarily rely on market or hierarchical methods of control. This focus on communication processes in collaboration is echoed by Ring and van de Ven (1994), who conceptualize IOCs as "socially contrived mechanisms for collective action, which are continually shaped and restructured by actions and symbolic interpretations of the parties involved" (p. 96). As such, organizational communication processes are central to the development and maintenance of IOCs. This is because organizational form and communication structure are permanently connected; the way information flows and functions in an organization will always relate to the way the organization is shaped (Jablin 1987).

One way to investigate the interconnectedness of form and structure is through a *constitutive* view of communication, which sees communication as a process that creates and reproduces collective meanings. As Craig (1999) explains, "Communication, from [a constitutive] perspective is not a secondary phenomenon that can be explained by antecedent psychological, sociological, cultural, or economic factors; rather, communication itself is the primary, constitutive social process that explains all these other factors" (p. 126). Knowledge and information are not static entities created by individuals and exchanged unproblematically with others; they emerge through dialogue with

others in a simultaneous and continual process of interaction. Within the context of organizational scholarship, scholars working from a constitutive view of communication see organizations as grounded in social processes of interpretation that are created and recreated through the ways in which various organizational stakeholders make sense of their experiences (Saludadez and Taylor 2006). The organization is not a container that exists *a priori* and subsequently uses communication to exchange messages, but rather organizations are the product of various negotiations and interactions between relevant stakeholders within a particular domain (Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman 1999).

A constitutive view of communication also challenges our traditional notion of organizations as rational enterprises that pursue goal accomplishment through openness, clarity, and consistency (Eisenberg 1984, Mumby and Putnam 1992). Instead, the complicated nature of human interaction fills organizations with ambiguity, paradox, irony, and contradiction (Ashcraft 2000, Eisenberg 1995, Harter and Krone 2001, Lewis 2000, Weick 1979, Tracy 2004, Tretheway and Ashcraft 2004). This means that organizations experience ongoing negotiations between the tensions emerging from human interaction while stakeholders balance the competing interests inherent to any form of collective action.

Research Questions

It is our contention that the study of IOCs has not adequately addressed communication processes primarily because previous research has not sufficiently considered a constitutive view of communication in the development of IOCs. We sought to address this situation in our case study of a nonprofit IOC that provides social services to at-risk populations. Our investigation was organized around two primary research questions. First, we wanted to understand what communication practices are actually involved in constituting an IOC. If communication is essential to the ontological foundation of IOCs as we discussed above, then we need to see how communication practices are involved in key aspects of the formation and maintenance of various IOC activities. Therefore we asked:

RQ1: What communication practices are involved in constituting interorganizational collaborations?

Second, as previously mentioned a substantial amount of organizational communication scholarship recognizes that these sorts of organizational partnerships will be fraught with tensions, paradoxes, and inconsistencies. If this notion of tension is so prevalent in organizational communication, then we need to understand what kinds of tensions are involved in the communicative constitution of IOCs. Therefore we asked:

RQ2: What tensions emerge from the ways in which communication practices among multiple stakeholders constitute interorganizational collaborations?

If communication is central to the constitution of IOCs as we have argued, then it is imperative for both scholars and practitioners to have a thorough understanding of how communication constitutes IOCs and the communicative practices that can make IOCs more successful. More attention to communication practices in IOCs can help produce more innovative solutions, balance stakeholder concerns, and generate productive collective action (Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant 2005). This is because conceptions

of collaboration directly influence how organizations actually collaborate with each other. If these conceptions are informed by a more accurate perspective of communication's constitutive role in collaboration, then conversations and interactions can be managed in ways that will improve the likelihood of effective collaboration.

Research Method

We studied the constitutive properties of communication in interorganizational collaboration using a case study methodology. We followed the basic format of case study research described by Eisenhardt (1989), which includes selecting a representative case(s), designing appropriate instruments and protocols, entering the field, analyzing data, developing propositions including relevant literature, and reaching closure after theoretical saturation. A case study methodology is justified for this research because of the need to study this subject in a real-life context and because boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly apparent (Yin 1981). Additionally, case study research is appropriate in the early stages of research (Eisenhardt 1989) and is a primary means for exploring field conditions (McCutcheon and Meredith 1993), all of which are relevant for our investigation. The strength of the case study methodology comes from its ability to provide in-depth examination of actual conditions within a real context with a large number of variables that cannot be controlled (Yin 1989, 1994). Our case is best described as an *exploratory case* (Yin 2003) because of it goes beyond mere description in order to develop a theoretical basis to interpret and understand certain phenomena.

Research Setting

Data for this case were collected from the Community Action Network (CAN), a private/public partnership of fifteen major community collaborations (see **Appendix A**) working to enhance the health and well being of Austin and Travis County Texas. The CAN's mission is "to achieve sustainable social, health, educational, and economic outcomes through engaging the community in a planning and implementation process that coordinates and optimizes public, private, and individual actions and resources."¹ The CAN utilizes a variety of tools to achieve their mission, including ongoing assessments of community conditions, resources, and needs; reviews and evaluations processes to determine the most effective use of resources; and community action plans that specify strategies for using resources to create positive change.

This IOC began in 1981 as an informal relationship between four partner agencies: the school district, the city, the county, and the mental health board. Fifteen years later the network included twelve organizations. During these fifteen years, the CAN developed a more formal organizational arrangement and hired its first executive director. Currently the CAN is comprised of multiple partnerships among nonprofit organizations and city/county agencies that focus on thirteen community issue areas (summarized **Appendix A**). It is structured around six interdependent planning committees and councils that oversee the primary activities for the various collaborative partnerships, and is directed by the resource council—a board of appointed volunteers from various nonprofits, government agencies, business groups, and educational institutions. All of the planning committees and councils work together to compile and disseminate information, develop community action plans, and apply best practices to achieve sustainable solutions. Essentially, the CAN operates as a planning body that coordinates the

activities of multiple collaborations working on different issue areas. The CAN itself only has four paid employees and a small office, yet it helps oversee the community planning for a mid-sized city and the surrounding county.

The CAN is a good research setting for this case for many reasons. The strength of the collaboration is in its relationships, not its physical infrastructure. Therefore organizational relationships and communicative action are keys to the development and success of this IOC. The CAN also involves organizations from multiple sectors of society (private, nonprofit, government, etc.) requiring a substantial amount of coordination and negotiation, thus magnifying the role of communication and interaction in the development of the collaboration. It was also very supportive of our research agenda and willing to participate in this case study. Overall, investigating this IOC can help re-orient our thinking about the ways in which communication functions to constitute IOCs among organizations working to deliver important social services to the community.

Data Sources

Data for this study came from two primary sources: observations of multiple CAN meetings and interviews with a sampling of CAN members. Various CAN documents (i.e., meeting minutes, flyers, listserv e-mails, etc.) were used to supplement our understanding of the observations and interviews as a measure of interpretive validity. Each of the CAN's six planning committees holds monthly meetings to share information and discuss various issues, necessitating extensive field notes and attention to the various communication practices of meeting attendees. This form of naturalistic inquiry allowed us to investigate communication and interaction as they ordinarily occurred in IOC meetings. It also helped us acclimate to the daily workings of the CAN and the issues/terminology common among the members. After each meeting we transcribed field notes, resulting in 85 total pages of single-spaced text for all the meetings. Overall we spent 70 hours in the field attending 35 different meetings. **Appendix B** indicates our meeting observation schedule.

The second aspect of data collection involved semi-structured ethnographic and informant interviews with members of the CAN (Lindlof and Taylor 2002) in order to capture the CAN's informal interactions and important features of the communication dynamics. We used quota and snowball sampling techniques to stratify different types of interview participants to ensure a broad range of CAN representation. Our sample included people from all fifteen partner organizations, representatives from each CAN planning body, and representatives from each Issue Area Group. This enabled us to achieve variation and a thorough representation of CAN participants. Overall we conducted 53 interviews with CAN members of various affiliations; 34 percent (n=18) of the interviewees were male, 66 percent (n=35) of the interviewees were female. All the interview participants had full-time jobs at a home organization while serving as a representative to some aspect of the CAN, either a planning committee or an Issue Area Group (with the exception of the three interviewees who worked full time for the CAN). All interviewees had been connected with the CAN for at least one year; some had been involved since its inception over fifteen years ago. **Appendix C** describes our interview sample. The interviews averaged 60 minutes in length and were recorded digitally for transcription and analysis, resulting in 663 pages of single-spaced text.²

After ten months of interviews and observations we recognized that the field work had become "theoretically saturated" (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 110), meaning that new

observations and interviews were adding little value to the concepts under investigation and our explanation of the data. This met Snow's (1980) three-pronged test of information sufficiency to justify leaving the field: taken-for-grantedness, theoretical saturation, and heightened confidence. After ten months and 53 interviews we had increased confidence in our data because we had become very familiar with these CAN meetings, we were hearing many of the same ideas, and no longer observing phenomena that added substantially to our data analysis. At this point we contacted all the interviewees and people we had met at various meetings to inform them we would be leaving the field.

Data Analysis and Validation³

The interview transcriptions and meeting observation data were analyzed using a two-step coding procedure (a summary of our data coding categories can be found in **Appendix D**). The first step involved a system of *open coding* (see Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Browning 1978) where the data were considered in detail to develop initial emergent categories. We read through each transcript several times and coded all interview responses and field notes based on the general themes they exhibited. We also wrote several analytic memos during this stage to help define the themes and make sense of our initial readings. We continued this process until all incidents in the transcripts were assigned to an emergent open code. The result of this stage was a list of 297 subcategories broadly relating to communication in IOCs, which guided the more focused second stage of coding. To manage and arrange our data we used the computer program ATLAS.ti, recognized as an industry leader for field note and transcription analysis (Lewins and Silver 2007).

The second stage involved *focused coding* (Lofland and Lofland 1995), where the initial subcategories were examined for congruence and collapsed into broader categories and meta-themes. For example, the initial subcategories of "speak up," "chance to talk," and "allowed to speak," were collapsed into a broader category of "voice." This category system was then used to go back and recode the original transcript data. Following the constant comparison method of qualitative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss 1987, Strauss and Cobin 1994), data were then analyzed to ensure that transcript comments not only represented the initial categories of the open coding stage, but also the meta-themes of the focused coding stage. Sixteen broader categories that emerged from the data, each represented by several sub-categories. These broader categories were further collapsed using similar processes of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss 1987, Strauss and Cobin 1994), resulting in two meta-themes that are the focus of this analysis.⁴ As an additional measure of validation, we made certain that all the coded data were represented at the sub- and meta-category levels.

These methods provide a measure of triangulation to strengthen the validity of our data because comments from interview transcriptions could be compared with field note observations and CAN documents. This meant that most of the data could be evaluated in relation to at least one other data source, which added a level of depth to our analysis and helped strengthen the validity of our case study. When triangulation was not possible (and even at times when it was), two other important steps were taken to strengthen the validity of this data analysis. First, we conducted a negative case analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985) to ensure there were not any data that directly refuted our original analysis. This was done by going back to the data throughout the project in order to see if there were any instances that contradicted the developing results. Second, we performed a member validation test (Lindlof and Taylor 2002) in order to find out

whether or not the CAN members agreed with our findings. The purpose of this step was to identify any discrepancies between the results of our data analysis and the perceptions of the participants involved in the research. After completing a draft of our analysis, we e-mailed every interviewee the results to solicit their feedback. Member validation does not necessarily privilege the opinions of the participants above the insights gained through data analysis, so we did not substantially alter our findings as a result of the feedback we received. At this point we have heard back from most interview participants, but no one has provided feedback that contradicts or challenges the overall substance of our conclusions.

RESULTS

Our first research question asked what communication practices are involved in constituting IOCs. Analysis of our interview and observation data revealed that communication practices of stakeholder participation functioned to constitute the Community Action Network. These aspects of communication played a substantial role in the development and operation of the CAN and became the primary focus of our investigation. Below we describe the data associated with these communication practices and how we came to see them as constitutive of the CAN.

Stakeholder Participation as Constitutive of Interorganizational Collaboration

Participation refers to a process where influence in organizations is shared among people who occupy different hierarchical positions (Locke and Schweiger 1979). It involves interaction with several people throughout an organizational structure, especially key decision makers (Marshall and Stohl 1993). Participation is “inherently communicative”—whatever meaning is given to participation, it implies a form of “specialized interaction” (Stohl 1993, pp. 100–101). Results from our analysis point to a form of stakeholder participation in the CAN that is provided to individual members by a collaborative structure through voice and opportunity, and is provided to collaborations by individual members through contribution and commitment. When this form of participation is fostered, a collaboration gains the input necessary to sustain and develop; when this form of participation is absent, a vicious cycle emerges that can threaten a collaboration’s existence or utility.

Voice

When asked about participating in the CAN, interviewees consistently talked about “needing to feel like they have a say” (Sylvia) and that their “voice was heard” (Jocelyn) because they had a “chance to speak” (Katherine). One collaboration member described it this way: “It’s allowing each party to feel that their voice is heard. And ensuring that everyone at the table is feeling engaged and that they’re contributing” (Lisa). People acknowledged that this can be difficult and time consuming—“it slows us to a crawl,” said one representative (Becky)—but it is also essential to the nature of collaboration. People need to feel like they are being included and that they have a chance to participate through talking.

These data suggest that voice is a communication property desired by individual collaboration members and enabled by the collaborative structure. It plays out through the

way in which meetings are facilitated, whether or not people are included in certain activities, and whether or not peoples' ideas are represented in the various symbolic artifacts of the collaboration (i.e., meeting minutes, newsletters, Web sites, etc.). When collaboration members are given voice they are able to contribute the communicative inputs necessary to sustain an IOC, including interaction, new ideas, dissent, encouragement, and information sharing. If not, collaboration participants quickly realize that they are not valued and tend to disengage—a clear detriment to any IOC.

Opportunity

Along with voice, participation in collaboration happens when people have opportunities to realize some potential benefit, whether that be personal, organizational, or otherwise. Some people discussed how they had a particular talent or ability that they wanted to offer the community and the CAN provided that opportunity. For example, a CAN member Lisa described what she wanted out of working with the CAN: “I think for me personally, as someone serving on the Resource Council, I want to be sure that I’m given the opportunity [to make a difference].” Others talked about how participating in a collaboration gave them an opportunity to further the mission of their home organizations. Still others described how the CAN afforded them the opportunity to network with others who have similar interests. Whatever the case, participation happened whenever the CAN provided opportunities for members to pursue various issues of importance to them. Conversely, members were very likely to disengage whenever they saw limited opportunities to benefit through participation in the CAN. Executive directors were quick to send lower-level representatives to meetings, funding partners reconsidered their need to contribute financially, and facilitators lost motivation to include other stakeholders.

In this way, IOCs can be understood as inherently participatory structures where various stakeholders engage in order to realize some benefit through the opportunities provided by the collaboration. Collaboration is sustained and thrives when human interaction ensures that opportunities are communicated throughout the collaborative structure. However, when opportunities are limited or non-existent, participation diminishes (either in terms of quantitative membership or qualitative involvement), thus cutting off the very life-blood of the collaboration. Participation was fostered through the CAN by the voice and opportunities it provided to its members.

Contribution

In addition to the things members need from collaborations (voice and opportunity), IOCs also need inputs from their members to ensure participation. One of these is contribution—members who show up to meetings and supply information and ideas that are useful to the collaboration. One CAN chairperson described it this way:

What I talk about with participation is that somebody is there and providing input—isn't just there. . . . So at a conceptual level, the idea of a participant is somebody who actually participates in it, rather than just sitting back going, “Mm-hmm . . . okay,” and being indifferent to it (Shane).

Although not every member can give substantive input on every issue, an IOC does need a steady stream of contributions in order to maintain momentum towards achieving its goals. Since IOCs are communicative networks that are made of negotiations, agreements, and information sharing, members need to participate by making consistent contributions to the suppository of knowledge and relationships that constitute a

particular collaboration. For example, one interviewee described a part of the CAN that was in danger of dying out, not because of conflict or lack of interest, but simply because the group was stagnating from a lack of informational inputs. Yet the members kept talking and bringing ideas to the table even when they did not see the immediate value. Eventually this continual contribution by the members led to a breakthrough in the organizational relationships that enabled the collaboration to leverage resources in a new way and continue well into the future.

The flip side of contribution is the free rider problem that is commonplace in any form of collective action. Since IOCs produce nonexcludable public goods that are accessible to all members, there is opportunity for some members to experience the benefits of collaboration without making the corresponding contribution. This is especially true in social service collaborations where there is much to gain from a public relations standpoint by being associated with certain well-known and effective collaborations, even if that association does not involve substantive contributions.

Commitment

IOCs also need participation in the form of commitment to the collaboration and its mission, both from individual members and partner organizations. When asked what it means to participate in the CAN, one chairperson said:

It means be committed to what the collaboration is about and its mission, or don't go. . . . Collaboration means being committed to just that. If you're not committed to what the purpose of the collaboration is, or you're only there for your own self-interest, it's not collaboration (Lucas).

IOCs cannot fulfill their missions unless key stakeholders are committed to the purposes and processes of the collaboration. Otherwise collaborations lose momentum and members retreat to their limited self-interests.

Many interviewees' initial understanding of commitment involved time and resources, but our analysis revealed that many characteristics of commitment are also symbolic in nature and seen in communicative practices. Commitment to the collaboration does not just happen behind the scenes through working late hours and writing checks, it is also a public practice that happens through a variety of symbolic actions and interactions. Commitment happens as key stakeholders show up at meetings and show genuine interest in the issues at hand and are willing to associate themselves and their organization with the mission of the collaboration. People described situations where it was important to have "major players at the table" (i.e., executive directors, city officials, etc.) conveying their commitment and support to the process.

It is also important for people to demonstrate commitment to other members in an IOC in order to create a sense of ownership and accountability. An agency representative described how public and symbolic forms of commitment may benefit an IOC:

I think any time you go up there and it says: XYZ subcommittee and you sign your name under it and say, "I will work on this." When the chair of XYZ says, "Joe, we need to have this done, will you help?" Joe thinks, "I signed up for this, I guess I better help" (Charles).

Without these sorts of commitments the work of an IOC rarely gets done. Collaborative partners have limited interactions, usually monthly or quarterly meetings. If commitment is not symbolically represented at these meetings then people can retreat back to their home organizations for extended periods of time with little chance of collaboration

work getting accomplished. Instead members need symbolic resources (such as a public commitment) to draw upon in their day to day work in order to stay engaged in the collaboration.

For example, at one CAN planning meeting a member finally volunteered to oversee a particular project to which many people seemed reluctant to commit. Yet once there was an initial commitment to oversee the project, several other members agreed to take responsibility for other components. Had this initial commitment not happened at that meeting, the project may have been delayed another month until the next meeting, or might not have received as much support if it had to be negotiated outside the meeting. Commitments in meetings become symbolic resources that collaboration members can draw upon in their daily work to stay engaged in the collaboration. Knowing that others have made public commitments can motivate collaboration members when they are back at their home organizations and away from their fellow collaborators; not seeing these types of commitments enables collaboration members to defer to the next meeting and disengage from working on collaboration responsibilities.

Overall, these results show that participation in the CAN was both something collaborations gave to their members through voice and opportunity, and members gave to the CAN through contribution and commitment. When present, the interdependent aspects of stakeholder participation (voice/opportunity, contribution/commitment) create an environment that provides an IOC with the inputs necessary to sustain and develop collective action, while simultaneously motivating individual members to stay involved and engaged. When these aspects of stakeholder participation are absent, a vicious cycle can emerge that is detrimental to the life of an IOC. Members who are not given voice and opportunity may not contribute and commit to the mission of the collaboration. Conversely, members who do not contribute and commit may find their voice and opportunities limited, if not diminished. From this we came to see the CAN as an essentially participative structure through the recursive relationship (Giddens 1984) between the communicative inputs provided by stakeholders (contribution and commitment) and in the communicative structure provided by the IOC (voice and opportunity).

COMMUNICATIVE TENSIONS OF STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

Our second research question asked about the communicative tensions that result from the participation of multiple stakeholders. In contrast to a transmission model of communication in IOCs that assumes a rational exchange of preconceived messages toward economic maximization (Eisenberg 1995), a constitutive communication model highlights the tensions and inconsistencies inherent to human interaction as an important part of organizational development. Scholars recognize that communicative processes of participation are fraught with paradoxes (Stohl and Cheney 2001) and organizational tensions (Tracy 2004). Rather than seeing these tensions as irrational, unproductive roadblocks toward organizational progress, a constitutive view of communication in IOCs sees these tensions as an intrinsic component of human organizing and an important part of the way in which organizational structure and norms are forged. In the case of the CAN, we identified two primary communicative tensions that served as important anchor points for the constitution and development of this IOC: tensions of inclusion/focus and tensions of talk/action.

Tensions of Inclusion/Focus

The nature of IOCs implies the involvement of multiple stakeholders who are included in the organizational structure of the collaboration. IOCs arise because issues are multifaceted and resources are scarce, especially in social service collaborations. As one interviewee explained, “[Collaboration is all about] the capacity to attract people, the capacity to keep a table that is inclusive” (Hector). When discussing a particularly successful collaboration, many interviewees said the “inclusiveness of the collaboration” was the heart of its success. One executive director stated:

I do think that collaboration is a good thing and certainly my training as a policy analyst is always to bring—to get as many viewpoints and you can and bring together the stakeholders and you can’t be successful without that. If you push through an initiative [without inclusiveness] it’s not going to work (Martha).

Inclusion is a core aspect of a collaborative ethos and an idea that resonated throughout the CAN membership.

At the same time, the reality and constraints of organizational life demand a level of focus in order to accomplish goals and achieve collaborative missions. Without focus the concern is that an IOC will be spread too thin and therefore not get anything done. There are too many people and interests in an IOC to attend to everything at once, so the collaboration needs to focus on a few key objectives that everyone can work toward. “I think there are so many issues that if we’re not focused, we won’t address any of the issues very effectively,” explained one CAN member (Katherine). Another said, “I think having an incredibly laser-like focus . . . is really important for a collaboration to be able to pull everyone together and feel like progress is being made” (Meredith). In fact, the lack of focus was a major source of conflict for many collaboration members. With clear aggravation in her tone, one collaborative partner explained, “My personal opinion is that we’re on too many fronts right now . . . I think it’s focus. I think focus is the biggest frustration” (Isabella). People involved in IOCs recognize the need to focus in order to make progress and achieve objectives.

Yet many times focus is at odds with inclusion—to focus is to necessarily exclude, and inclusion implies a broad (non-focused) perspective. Interview participants recognized this tension. “There’s a ton of non-profits here. It is conceivable that the CAN could be a driving force for consolidation and efficiency. But when you do that, you’re going to upset a lot of [people]” (Michael). This tension between inclusion and focus cuts to the core of IOCs pitting the conceptual essence of a collaboration against practical necessity. It forces participants to choose between limiting the necessary inputs for collaboration versus realizing the intended outcome. The resulting paradox is that focus attracts participants, yet more participation limits focus. People are attracted to collaborative efforts that are making progress and accomplishing goals, yet they are also pushed away when the collaboration moves in a direction that does not include their organizational and/or personal interests. As people interact and communicate their organizational interests the IOC senses a need to focus, and in turn the language of focus symbolizes who is and is not included, whether these messages are explicitly stated or subtly implied. The communication challenge for collaborative participants seems to be negotiating a collaborative space that is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, conveying a focus that is broad enough to allow multiple entry points yet narrow enough to make progress.

Tensions of Talk/Action

A second tension that emerged from the participation of multiple stakeholders in the CAN was between the need to process and plan in collaboration meetings versus showing some tangible product or outcome. This was the biggest source of contention across all the interview participants and meeting observations: “Meeting and talking and meeting and talking and never getting anywhere. That, to me, is the downfall of collaboration. I cannot stand going to meetings and talking and feeling like we’re not getting anywhere” (Allison). IOCs requires a substantial amount of coordination and discussion, but usually they also convene for the express purpose of achieving some form of measurable goal or result.

This gets at the difference between seeing collaboration as a means to an end versus seeing collaboration as an end in and of itself. For example, one participant explained, “I think collaborations easily become about process, process, process and they forget entirely why they are there and you spend a tremendous amount of time on process and little gets done” (Jackie). On the other hand, another participant placed the emphasis in collaboration on the process: “A perfect product is a failure without a perfect process” (Becky).

Some CAN participants wanted to solve this tension by having the process people talk less and take more action, but others took a more nuanced position and recognized the potential benefit of such tension in an IOC. They saw the continual tension between talk and action as a productive force that kept everyone in check and allowed the collaboration to progress at a healthy pace.

So you need that tension between process and action so that you get to the truth of the matter. You get to the truth of what the community really needs. If the action people just got to run out and do a thing, then the process people need the pressure from the action people, because I can be a process person myself, and we’ll process to death. So it’s those opposing forces that keep us on track. It’s like walking the tightrope. Without that balance, you’ll fall off on one side or the other (Tonya).

This demonstrates the constitutive nature of communication in regards to tensions of stakeholder participation—tensions are both created and managed through communication, thus providing a structuring mechanism to establish and maintain the framework of the CAN and guide future decision making. Thus a major communication challenge for IOCs is to manage the tension between talk and action, to negotiate a productive balance that fosters interaction and results in collective action.

Tensions of focus/inclusion and talk/action permeate the collaborative process and require IOC members to oscillate between these differing principles in order to foster collective action. Instead of resolving these tensions, the focus is on how collaboration members co-create a collaborative space that synthesizes the qualities of each tension in order to transcend the limitations of any one side of a tension operating in isolation. The reality of these tensions demonstrates the complicated environment that exists for the process of collaboration and the necessity of quality communication practices in order to navigate these pressures and maintain progress towards collective action. Overall this helps us see how communication in IOCs is more than just message exchange; communication plays a vital role in the constitution and ongoing development of collaborative partnerships between organizations.

TOWARD A CONSTITUTIVE MODEL OF COMMUNICATION AND INTERORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION

Our goal is to move the understanding of communication in IOCs beyond a simplistic transmission view of communication as message exchange within a pre-existing organizational structure and instead towards a constitutive perspective that demonstrates the ways in which communication and human interaction are essential components of the ontological makeup of IOCs. The case of the Community Action Network demonstrates that the communication practices associated with stakeholder participation are a key component to the constitution of this IOC. Additionally, the ways in which stakeholders negotiate and interact around tensions of inclusion/focus and talk/action also function as communicative properties of the CAN that play a critical role in its development. From this we propose a theoretical model that illustrates how we can think of communication's constitutive role in IOCs.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of a conceptual model of the communicative constitution of IOCs, which emphasizes the reciprocal constitutive processes of stakeholder participation and the resulting communicative tensions. From this model we developed four propositions to guide future research and inform theorizing about collaborative relationships between organizational partners.

First, we identify that the ontological foundation of an IOC as the participation of stakeholders who give and receive essential communicative resources that make collaboration possible.

Proposition 1: The essence of an IOC is the participation of multiple stakeholders who provide communicative inputs of contribution and commitment, and conversely are provided a communicative structure of voice and opportunity from the collaboration.

This means that the provision and input of stakeholder participation are necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for successful IOCs. Our contention is that these communicative elements will be present in a successful IOC. This is a recursive process that can be observed through specific practices of voice, opportunity, contribution, and commitment.

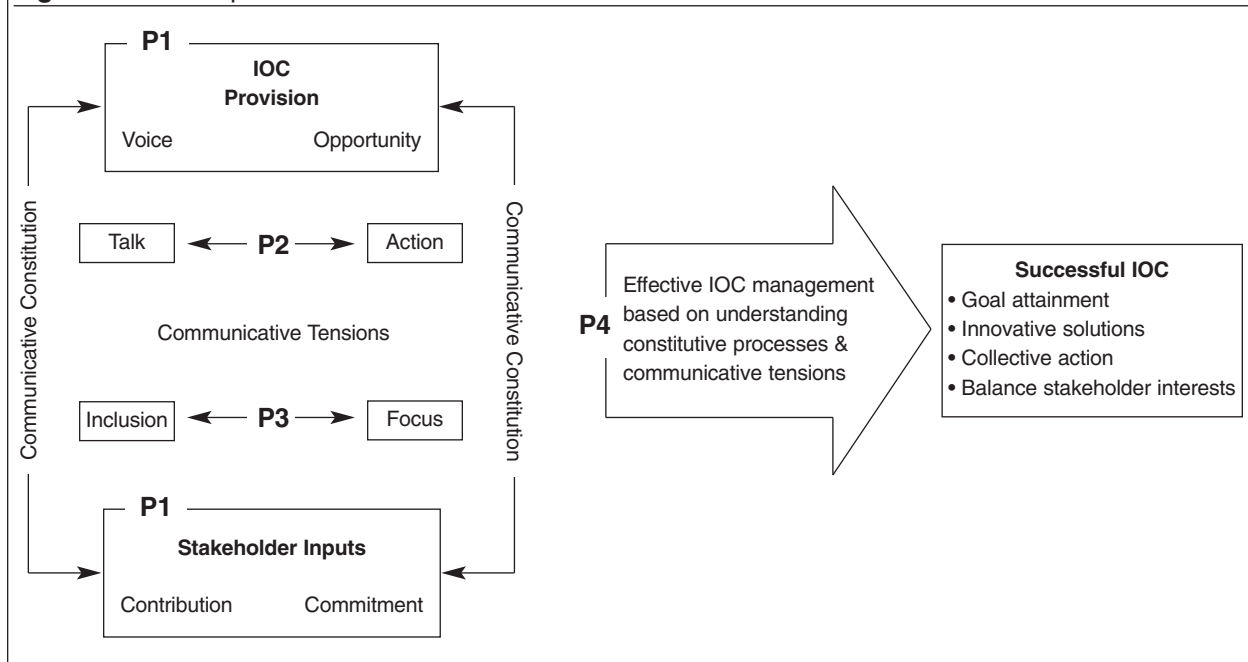
Next, we identify two communicative tensions that will emerge during the constitutive processes of IOCs: inclusion/focus and talk/action.

Proposition 2: The constitutive processes of an IOC create a tension between focus and inclusion. Negotiations of this communicative tension serve to further constitute the development of an IOC.

Proposition 3: The constitutive processes of an IOC create a tension between talk and action. Negotiations of this communicative tension serve to further constitute the development of an IOC.

Empirical observations can confirm the presence or absence of these tensions in other IOCs and the role that communicative tensions play in the constitution of collaborative partnerships between multiple organizations.

Figure 1 Conceptual Model of the Communicative Constitutional of IOCs



Finally, this model implies that understanding and acknowledging this constitutive process and the resulting tensions can support management practices that can lead to successful interorganizational collaboration, using general success criteria established in the literature. These success criteria include goal attainment, innovative solutions, collective action, and balancing stakeholder interests (Hardy et al. 2005).

Proposition 4: Effective management of IOCs comes from understanding and acknowledging the constitutive processes of IOC (i.e., ensuring necessary levels of stakeholder provision and input) and the resulting communicative tensions (i.e., balancing focus/inclusion and talk/action). This can lead to more successful IOCs, measured in terms of goal attainment, innovative solutions, collective action, and balancing stakeholder interests.

This theoretical proposition suggests that successful outcomes of IOCs can be connected to the ability of leaders/managers/facilitators of IOCs to influence the constitutive processes of stakeholder participation and to balance the competing tensions that naturally emerge.

DISCUSSION

As we mentioned previously, interorganizational collaboration is a hallmark of today's organizational landscape, especially in the nonprofit sector. Scarce resources, decentralization, and the complexity of societal issues all drive organizations to form a variety of different partnerships and associations in order to survive and thrive. Yet collaboration among organizations is very difficult and failure is common. A major source of complication is the fact that IOCs are fundamentally different than organizations operating

independently. IOCs lack formal employee/employer relationships that are common in organizations. This means that authority structures are vague and uncertain. Stewart (1999) points out that collaboration is more about influencing an organization than an individual, and Huxham and Vangen (2000) explain how the frequent ambiguity of collaborative partners can complicate the authority structure and decision-making capacity of IOCs. Furthermore, IOCs bring together organizations with different cultures, missions, and visions. Despite common ground about the primary issue or problem that forms an IOC, each organization brings different (even contradictory) assumptions about how to make decisions, norms of operation, and patterns of interaction. The result is that IOCs present a host of complications that are fundamentally different (or at least magnified) compared to single organizations operating independently.

Therefore we need a better understanding of the practices and processes that constitute these organizational partnerships and a conceptual framework to make sense of how successful IOCs can emerge. Our model places communication and human interaction at the ontological foundation of what it means to be an IOC. We reject the idea that communication is a simple, linear process of message transmission that happens within a pre-existing organizational structure. Instead, we see communication as the essential element that constitutes IOCs, which do not exist apart from the ongoing negotiations, interaction, agreements, persuasion, etc. of IOC members. This perspective does not deny the importance of material resources, economic conditions, or financial capital. But it does emphasize how these factors operate within a social infrastructure that is continually changing the way IOC members understand and respond to various issues.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Although the main focus of our case study was theory development, what does this all mean for those actually involved in IOCs and working with other organizations? What difference will this communication perspective make on the ways in which practitioners go about the operation of an IOC? We conclude with several implications for IOC practice that are suggested by our model, with particular focus on the meetings that facilitate the work of IOCs.

Most meetings we witnessed in the CAN were designed for information exchange, attendance, and representation. Interaction was limited and most of the focus seemed to be on getting things “on the record” and “in the minutes.” In our estimation, this revealed a deficient view of communication, where ideas exist *a priori*, and simply need to be represented in meetings unproblematically and codified for future reference. But our communicative model of IOCs would instead see meetings as important sites of constitution that should be designed for interaction and engagement. Rather than have a detached facilitator simply say, “Does anyone have anything else they’d like to add,” which is met by the usual round of silence, IOC meetings should be structured to foster interaction among members in ways that encourage (not just allow) substantive participation. We noticed that there was a considerable amount of interaction before and after meetings, even if the meetings themselves were dry and static. This suggests that members have ideas to share, but the meetings were unable to surface these ideas. IOC members should ask themselves, “If we are not interacting and participating, why are we meeting?” If the answer is simply to share information, then information can be shared in more productive and efficient ways.

Similarly, a reconsideration of meetings will mean that more attention is paid to who actually sits at the table. For example, some CAN meetings were comprised of lower-level employees or interns who attended simply to represent their home organization, even though they had little authority to speak for their home organization or make decisions. Our communicative model suggests that this practice complicates and even hinders the development of an IOC. If an IOC is literally constituted among the interactions of members at meetings (among other things), then it is critically important who is at the table. We certainly recognize the difficulty of getting executive directors and other high-level organizational representatives in the same room on a consistent basis. One practical implication from this is the need to make better use of communication technologies to facilitate IOCs, especially since today members no longer need to be co-present in order to complete the important work of IOCs. Our model highlights the importance of communicative inputs and provisions, and communication technologies (such as virtual meetings or video chat) can help maintain the stability of the constitutive process.

Finally, practitioners also need to pay special attention to the individual communication skills of IOC members. Lewis (2006) identifies interpersonal skills as one of the primary communication themes of collaboration. Communication skills such as conflict resolution (Kuhn and Poole 2000), assertiveness (Street and Millay 2001), face support (Jameson 2004), reasoning, and trust building (Lakey and Canary 2002) all play a vital role in the development and maintenance of productive collaborative partnerships. Therefore IOC members will pay special attention to the interpersonal skills that members bring to the table, and partner organizations will assess interpersonal skills as one of the primary criteria for being a representative boundary spanner. In the CAN, several interviewees expressed frustration about other members who were involved simply to “fill a seat” because of their title, but they were difficult to work with and engage because of their lack of interpersonal skills. Traditional models of collaboration that focus on resource dependencies and economic transactions see interpersonal skills as a “soft skill” that is peripheral to the real work of collaboration. But our communicative model of IOCs elevates the status of quality interpersonal skills to an essential element of collaboration and a necessary attribute for the members who comprise these organizational partnerships. In our model, individual communication skills are the vehicle by which the constitutive elements of stakeholder inputs and provision happen at a practical level.

CONCLUSION

A communicative model of IOC constitution makes a difference because it changes what we pay attention to, what we value, and how we might evaluate the success of collaborative partnerships between organizations. Communication is no longer a simple process of message transmission that exists within a pre-existing organizational structure; communication is now the essence of what it means to be an IOC. Through the reciprocal processes of stakeholder participation (opportunity/voice, contribution/commitment) and the management of communicative tensions (focus/inclusion, talk/action), IOCs come to have their existence, sustain their operations, and generate successful outcomes through collective action.

Our use of a case study methodology was an important aspect of developing this theoretical model. A case study methodology allowed us to study these phenomena in a real-life context and gave us the ability to provide in-depth examination of actual conditions with a large number of variables that cannot be controlled (Yin 1989, 1994). In

this early stage of our research, it was important to study actual field conditions through first-hand experience and observation. A case study methodology allowed us to do all this in order to develop a communicative model of IOC constitution that more-accurately reflects the processes and practices of collaborative partnerships between organizations in the nonprofit sector.

APPENDIX A Community Action Network Organizational Structure

CAN Partners

Austin Area Human Services Association
Austin Area Research Organization
Austin Independent School District
Austin Area Interreligious Ministries
Austin-Travis County Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center
Capital Metro
City of Austin
Community Justice Council
Great Austin Chamber of Commerce
Health Partnership 2010
Higher Education Coalition
Travis County
Travis County Healthcare District
United Way Capital Area
WorkSource

CAN Planning Bodies

Administrative Team
Assessment & Planning Committee
Community Council
Executive Committee
Marketing Committee
Resource Council

CAN Issue Area Groups

Aging Services Council
Basic Needs Coalition
Behavioral Health Planning Partnership
Central Texas after School Network
Child and Youth Mental Health Planning Partnership
Developmental Disabilities Planning Partnership
Early Care and Education Planning Group
Homeless Task Force
The Literacy Coalition of Central Texas
Ready by 21 Coalition
Re-Entry Roundtable
Victims Services Task Force
Workforce Development

APPENDIX B Community Action Network Meeting Observations				
Date	Meeting	Time	Location	Hours
3/9/2007	CAN Resource Council	1:00–3:00	City Hall	2
3/9/2007	Community Council Planning Mtng	3:30–4:30	City Hall	1
3/20/2007	Marketing Committee	2:00–4:00	United Way	2
3/22/2007	Assessment & Planning	3:00–4:45	Greenlights	1.75
3/28/2007	Issue Area Group	1:30–4:00	WorkSource	1.5
4/2/2007	Administrative Team	3:00–4:45	United Way	1.75
4/13/2007	Resource Council	1:00–2:45	City Hall	1.75
4/16/2007	Community Council	5:30–7:45	City Hall	2.25
4/17/2007	Marketing Committee	2:00–3:30	United Way	1.5
4/26/2007	Assessment & Planning	3:00–5:00	Greenlights	2
5/7/2007	Administrative Team	3:00–5:00	United Way	2
5/10/2007	Community Dvlpmnt Comm	6:30–7:30	City Hall	1
5/15/2007	Marketing Committee	2:00–3:30	United Way	1.5
5/21/2007	Community Council	5:30–7:30	City Hall	2
5/24/2007	Assessment & Planning	3:00–4:30	Greenlights	1.5
6/1/2007	Administrative Team ad hoc (forum planning)	1:30–3:30	Palm Square	2
6/4/2007	Administrative Team	3:00–4:45	United Way	1.75
6/8/2007	Resource Council	1:00–2:45	City Hall	1.75
6/18/2007	Community Council	5:30–7:30	City Hall	2
7/16/2007	Community Council	5:00–7:30	City Hall	2.5
7/25/2007	Issue Area Group	1:30–3:45	WorkSource	2.25
7/30/2007	A-team ad hoc (forum planning)	3:00–4:00	Palm Square	1
8/10/2007	Resource Council	1:00–2:45	City Hall	1.75
8/20/2007	Community Council	5:15–7:45	City Hall	2.5
8/24/2007	Executive Committee	8:30–11:30	WorkSource	3
9/10/2007	A-team/Assessment & Planning	3:00–5:15	United Way	2.25
9/14/2007	Resource Council	1:30–3:45	City Hall	2.25
9/17/2007	Community Council	5:30–7:45	City Hall	2.25
9/26/2007	Issue Area Group	1:30–3:30	WorkSource	2
9/28/2007	Executive Committee	8:30–10:30	Palm Square	2
11/5/2007	Administrative Team	3:00–4:30	United Way	1.5
11/9/2007	Resource Council	1:00–3:00	City Hall	2
11/28/2007	Issue Area Group	1:30–3:30	WorkSource	2
11/14/2007	Resource Council	1:00–3:00	City Hall	2
12/14/2007	End of Year Celebration	3:30–5:00	City Hall	1.5

APPENDIX C Interview Participants			
#	Pseudonym	Home Organization	Position in the CAN
1	Hector	Community Action Network	Staff
2	Sylvia	Indigent Care Collaboration	Community Council
3	Marcia	WorkSource	Resource Council
4	Wilson	Seaton Medical	Resource Council
5	Jennifer	Austin Area research Organization	Resource Council
6	Adria	Austin Area research Organization	Administrative Team
7	Lucas	Political Asylum Project	Victim Services Task Force
8	Meredith	Travis County Healthcare District	Marketing Committee
9	Lisa	Indigent Care Collaboration	Administrative Team
10	Daniel	United Way	Resource Council
11	Scott	Mental Health & Mental Retardation Center	Resource Council
12	Jose	Skill Point	Assessment & Planning Committee
13	Lucille	Mental Health & Mental Retardation Center	Resource Council
14	Margaret	Strauss Institute	Community Council
15	Isabella	Capital Metro	Resource Council
16	Jonathan	St. David's Foundation	Resource Council
17	Richard	Private accountant	Resource Council
18	Rebecca	Austin Area Interreligious Ministries	Administrative Team
19	Gary	Community Action Network	Staff
20	Gena	City of Austin	Community Council
21	Jocelyn	Travis County Attorney's Office	Marketing Committee
22	Rachel	WorkSource	Resource Council
23	Michael	Vaugh House	Ready by 21
24	George	Private architect	Community Council
25	Amanda	Austin Groups for the Elderly	Aging Services Taskforce
26	Joy	Travis County	Resource Council
27	Alan	Travis County	Resource Council
28	Ashley	Austin Independent School District	Resource Council
29	Nick	Easter Seals	Resource Council

APPENDIX C cont'd Interview Participants			
#	Pseudonym	Home Organization	Position in the CAN
30	Katherine	Austin Academy	Behavioral Health Planning Partnership
31	Steven	Austin Area Human Services Association	Resource Council, Basic Needs Coalition
32	Erin	UT School of Nursing	Community Council
33	Jackie	Austin Community Foundation	Resource Council
34	Joshua	Austin Independent School District	Resource Council
35	Johanna	Austin Chamber of Commerce	Resource Council
36	Lisa	Seaton Medical	Resource Council
37	Jamie	Literacy Coalition	Interest Area Groups
38	Julie	United Way	Administrative Team
39	Lacey	Easter Seals	Resource Council
40	Kelly	Austin Independent School District	Community Council
41	Lucinda	Area Agency on Aging	Aging Services Council
42	Shelly	Private doctor	Children's Partnership
43	Shane	Family Connections	Homelessness Taskforce
44	Charles	WorkSource	Ready by 21
45	Roberto	City of Austin	Community Council, Executive Committee
46	Laura	Community Action Network	Staff
47	Betsy	Travis County	Resource Council
48	Tonya	Travis County	Administrative Team
49	Nicole	City of Austin	Assessment & Planning Committee
50	Martha	Austin Area Research Organization	Administrative Team
51	Becky	City of Austin	Resource Council
52	Allison	Travis County Healthcare District	Resource Council
53	Brian	City of Austin	Resource Council

APPENDIX D Summary of Data Coding Categories

Meta-Theme Conceptual Categories	Samples of Initial Open Codes	Sub- Categories	Sample Quote or Incident	Page # (I=interview, F=fieldnotes)	Interviewee or Meeting
Stakeholder Participation	Chance to talk	Voice	"For many people it's about needing to feel like they have a say."	p. 320 (I)	Sylvia
	Allowed to speak		He mentioned that it was important for everyone's voice to be heard on this issue.	p. 30 (F)	Resource Council
	Empowered	Opportunity	"I think for me personally, as someone serving on the Resource Council, I want to be sure that I'm given the opportunity [to make a difference]."	p. 92 (I)	Lisa
	Possibility to be part of something		The presenter thanked the Resource Council for the opportunity to share his ideas and be part of this collaboration.	p. 85 (F)	Resource Council
	Input	Contribution	"What I talk about with participation is that somebody is there and providing input—isn't just there . . . So at a conceptual level, the idea of a participant is somebody who actually participates in it, rather than just sitting back going, "Mm-hmm...okay," and being indifferent to it."	p. 182 (I)	Shane
	Bring value		The chair mentioned that this plan won't work unless everyone brings something of value to the table.	p. 72 (F)	Executive Committee
	Buy in	Commitment	"It means be committed to what the collaboration is about and its mission, or don't go. . . . Collaboration means being committed to just that. If you're not committed to what the purpose of the collaboration is, or you're only there for your own self-interest, it's not collaboration."	p. 377 (I)	Lucas
	Willing to invest		This spring forum won't work unless we are all committed to seeing it happen.	p. 65 (F)	Administrative Team
Communicative Tensions	Targeted	Focus/ inclusion	"[Collaboration is all about] the capacity to attract people, the capacity to keep a table that is inclusive. I think there are so many issues that if we're not focused, we won't address any of the issues very effectively."	p. 305/ p. 18 (I)	Hector/ Katherine
	Broad representation		A difficult discussion about the spring forum, hard time deciding whether to focus on a few specific things or included a broad representation of issues.	p. 67 (F)	Administrative Team
	Process	Talk/action	"I think collaborations easily become about process, process, process and they forget entirely why they are there and you spend a tremendous amount of time on process and little gets done. /A perfect product is a failure without a perfect process."	p. 50/ p. 276 (I)	Jackie/ Becky
	Accomplish something, results		During the discussion she rolled her eyes and under her breath said, "no action."	p. 62 (F)	Administrative Team

NOTES

1. See www.caction.org.
2. Interviews were transcribed by Katz Transcription (www.katztranscription.biz) and funded by a grant from the North American Case Research Association.
3. Consistent with qualitative/interpretivist research, our primary concern was data validity. It is well-established in the qualitative methodology literature that reliability is not a principal consideration (Lindloff and Taylor 2002). This is because measurement of a single, non-repeated operation cannot yield any measure of reliability (Anderson 1987). Even in the case of coding qualitative data, inter-coder reliability checks are not common in interpretivist research (Kirk and Miller 1986). Inter-coder reliability measures have limited value because the researcher's intimate knowledge of the data and experience in the field are critical components of the coding process. This cannot be replicated by another researcher and should not be a standard for the quality of the data. The analysis is actually harmed if it is required to adhere to the assessment of an objective, detached observer who provides additional data coding. Within naturalistic, ethnographic research (such as our case study), traditional measures of reliability are both untenable and undesirable (LeCompte and Goetz 1982). Interpretivist research assumes multiple, changing realities, so that "replication of results via independent assessments is neither practical nor possible" (Lindloff and Taylor 2002, p. 239).

Therefore generalizability and replication (the main focus of reliability analysis) are not primary concerns of qualitative/interpretivist research. Instead, the focus is on providing an insightful framework for making sense of various social phenomena. Data validity is the primary concern of qualitative/interpretivist research and several steps were taken to ensure the validity of the data, which we describe in the sections above. We do not assume a positivist view of objectivity that suggests our data describe things "the way they are" and therefore can be generalized and replicated reliably in different times and places by different researchers. Rather we provide an interpretive model of interorganizational collaboration based on a constitutive view of communication that can inform future research and aid the decision making of practitioners.

The above discussion focuses on the notion of external reliability, but internal reliability is still an important concept in qualitative research. In contrast to inter-coder reliability, inter-observer reliability provides an important level of internal reliability to qualitative research. This can be achieved through, "low-inference descriptors, multiple researchers, participant researchers, peer examination, and mechanically recorded data" (LeCompte and Goetz 1982, p. 41). All these aspects of inter-observer reliability were used in this case study.

4. The case study we report here is part of a larger study of communication and IOCs. Although we describe our entire data analysis procedures, we only report the results that pertain to this specific case study investigation.

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