

Collaborative Tensions: Practitioners' Experiences of Interorganizational Relationships

Laurie Lewis, Matthew G. Isbell & Matt Koschmann

Organizations and the relationships they create are rife with tensions that pull individual participants and whole organizations in opposing directions. When multiple organizations form relationships with one another these tensions may take on new forms and create new challenges for individual and organizational participants. This study utilized a focus-group methodology to explore how participants in collaborative interorganizational relationships (IORs) experience and cope communicatively with tensions. The data suggest that tensions exist across two areas: relationships and structures. We found that tensions in collaboration are common, acknowledged, and that the tensions manifest and are addressed through communication.

Keywords: *Dialectical Theory; Collaboration; Nonprofit Organizations; Interorganizational Relationships*

It is common for scholars to describe human behavior and organizations in terms of dialectical tensions. Through diverse approaches and levels of analyses, scholars have noted the “ways in which human social order is premised on tensions and contradictions that underlie apparent cohesion and that point to potential social change and transformation” (Mumby, 2005, p. 22). Debates have revolved on the desirability of resolving or maintaining such tensions. Kramer’s (2004) work on in groups illustrates the notion of “dialectics” with the following examples: autonomy-connectedness, independence-dependence, predictability-novelty, needs for certainty-needs for uniqueness, openness-closedness. Kramer notes that both interpersonal (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, 1998; Goldsmith, 1990; Rawlins, 1992) and group

Laurie Lewis (Ph.D., University of California at Santa Barbara) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at Rutgers University, 4 Huntington St., New Brunswick, New Jersey, 08901-1071. E-mail: lewisl@rutgers.edu. Matthew G. Isbell (Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin) is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Merrimack College. E-mail: isbellm@merrimack.edu. Matt Koschmann (Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Email: koschmann@colorado.edu

scholarship (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Kramer, 2002) embraces dialectical theory as a frame to understand interaction and process. As Johnson and Long (2002) argue:

Dialectical theory provides communication scholars, in particular, with an important means to study what and how a group becomes and remains a group.... [providing] a new way to observe how communication constitutes groups rather than simply studying what groups do with communication. (p. 40)

Furthermore, organizational scholarship has construed practices as paradoxical (Stohl & Cheney, 2001) and full of contradiction (Tracy, 2004).

In organizational scholarship, Tracy's (2004) review suggests, "contradictions are inescapable, normal and, in some cases, to be embraced" (p. 121). Tracy focused on the responses to internal organizational tensions experienced by employees including what she called "selection/splitting/vacillation," "attending to multiple organizational norms simultaneously," and "withdrawal" (p. 129). Tracy and others have also focused on the discursive framing of tensions by those who experience them within single organizations. For Tracy's study of two correctional facilities, those included frames of "contradiction" (p. 136), "complimentary dialectics" (p. 137) and "double-binds" (p. 139).

The purpose of the current study is to make use of dialectical theory to frame process dynamics of interorganizational communication and collaboration. We draw here from Baxter and colleagues' notion of tension in dialectics (Baxter & Simon, 1993; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, 1998). This perspective provides a lens through which to view tensions in relationships as normal ongoing struggles that need not necessarily be resolved. Those tensions are noticeable by participants and at times, as Stohl and Cheney (2001) note, may cause discomfort (p. 353).

Dialectics in Interorganizational Relationships

Much has been written about interorganizational relationships (IORs) in general (see Barringer & Harrison, 2000, for overview). Research has examined for-profit, nonprofit, and cross-sector partnerships. IORs comprise long and short-term linkages among pairs or multiple organizations. "These linkages are seen as the means by which organizations manage their dependencies on resources necessary for organizational survival" (Miller, Scott, Stage, & Birkholt, 1995, p. 681). Resource dependency theory (see Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) is often used in IOR scholarship and takes a decidedly rational approach. In this approach, organizations make strategic decisions to partner in order to create opportunities, and avoid limitations or threats. Barringer and Harrison (2000) note that a pervasive area of emphasis is in explaining whether the advantages of partnering outweigh costs. Thus, a rational cost-benefit analysis is often used in analyzing whether such partnerships should have formed as well as judging their outcomes.

Vlaar, Van den Bosch, and Volberda (2006) argue that although most research into IORs has primarily focused on problems of coordination, control, and legitimacy, key problems worthy of investigation are "problems of understanding" in cooperative IORs. They suggest that problems of understanding concern "differences between

partners in terms of culture, experience, structure and industry, and the uncertainty and ambiguity that participants experience in early stages” (p. 1617). They argue that it is during sensemaking and formalization of collaborative IORs that tensions between various poles of meaning are resolved or addressed. Other authors have claimed that there are numerous areas where tension and misunderstandings can occur (Foster-Fishman, Salem, Allen, & Farhrbach, 2001; Sandfort, 1999). As Takahashi and Smutny (2002) note, “There are significant challenges, including overcoming turf and territoriality issues, identifying and addressing differences in organizational norms and procedures, expanding communication both within and across organizations, coping with *tensions* concerning organizational autonomy and differential power relations” (emphasis added, p. 167).

The Context: Nonprofit Interorganizational Collaboration

Collaboration represents a specific type of interorganizational relationship. Scholars define collaboration in different ways (see Lewis, 2006, for review of communication approaches to collaboration including IOR collaboration). Minimally, collaboration is understood to involve: (1) cooperation, coordination, and exchange of resources (e.g., people, funding, information, ideas), and (2) mutual respect for individual goals and/or joint goals. Scholars investigating collaborative IORs often cite Gray’s (1989) definition of collaboration; “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (p. 5).

The nonprofit sector (also known as the independent, third, or civil society sector) is a vital and growing component of worldwide economies and governance (Lewis, 2005). This sector accounts for an impressive portion of employment, production of goods and services, and the marshalling of a large volunteer workforce (Salamon, 1997). In the United States alone, the nonprofit sector comprises 1.8 million formally registered organizations and several million other associations (O’Neill, 2002). Increasingly, a defining characteristic of nonprofits is their participation in collaborative interorganizational relationships, particularly nonprofits in the health and human services subsector. IORs are important in nonprofit contexts for a variety of reasons. Collaborative partnerships have been widely proposed as a means to: (a) increase cost effectiveness of social service delivery, (b) enhance the capacity of partnering agencies, and (c) increase the comprehensive nature of social services (Takahashi & Smutny, 2002). Blau and Rabrenovic (1991) argue that these linkages “are used to integrate programs within a community, coordinate client services, obtain resources, and deal with government agencies” (p. 328). Additionally, the number of collaborative IORs has been growing to meet the demands of funding agencies and policymakers who increasingly require service integration and collaborative programs and projects from providers (Einbinder, Robertson, Garcia, Vuckovic, & Patti, 2000; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001). However, such partnerships have been shown to be highly problematic, with limited capacity to produce the desired results.

Research Questions

Although most models of interorganizational relationships tend to rely, overly so we would argue, on a rational perspective of the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of these arrangements, we sought to illuminate tensions experienced by participants in these arrangements that shed light on the less “rational” aspects of IORs. This frame allows examination of alternate explanations for the continuation, dissolution and/or stagnation, or success of IORs. Previous scholarship has proposed that tensions exist in group contexts and that similarly these tensions may be manifest in management of collaborative IORs (cf. Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Sandfort, 1999; Takahashi & Smutny, 2002). As Kramer (2004) and others have extended dialectics theory from the study of interpersonal contexts to small group settings, we sought to extend it further to the IOR context. Thus our first research question asked:

RQ 1: What do practitioners perceive as common tensions in creating and maintaining collaborative IORs?

Our further interest was in understanding not only the perceptions of tensions in collaborative IORs, but also how such tensions are obvious in communication within collaborative arrangements. Communication scholarship about IORs has grown in recent years (cf. Bisel, Ford, & Keyton, 2007; Doerfel & Taylor, 2004; Heath & Sias, 1999; Keyton, Ford, & Smith, 2008; Keyton & Stallworth, 2003; Miller et al., 1995; Monge et al., 1998; Monge, Heiss, & Margolin, 2008; Scott, Lewis, & D’urso, 2005; Zoller, 2004). We sought to add to this trend in macrolevel organizational communication by better describing the explicitness or implicitness with which tensions in IORs are dealt with in collaborative communication. In so doing, we hope to discover what challenges related to communication may arise out of the recognition and naming of such tensions. As Tracy (2004) argues, “it is not the contradictions per se, that are a problem in organizational settings, but rather that different framing techniques are associated with various organizational and personal ramifications” (p. 141). Our second research question thus asked:

RQ 2: What specific communication challenges and problems, if any, do practitioners commonly associate with these tensions?

Finally, we were interested in how the collaborative participants dealt with communication challenges related to IOR tensions. As Kramer (2004) noted, it is important to investigate the “efficacy of various coping strategies in managing the tensions” (p. 330). We sought to better understand whether the previously identified means of coping with organizational and interpersonal tensions were also present and exhaustive of the coping mechanisms in this setting.

RQ 3: How are tensions dealt with communicatively in collaborative IORs?

Methods

Given that the literature examining IORs from a communicative perspective is limited, and most of the empirical literature has used a single-case observation methodology,

we sought to focus on: (a) self-reports of experiences of participants, (b) experiences of participants that would not be limited by predefined categories, and (c) multiple exemplars of collaborative IORs. This study employed a focus-group methodology for data collection. This method was chosen in order to maximize the effect of group interaction and discussion (cf. Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Our goal was to stimulate the recall and discussion of IOR challenges, experiences, and resolution of tensions through encouraging participants to share stories and jointly reflect on them.

Key Informants

A convenience sampling method was adopted for this study. The researchers contacted potential focus group participants through existing networks of nonprofit professionals, beginning with two listservs of local health and human service professionals. In addition, personal contacts were made with potential participants through the research team's knowledge of those involved in local NPO collaborations. Efforts were made to encourage participation from a variety of NPO subsectors (e.g., faith-based, health and human services, arts and culture). Forty nonprofit professionals (7 men and 33 women) participated in one of eight focus groups across three dates. Table 1 presents other characteristics of the participants and their organizations. Their general attitude about collaboration was assessed using a four-item measure on a seven-point scale (e.g., "It is a good idea to look for collaborative opportunities whenever possible," "I enjoy participating in collaborative partnerships," "Collaborating is preferable to working independently," "Collaboration should only

Table 1 Demographics of sample

Characteristic or demographic	No	Percentage of total
<i>Gender</i> (n = 40)		
Male	7	18
Female	33	83
<i>Nonprofit subsector</i> (n = 40)		
Health and human services	24	60
Education	6	15
Arts & culture	2	5
Faith-based	1	< 1
Other	7	18
<i>Nationally affiliated organization?</i> (n = 38)		
Yes	13	34
No	25	66
<i>Annual budget</i> (n = 36)		
\$ ≤ 25,000	2	< 1
\$25,001–1,000,000	2	< 1
\$100,001–500,000	10	28
\$500,001–1 million	5	15
\$ > 1 million	17	47
<i>Status at organization</i> (n = 40)		
Paid staff	34	85
Volunteer staff	6	15

be engaged in when there are no good alternatives.”). These scale items were highly reliable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$).

On average, the participants who completed this scale ($n=35$) were generally favorable toward collaboration ($M = 5.9$, assessed on a 1–7 scale). Individual scores on this collaboration preference scale ranged from a low of 4.8 to a high of 7.0. Additionally, these informants were experienced in collaboration having participated in an average of 12 collaborative partnerships each. We asked their own self-assessed “level of experience” in collaboration and found that 43 percent of the sample reported that they were “quite” or “very” experienced.

Procedure

Focus groups were conducted at a local community college and university. As they arrived they were sorted into groups averaging five individuals (following Lindlof & Taylor’s, 2002, recommendation for group size) to participate in a discussion about interorganizational NPO collaboration. We asked participants to avoid joining in the same focus groups as close colleagues (to encourage candidness in their stories). While it was not always possible to create groups with all unfamiliar participants, this was accomplished in most groups. Facilitators, who were members of the research team, explained the purpose of the session and research (in general terms) and started the tape recorder. Facilitators asked four general discussion starters during the session: (a) What are the challenges of creating and maintaining successful NPO collaborative partnerships? (b) What specific communication challenges and problems are faced in NPO collaborative partnerships? (c) How are they dealt with and communicated about? and (d) What are your most memorable stories of your experiences in nonprofit organizational collaborative partnerships? Participants were asked to elaborate with examples and to engage one another (e.g., asking questions of one another, agreeing or disagreeing, elaborating each others’ responses) in order to create a real conversation about the topics the facilitator introduced. Each focus group lasted about one hour. The focus groups were audio-recorded and each facilitator took notes during the meeting. The transcriptions of the recordings yielded 85-single spaced pages of data, averaging over 12 single-spaced pages of transcription per hour focus group.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed in two phases. In the first analysis, one of the authors and a research assistant familiar with the project conducted open coding (see Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Open coding allowed the coders to compile numerous emic-based categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), thus preserving the naturally occurring features of the focus groups (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001). After open coding the researchers used a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze the data and initial codes. Each author separately coded the focus group transcripts for emerging themes among the responses. In order to maintain consistency between

coders and add rigor in the triangulation of data, the two researchers read a portion of one transcript together so that a unit of analysis could be agreed upon. Talk turns were used as the unit of analysis. After reading all transcripts individually, the same two authors compared salient themes across the transcripts. Using analytical induction (Bulmer, 1979; Huberman & Miles, 1994) each theme was discussed and compared to other themes to establish an outer perimeter for what was included or excluded in each theme. Differences between the coders were discussed and a set of themes was agreed upon that best represented the spirit of the data.

Once the first phase of data analysis was completed, a second level of analysis was conducted on the salient themes developed in the first phase. Focusing on our existing research agenda on tensions within collaborations, the author from the first phase of analysis and one of the authors not present for the first phase used an etic approach to categorization. Using sensitizing themes (Patton, 2002), the researchers sorted the data into “metathemes” based on preexisting organizational communication literature. We use “metathemes” here to refer to more fundamental tensions or foci that ran across the whole data set. We developed these themes in order to answer our research questions concerning what practitioners perceive as common tensions in creating and maintaining collaborative IORs; what communicative challenges and problems they associate with those tensions; and how those tensions are typically dealt with communicatively. The authors jointly developed two metathemes: relationship tensions and structural tensions.

Finally, in keeping with Taylor and Trujillo’s (2001) call for more rigorous qualitative research, the researchers conducted a negative case analysis (cf. Gossett & Kilker, 2006) of the larger metathemes as well as the initial emic themes produced in the first phase of data collection. The data was then reanalyzed to ensure that informants’ comments not only represented the smaller emic-themes from the first analysis, but also fit the larger metathemes. For example, the following comment: “When you get down to the nitty gritty, it’s ‘what am I going to give up and what are you going to get. My turf, and you don’t get to touch that’” (FG-7) was initially coded as a *partner organization influence*. In the second analysis, this comment was reevaluated to make sure it still fit the partner organization influence theme, but also that this comment could be accurately categorized in the relationship metatheme. Finally, all the codes were checked against one another and the body of the data for possible opposing interpretations. The spirit of the data had to be represented at both thematic levels in order to validate our presentation of the data. In the next section we describe our results starting with the relationship metatheme. The quotes presented in this section are identified by the focus groups only. The number given after each quote is the focus group number (i.e., FG-7 represents a comment made in focus group 7).

Results

The presentation of results is organized around two sets of tensions identified in this study: relationship tensions and structural tensions. Relationship tensions concern

the degree to which collaborative IORs are pulled towards external and internal environmental concerns. At times, the individuals in collaborative IORs experience a pull towards a focus on outside elements (e.g., politics of home organizations) rather than the collaboration itself. At other points, individuals recognize a pull to examine and primarily be concerned with people “around the table,” and the joint goals and purposes of the collaboration. What can be most problematic for the collaborative members is when these forces pull on the individual at the same time. The second set of tensions concern the communication related to the overarching structure of the collaboration recognized by our informants. Tensions in this area concern how participants engage process and manage their collaboration. In each area we also show how informants represented the communication dynamics associated with these tensions and the ways in which they typically dealt with the tensions.

Relationship Tension

The relationship tension concerns the attention and focus of collaborations as they contemplate and balance external demands and internal dynamics of the collaboration. One informant’s way of capturing this tension was in her statement referring to collaborating as an “unnatural act between unwilling participants” (FG-7). The collaborative process almost always requires accommodating multiple voices. This creates a tension where external demands are made upon a collaborative IOR at the same time that internal cohesion, loyalty, and identification are required. The necessity to produce efficient outcomes is frequently mentioned as one of determining factors of group cohesion, but the effect of external influences can be detrimental to the collaborative process.

Communicating Relationship Tensions

A ‘we-orientation’ communicates the needs for balancing the stakes of all agencies in the collaboration. “The point of bringing agencies together is to create something beyond the capacity of each of those organizations” (FG-7). For many informants in these focus groups collaboration means equal participation and a balance of power. As one individual put it, “I think it is important to make sure that everyone is recognized as having equal value . . . and that everyone knows that they are valued” (FG-4). From a we-orientation, the collaborative process is a group accomplishment wherein all members have equal stakes in the larger endeavors. Not only is there a strong drive for equal participation but also the value of absolute agreement is often just as prized.

Beyond creating an organizational form that allows participants to accomplish goals greater than the scope of their individual organizations, informants in our focus groups frequently described the need to have a network of friends on whom they could rely. Collaborations allow participants to “expand their networks and knowledge base” (FG-1). Another person commented that collaboration “is a way for everybody to talk about how everybody is working together and how they can streamline services or finding someone I know to ask about this problem I am having

in my own agency. . . It is a sort of network of friends" (FG-2). The we-orientation communicates a collaborative process that forms alternative uses, beyond the mission of the group. People realize that they are not alone in the field and have support from others:

If I am collaborating with someone who already has an expertise and it is one I need, I don't need to go out and learn that expertise if I can join with her. . . It is being able to appreciate other people's expertise and not having to recreate the world. (FG-1)

The networks that are created by the collaboration are based on mutual need. Some organizations may be smaller and not have the resources to contribute to the collaborative process, but each person has information that can be shared through the relational network.

On the other side of the relationship tension, communication that emphasizes a 'me-orientation' focuses on clear and distinct boundaries between the collaboration and the home-organization. This me discourse stresses the notion of resources and self-interests. This tension often was invoked in terms of issues of turf:

One part of it may be that folks come to the table representing an agency or a population, that is your job, that is your role, that is your passion. . . It can be kind of hard to rise above it and look at the big picture. Is there really something we can do on a system level in a really different way? (FG-2)

The affiliation that a collaboration representative has for their own organization can trump their loyalty to the collaboration as a whole. People perceive the resources to be scarce and need to protect what they already have. "When you get down to the nitty gritty, it's 'what am I going to give up and what are you going to get.' My turf, and you don't get to touch that" (FG-7).

In addition to "turf," informants spoke of some member organizations playing dominant roles or ignoring the we-orientation of others. As one informant noted, "Instead of using communication to talk about [expectations] the nonprofit was just going to do it their way anyway" (FG-3). Relatedly, self-interests are put into tension with collective interests when credit for accomplishments are acknowledged or announced. "One nonprofit basically took over the collaboration. They hired the staff to take over and they got credit for it. I think that was really discouraging for the people involved in the collaboration" (FG-2). At times the drive to focus on turf or self-interests spawns a competitive environment where groups turn to self-protection in order to secure rewards, protect resources and ensure status.

Coping with Relationship Tensions

Although the we- versus me-orientation is prevalent in the discourse of collaborative members, addressing and dealing with the tension is of equal importance. Informants in our focus groups commonly reported three ways the relationship tension is addressed: trust building, buy-in, and disassociation. For most members, building trust was a prerequisite for building collaboration. "You bring people together to talk

about communication, collaboration, and talk about knowing each other, eventually this leads to a culture of trust" (FG-2). With trust, collaborations can maintain a positive environment and work towards goal accomplishment. "Trust building is one of the key things in any collaboration. Just get to know the people you are working with" (FG-5). Our informants often viewed face-to-face communication as central to building trust. "If any collaboration is going to work, it needs constant face-to-face communication" (FG-7). Trust is also built over time. "Sometimes I think that we overlook the importance of getting people together in a room regularly and they are just talking to each other. . . A level of trust and familiarity can build up" (FG-4).

A second approach to addressing the tension involves buy-in. Collaborative members discussed the formation of collaborative groups and what types of members should be involved. Collaborative members spoke about getting the "right people around the table." Part of this challenge is not only getting the "right" people there but also deciding when to stop inviting more or whether to close the boundaries of membership at all. Further, collaborations have to get the right people to buy in and then get consistent attendance from the individuals who can move the collaboration along. "I believe that an absolute necessity is for the top executive to buy into the [collaboration]" (FG-7). The buy-in starts at the top, and commitment is needed all the way down the hierarchy. Collaborations that were hesitant to draw firm lines around their membership or to define members in terms of people as well as the organizations they represented, sometimes had a revolving door problem of attendance and participation in which each meeting represented a completely new mix of people "at the table." "We have got some of our agencies who send a different person to every meeting. If you get a lot of that, you start over at every meeting" (FG-6).

A third approach to addressing the relationship tension is disassociation. If member organizations feel they cannot be "on board" with decisions, they will rather withdraw than express dissent. One focus group informant put it this way, "I have not really heard of someone saying 'that is a bad decision, and I am not going to participate.' They will just stop showing up" (FG-6). The communicative challenge of dealing with the relationship tension concerns how voice is managed and how conversations about "stakes" takes place (or does not) in collaborations. A very typical way in which this tension is dealt with is in avoiding it and simply withdrawing from the collaboration.

Additionally with the creation of a collaboration, those not a part of a collaboration can become disassociated with the group and consequently considered out-group members. There are those that do not see the value in collaborating and consequently do not participate in the collaborative process. When people choose not to collaborate and consequently exclude themselves from the informal relational networks that are created, this can create problems in terms of knowledge transfer. "[Some groups] always want to be different, they don't want to figure out ways to come together" (FG-2). The groups that do not join the collaboration are consequently not involved in the process and networking that occurs. These groups miss out on behind the scenes conversations that could help "streamline services" and thus become more efficient. Furthermore, organizations that disassociate are missing

out on opportunities to “expand their knowledge base” and see what competitors in their sector have accomplished.

Overall, the relationship tension highlights collaboration members’ attempts to balance ties that each individual has with a “home” organization and the need to join forces and create a community of individuals and a community of organizations. In response to our research questions, this tension is clearly associated with how participants talk about the relational aspect of collaborating. Discussions about *we* versus *me* are prevalent and salient to collaborative members. Finally, group members try to deal with the tension by surrounding themselves with members that have the right credentials and can be trusted or by disengaging and disassociating. In sum, by gathering the “right people” around the table, members can address the issues at hand in the collaboration and feel that the individual stakes of each member are addressed.

Structural Tensions

The structural tensions illustrate a strain on IORs that relates to the rules of operation and engagement. Collaboration participants discussed the need to have rules and a unified mission statement, but also feared overstructuring the collaboration process and hindering the free flow of participation and voice. Although viewed as an integral component of their work within the nonprofit community, collaborations with other organizations were often viewed as ambiguous work groups needing further definition and structure. Our focus groups discussed the needs of IORs to set “clear expectations, clear agreements, rules of communication, how resources are shared, rules and responsibilities” (FG-5). Many felt that rules and roles of the collaborative process need to be communicated to all the people involved. The formalization of the collaboration acknowledges the need to give boundaries that participants can function under so that inefficiencies in the process do not hamper the limited time and resources of the collaboration. “You really have to invest a lot more communication time, a lot of relationship building time, a lot more logistical stuff to make a collaboration work” (FG-2). However, in juxtaposition to this need to formalize the process, informants also spoke about the dangers of overstructuring.

Our focus group informants provided examples of how overstructuring can slow process or progress on goals. “We were so focused on where we were on the clock that we were not allowing the discussion to really flow where it needs to go for everyone to feel like they’ve been heard” (FG-4). Overformalizing the collaboration can impede what a few informants called the “open dialogue” of the collaborative process. Regimented agendas and too many subcommittees were common symptoms of an overformalized collaboration. One focus group member noted a collaboration where “we got our agenda, and you speak now, and you can speak, and it got to the point where it was a very stifled meeting . . . It had gotten so structured that no one was talking anymore” (FG-6).

These members of collaboration travel the tension of formalization of structure. Formal communication structures are needed to stay on task and accomplish

objectives; yet informal communication structures are also needed in order to generate new ideas and respond to unexpected events. Informants discussed two specific types of structural tensions: accountability tensions and decision-making tensions.

Communicating Accountability Tensions

The accountability tension concerns how IORs struggle to steer both the direction and outcome-focus of the collaboration. The goals of accountability often concern keeping both individual partners and the whole collaboration in line with some set of joint goals. Participants expressed a need to confront the tension between minding their own accountability in comparison to observations of partners' contributions and fulfillment of responsibilities as well as keep an eye on the collective achievement of the IOR. It is relatively easier for partners to focus only on what they are bringing to the table relative to others. However, if the goal is not just parity, but success, accountability has a very different look. The tension concerns each partner's ability to hold other partners mutually accountable for their parts of the collaborative effort as well as assess the communal accountability of the whole unto itself.

The assignment of both praise and blame can become problematic in IORs confronted with both kinds of accountability. One collaborator explained it this way: "It is a real challenge when you see how different organizations meet accountability and where they prioritize accountability for grant measures and things like that. It has been a real challenge" (FG-4). It may be that the IOR was highly successful in achieving results, but that the individual partners were quite disparate in meeting their individual obligations. When informants discussed goal setting and goal achievement and how they can be collectively created and collectively managed we heard a good deal about this tension. With so many potentially diverse participants from multiple organizations, individual responsibility for specific tasks can be unclear. Thus, these participants struggled with how to communicatively announce and describe contributions of the group as well as individual agencies.

Coping with Accountability Tensions

One of the typical means of coping with communicative problems raised by the accountability tension is through formal leadership roles. The leader needs to guide the IOR while monitoring members' personal interests so that they do not conflict or supersede the collaboration's mission. Further, leaders can keep an eye on who has responsibilities and who is accountable for which results. In some cases the leader is the person with the most access to resources, and in other instances the leader may be the most vocal member but leaders are not always recognized as such. "Issues of power need to be addressed. They need to be said out loud. Often times it is not. It is just in the room and plays itself out" (FG-4). The leader needs to address how influence and power are acted upon in the collaboration to help bring everyone together and reduce potential conflict between members that hold similar status.

However, it is sometimes difficult to cope with the communicative problems of this tension through leadership because IORs often have strong norms and values concerning participation and voice that make them reluctant to instill any one individual with too much power or responsibility to speak for the whole. Leaders can help clarify and enforce mutual accountability of individual partners/participants to one another, but they can become overly powerful. By limiting the amount of power of leaders and trying to attain neutral leadership, the members of the collaboration are attempting to deal with the tension of accountability and leadership “You have to be interested but unbiased” (FG-4). As another informant put it, “Even if you have a lead collaborator, that person ought not to be making decisions without the input and communication of everyone else in the collaboration” (FG-7).

Some collaborations use mission statements as a communicative tool to help manage the diffusion of accountability by creating a document or statement that all can sign on to support. The mission statement gives the members an identification target in which they can evaluate and justify their participation in the collaboration. By formalizing some of the participation roles and guidelines, members can then go to these guidelines when the tension manifests itself in the collaborative interaction. The mission allows members to “share a vision” and find a space in which the member can operate as collaborative partner, and also a representative of an outside organization. As one member stated:

[The collaboration] addressed the point that there is an adopted framework, the five continuums that everybody at the table agrees with and our mission fits in with that. We're like, ‘oh we can locate ourselves here, here, and here, within that global mission and we're all on board with that.’ (FG-4)

That mission statements can be interpreted in multiple ways is both problematic—in paralyzing the group with diverse interests—and an advantage in being strategically ambiguous (Eisenberg, 1984).

Communicating Decision-Making Tensions

Decision-making tensions concern the need to both codify decision-making processes of the group as well as allow for and encourage spontaneous and unplanned contributions. “I’ve been in meetings where the facilitator really embraces the free flow of ideas and very little structure . . . but then those meetings can run over and people may or may not feel an accomplishment, but then again too much structure impede the chance to brainstorm and have a free flow” (FG-4). In collaboration, the decision-making process can exist on a continuum of two extremes where groups can either ‘spin their wheels’ or achieve goals efficiently. One collaboration member described how informal, unspoken norms may trump formal rules and structure: “We have bylaws and we have all this other stuff that dictates some process. But mainly when you’re in that arena, it’s really about succession. How are decisions made, who succeeds, who votes, who’s a member, the process oriented stuff” (FG-5). For most informants, there was little formalization of the process. Some people

would articulate frustrations they had with the decision-making process during the focus group, but few objections or critiques were discussed openly while in the collaborative process. Others felt the need for more structure in collaboration decision-making: "Everything is formalized, and I think we need to do that. I think where you run into problems is when you just continue to have folks sitting around a table expressing opinions, because it just goes on forever" (FG-6).

Coping with Decision-Making Tensions

In most cases, decision-making involved achieving a simple majority, while at other times a sense of complete consensus needed to be achieved. A collaboration member explained one way in which consensus decision making happened in their meetings: "The Quaker meeting approach means we don't do it until everybody in the room can buy it. . . . It means that the decision you are making is broad based so that everybody can buy into it" (FG-3). Furthering the Quaker notion, one informant noted that if one person does not buy in then often times the majority backs out. However, we also heard from informants that strong norms of consensus may silence dissenters who do not want their sole voice to override the group will. As was noted above, such dissenters sometimes just stop coming to meetings rather than vote against.

Another way collaborative participants battle a strong consensus norm is through obfuscation. Some organizations will only allow provisional decisions to be made at the collaboration. "The second guessing can sure get a [collaboration]. I mean, you think you have come to some agreement and then it goes back [to the organization] and then you have to come meet again, and you get the correct answer the next time" (FG-6). A decision has to be provisionally made, sent back to partner organizations for feedback, and then the members reconvene with responses. Even more problematic is that these delays are sometimes viewed as strategic. "Sometimes you will find that (the delay) was a smokescreen for them not wanting to do this in the first place, and getting more time to think about how they were going to say that tactfully to the group" (FG-3). Overall, the decision making structure seems to vacillate in degrees of formalization between a more rule-bound structure where votes are cast to a more emergent decision-making structure where the choices made may not be clear, how the group came to those decisions is vague, and the decision making process ambiguous at best.

Discussion

Johnson and Long (2002) argue that Dialectical Theory provides communication scholars, "with an important means to study what and how a group becomes and remains a group. . . .providing a new way to observe how communication constitutes groups rather than simply studying what groups do with communication" (p. 40). The results of this study extend the application of dialectical theory to provide a means for scholars to observe how communication constitutes interorganizational

relationships. While this has been demonstrated for interpersonal and group communication, it has yet to be examined at the interorganizational level. We go beyond extrapolating group/organizational-level tensions from interpersonal interactions; we identify tensions that are inherent in the IOR structure itself and describe how participants engage these tensions communicatively.

Our research questions ask what practitioners perceive as common tensions in creating and maintaining collaborative IORs; how those tensions are played out in communication; and how participants cope with these tensions communicatively. Our data surfaced relationship and structure tensions related to creating and maintaining collaborative IORs.

Concerning relationships, our informants discussed examples of *we* versus *me* orientations; ownership rights and turf; community contributions; equal participation; and inclusion/exclusion. A common thread throughout this tension is the construction of public goods. Monge et al. (1998) suggest that public goods are collective goods produced by a collaborative IOR that are nonexcludable (they are available to all partners) and jointly supplied (partners' uses of goods are noncompeting). For example, Monge et al., demonstrate how information sharing produces both "connectivity" (communication system that connects partnership members) and "communality" (common pool of accessible information) as public goods for collaborative alliances. One could imagine other sorts of public goods that collaborative IORs also produce including reputation, credibility, community good will, social capital, or data. As Monge et al. note, one key problem with the production of public goods is the "free rider" problem where "people enjoy the benefits of a public good without contributing to its establishment and/or maintenance" (p. 412). This is precisely the sort of issue raised by our informants. Einbinder et al. (2000) applied this concept to collaborative IORs in relation to issues of sharing. They argue that free riders, who ignore norms of reciprocity, are likely to create uneven or inequitable participation by members. This creates tension in collaborative IORs in a host of ways illustrated in the experiences shared by our informants. Our data reveals that practitioners view these as common and problematic points that collaborations must navigate.

Within the structural tensions, our analysis reveals that collaborative participants frequently struggle with issues of formality and flexibility. Practices related to participation, membership, accountability, and decision-making among others are important and many times problematic for collaborations. Previous case study research has noted that collaborative IORs involve the negotiation of roles and responsibilities "since the participants remain relatively autonomous and must be convinced to act even though there is no legitimate authority that can demand cooperation" (Hardy, Phillips, & Lawrence, 2003, p. 3). The limited case evidence is bolstered by the more far-ranging experience of our informants. Our data also suggest that practitioners recognize the developmental dimension of organizational structure and understand that the adaptability of structure over the lifespan of collaboration is challenging but necessary.

These data also provide evidence in support of scholars' arguments that an internal–external tension exists for collaborations wherein sensitivity to external stakeholders may interfere with internal cohesion or vice versa. Mitchell and Shortell (2000) argue that partnerships need to align their internal mission with the characteristics of important partnership and community stakeholders. Lawrence, Hardy and Phillips (2002) describe a structurational process that explains how these internal and external pressures are balanced:

Through repeated interactions, groups of organizations develop common understandings and practices that form the rules and resources that define the [institutional] field. At the same time, these rules and resources shape the ongoing patterns of interaction from which they are produced. (p. 282)

Our data suggest that practitioners recognize these tensions, and understand that outside forces play an important, and in some cases, determinant role in such matters as tolerances for turfism, ownership, credit, accountability, power to control the process, power to control goals, and norms of equality. Also, these data identify the ways these matters play out and have implications for how the collaborations are able to interact within larger institutional contexts (e.g., industry, sector).

Finally, our third research question asked how tensions are typically dealt with. We found that the ways in which tensions were dealt with in these IORs is less clear in the reports of our informants. The practitioners were more easily able to identify problems and their causes than to agree on specific means to deal with those problems. Although our informants had no difficulty in articulating and discussing tensions in collaboration, their reports of coping strategies often boil down to ignoring or avoiding tensions. For example, some informants reported conflict avoidance or dropping out of collaborations as a response to noted tensions. Given norms of low conflict and high inclusiveness, it is not surprising that IORs in this context appeared to favor these sorts of strategies.

Another common strategy for dealing with apparent tensions seemed to be living with them and accepting them as part and parcel of doing collaborative IOR work. So for example, while participants recognized that inclusion and exclusion each came with a price, they simply lived with the downsides of lack of complete inclusiveness at times or complete openness to the point of it becoming dysfunctional. They recognize that some important players who should be at the table are not, or that it is hard to function with fluid membership, but they choose to accept the state of affairs without actively choosing one alternative over the other. This relates to a neutralization response (Baxter, 1988, 1990; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) where neither side of the tension is favored, but efforts are made to keep them balanced. Whatever direction their collaboration historically leans towards becomes the norm for that collaboration.

In another strategy, participants choose to vacillate between extremes of the tension. In choosing the degree of formality of the group's communicative practice, some groups would move things along too far to the formal and then swing practices back to more informal until that was dysfunctional. This resembles a selection

response (Baxter, 1988, 1990; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) that involves choosing a particular aspect of the tension to focus on in a given context. Informants rarely talked about finding the “right balance” but spoke more in terms of always “looking for” the right balance—constantly vacillating and course-correcting.

In sum, the strategies for dealing with tensions in IOR collaborations identified by our informants who have a wide variety of collaborative experiences also line up well with some of those identified by Tracy (2004) in her study of employees in two correctional facilities. She noted “splitting or vacillation,” “attending to multiple organizational norms simultaneously,” and “withdrawal” as common ways of managing tension within organizations. Avoidance and ignoring strategies are similar to “withdrawal,” “living with paradox” is similar to Tracy’s (2004) notion of “attending to multiple norms,” and vacillation is the same in both studies.

One important difference between the current study and Tracy’s (2004) study is that the participants in these collaborative IORs have a significantly greater influence over how the IOR is structured, the rules that are applied, and the interactions that will be allowed or disallowed. They essentially self-govern, whereas in Tracy’s study the informants were employees of correctional facilities who had little say in such matters. Despite the potential to control and alter or resolve the tensions experienced in IORs, our informants utilized the same sorts of strategies as those less empowered employees in Tracy’s study. This leads to the potential revelation that dialectal tensions may present as puzzles that even if recognized by participants are not readily rationalized in practice. They appear to be responded to with more conflict avoidant and self-correcting methods than with system-wide adjustment and rational examination (e.g., choosing an alternative that is most ideal).

This study adds to what is known about communication in collaborative interorganizational relationships. Very few studies have examined this level of analysis. Past scholarship has so far focused primarily on single or few cases of collaboration. This study contributes an emic perspective of key informants who have collectively participated in hundreds of collaborative IORs. The results: (a) provide evidence of much of what has been *proposed* to be typical or common tensions in interorganizational collaboration in the scholarly literature, (b) illustrate that participants notice tensions and are adept at understanding and articulating their form and consequences for IORs, (c) reveal that strategies for coping with observed tensions in collaborative IORs line up well with what has been observed in more limited examinations of single organizations—thereby strengthening claims of generalizability for theoretical models proposed by other scholars, and (d) illustrate the use of dialectical theory to account for how processes of organizing are accomplished through communication.

Another contribution of this study is in demonstrating the value of an alternate way of viewing interorganizational relationships than the dominant resource dependency view. In using dialectical theory and examining the communicative processes in collaborative IORs, we have highlighted the nonrational aspects of formation, continuation, and /or dissolution of these arrangements. In doing so, we potentially have created a more powerful lens through which to account for the

process and outcomes of IORs. The resource dependency model relies on a rational cost–benefit analysis of how IORs come to be and ultimately succeed or fail. Dialectics, as illustrated in these data, suggest that a more process-oriented view directs us to consider the effectiveness of coping with dialectical tension as a source of explanation.

Limitations

The current study does have limitations. A convenience sample was used to recruit informants. Despite our best efforts, we were not able to balance the high number of health and human services participants with equal numbers representing arts/culture, faith-based, and other nonprofits in our sample. Moreover, we also oversampled those professionals with a bias in favor of collaboration. Although there were many comments about the negative aspects of collaboration, we may have generated different themes in our analysis had different participants been included in our sample.

Future Directions

The research on interorganizational collaboration is certainly expansive and complex. Thus far, the majority of the research has taken a descriptive, exploratory, and case-study approach. Our own study adds the step of examining practitioners' sensemaking about collaborative challenges and communicative practices. In future work, now having a base of cases and more generalizable findings to draw from, research should begin to test predictions of contingencies that are associated with particular contexts, practices, perceptions, and outcomes. Likely important avenues for future study will include examination of life cycles of collaborative partnerships, comparative work using multiple case studies to examine determinants of various communicative practices, and prediction of failed or successful collaborative partnerships.

References

- Aldrich, H.E., & Pfeffer, J. (1976). Environments of organizations. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2, 79–105.
- Ashforth, B.E., Kreiner, G.E., & Fugate, M. (2000). All in a day's work: boundaries and micro role transitions. *Academy of Management Review*, 25, 472–491.
- Barringer, B.R., & Harrison, J.S. (2000). Walking a tightrope: Creating value through inter-organizational relationships. *Journal of Management*, 26(3), 367–403.
- Baxter, L.A. (1988). A dialectical perspective on communication strategies in relational development. In S.W.D.a.D.F. Hay (Ed.), *A handbook of personal relationships: Theory, research, and interventions* (pp. 257–273). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Baxter, L. (1990). Dialectical contradictions in relationship development. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 7, 69–88.
- Baxter, L.A., & Montgomery, B.M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Baxter, L.A., & Montgomery, B.M. (1998). A guide to dialectical approaches to studying personal relationships. In B.M. Montgomery & L.A. Baxter (Eds.), *Dialectical approaches to studying personal relationships* (pp. 1–16). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Baxter, L.A., & Simon, E.P. (1993). Relationship maintenance strategies and dialectical contradictions in personal relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 10, 225–242.
- Bisel, R.S., Ford, D.J., & Keyton, J. (2007). Unobtrusive control in a leadership organization: Integrating control and resistance. *Western Journal of Communication*, 71(2), 136–158.
- Blau, J.R., & Rabrenovic, G. (1991). Interorganizational relations of nonprofit organizations: An exploratory study. *Sociological Forum*, 6(2), 327–347.
- Bulmer, M. (1979). Concepts in the analysis of qualitative data. *Sociological Review*, 27, 651–677.
- Doerfel, M., & Taylor, M. (2004). Network dynamics of interorganizational cooperation: The Croatian civil society movement. *Communication Monographs*, 71(4), 373–394.
- Einbinder, S., Robertson, P.J., Garcia, A., Vuckovic, G., & Patti, R.J. (2000). Interorganizational collaboration in social service organizations: A study of the prerequisites to success. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 6(2), 119–140.
- Eisenberg, E.M. (1984). Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication. *Communication Monographs*, 51(3), 227–269.
- Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R.I., & Shaw, L.L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic field notes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foster-Fishman, P.G., Salem, D.A., Allen, N.A., & Farhrbach, K. (2001). Facilitating interorganizational collaborating: The contributions of interorganizational alliances. *American Journal of Psychology*, 29(6), 875–905.
- Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Goldsmith, D. (1990). A dialectic perspective on the expression of autonomy and connection in romantic relationships. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 54, 537–556.
- Gossett, L.M., & Kilker, J. (2006). My job sucks: Examining counterinstitutional web sites as locations for organizational member voice, dissent, and resistance. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 20(1), 63–90.
- Gray, B. (1989). *Collaborating: Finding common ground for multiparty problems*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hardy, C., Phillips, N., & Lawrence, T.B. (2003). Resources, knowledge and influence: The organizational effects of interorganizational collaboration. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40, 321–347.
- Heath, R.G., & Sias, P.M. (1999). Communicating spirit in a collaborative alliance. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 27, 356–376.
- Huberman, A.M., & Miles, M.B. (1994). Data management and analysis methods. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 428–444). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Johnson, S.D., & Long, L.M. (2002). Being a part and being apart. In L. Frey (Ed.), *Dialectics and group communication* (pp. 25–41). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Keyton, J., Ford, D.J., & Smith, F.L. (2008). A meso-level communicative model of collaboration. *Communication Theory*, 18(3), 376–406.
- Keyton, J., & Stallworth, V. (2003). On the verge of collaboration: Interaction processes versus group outcomes. In L.R. Frey (Ed.), *Group communication in context: Studies of bona fide groups* (2nd ed, pp. 235–260). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Kramer, M.W. (2002). Communication in a community theatre group. Managing multiple group roles. *Communication Studies*, 53, 151–170.
- Kramer, M.W. (2004). Toward a communication theory of group dialectics: An ethnographic study of a community theatre group. *Communication Monographs*, 71(3), 311–332.
- Lawrence, T.B., Hardy, C., & Phillips, N. (2002). Institutional effects of interorganizational collaboration: The emergence of proto-institutions. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45(1), 281–290.
- Lewis, L.K. (2005). The Civil Society Sector: A review of critical issues and research agenda for organizational communication scholars. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 19(2), 238–267.

- Lewis, L.K. (2006). Collaboration: Review of communication scholarship and a research agenda. In C. Beck (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 30* (pp. 197–247). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lindlof, T.R., & Taylor, B.C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, K., Scott, C.R., Stage, C., & Birkholt, M. (1995). Communication and coordination in an interorganizational system: Service provision for the urban homeless. *Communication Research*, 22, 679–699.
- Mitchell, S.M., & Shortell, S.M. (2000). The governance and management of effective community health partnerships: A typology for research, policy, and practice. *The Milbank Quarterly*, 78(2), 241–289.
- Mizrahi, T., & Rosenthal, B.B. (2001). Complexities of coalition building: Leaders' successes, strategies, struggles, and solutions. *Social Work*, 46(1), 63–78.
- Monge, P.R., Fulk, J., Kalman, M.E., Flanagan, A.J., Parnassa, C., & Rumsey, S. (1998). Production of collective action in alliance-based interorganizational communication and information systems. *Organization Science*, 9, 411–433.
- Monge, P.R., Heiss, B.M., & Margolin, D.B. (2008). Communication network evolution in organizational communities. *Communication Theory*, 18, 449–477.
- Mumby, D.K. (2005). Theorizing resistance in organization studies: A dialectical approach. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 19(1), 19–44.
- O'Neill, M. (2002). *Nonprofit nation: A new look at the third America*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G.R. (1978). Interorganizational cooperation and decision making autonomy in a consortium multihospital system. *Academy of Management Review*, 9, 494–504.
- Rawlins, W.K. (1992). *Friendship matters: Communication, dialectics, and the life course*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Salamon, L. (1997). The civil society sector. *Society*, 34(2), 60–66.
- Sandfort, J. (1999). The structural impediments to human service collaboration: Examining welfare reform at the front lines. *Social Service Review* (September), 314–339.
- Scott, C.R., Lewis, L.K., & D'urso, S. (2005, November). *Sowing the seeds of collaboration through introduction of a listserv: A case study of a community of homeless service providers*. A paper to be presented to the Organizational Communication Division at annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Boston, MA.
- Stohl, C., & Cheney, G. (2001). Participatory processes/paradoxical practices: Communication and the dilemmas of organizational democracy. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 14(3), 349–407.
- Takahashi, L.M., & Smutny, G. (2002). Collaborative windows and the organizational governance: Exploring the formation and demise of social service partnerships. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 31(2), 165–185.
- Taylor, B.C., & Trujillo, N. (2001). Qualitative research methods. In F.M. Jablin & L.L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods* (pp. 161–194). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tracy, S.J. (2004). Dialectic, contradiction, or double-bind? Analyzing and theorizing employee reactions to organizational tension. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 32(2), 119–146.
- Vlaar, P.W.L., Van den Bosch, F.A.J., & Volberda, H.W. (2006). Coping with problems of understanding in interorganizational relationships: Using formalization as a means to make sense. *Organization Studies*, 27(1), 1617–1638.
- Zoller, H.M. (2004). Dialogue as global issue management: Legitimizing corporate influence in the transatlantic business dialogue. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 18, 204–240.