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The human service literature suggests that the concept and outcomes of inter-organizational collaboration are not well understood. Nonetheless, inter-organizational collaboration has emerged as a statement of direction for social welfare policy and professional practice. In light of an unclear understanding of collaboration, this analysis suggests the concept has powerful symbolic qualities, which perpetuates its continued use. While the general notion of collaboration is promising, human service administrators and stakeholders must couple critical thinking and action to clarify the meaning, intent, application, and outcomes of inter-organizational collaboration. This article raises the question as to whether the popularity of inter-organization collaboration is grounded in its proven efficacy as a means of achieving specific human service recipient outcomes or symbolism and ideology.

Keywords: *collaboration, cooperation, symbolism, inter-organizational relations, social policy*

Introduction

Policy makers, administrators, and the general public are vigorously promoting collaboration between human service organizations in the United States (U.S.) (Sandfort, 1999). However, the concept and outcomes of collaboration are not well understood (Alter & Hage, 1993; Morrison, 1996; O'Looney, 1997; Reilly, 2001). The promotion of collaboration may have roots in its value as a symbol of rationality, efficiency, legitimacy, and social responsibility (Morrison, 1996; Reitan, 1998; Weiss, 1981). In light of an

array of emerging accountability expectations which link funding streams to an organization's achievement of specific performance standards (Cooke, Reid, & Edwards, 1997; GPRA, 1993), an unconditional and overzealous embrace of inter-organizational collaboration may result in a marked reduction in the already limited resources for human service stakeholders and possibly harm the most vulnerable groups in the U.S. Therefore, agency administrators, service providers, and stakeholders have an ethical duty to clarify the intention, application, and outcomes of inter-organizational collaboration for human service recipients.

The Emergence of Collaboration as Social Welfare Policy

Most human services administrators, interventionists, and an array of public servants that Michael Lipsey (1980) refers to as "street-level bureaucrats" will attest that they commonly encounter the term "collaboration" in their work. Inter-organizational collaboration is promoted as a rational and effective process through which the public expectation for accountability, results, and outcomes from human service organizations can be met (Alaszewski & Harrision, 1988; Austin, 2000; Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Gray, 1989; Page, 2003).

Hassett and Austin (1997) and Neugeboren (1990) note that collaboration and coordination in human services reflects a history of reform efforts to achieve "service integration." Harbert, Finnegan, and Tyler (1997) maintain that "interagency service coordination, integration, or collaboration are general concepts used to describe a variety of efforts to reform the existing delivery system of categorical social services" (p. 84) informed by the Social Security Act.

The more recent emphasis on collaboration between organizations reflects a public concern that human service agencies are not effectively "working together" at the national, state, and local levels (Austin, 2000; Gottshall, 2002; Shorr, 1998; Waldfogel, 1997). The predominant form of inter-organizational relations are believed to contribute to a public human service system characterized as fragmented, inefficient, wasteful (Berger & Neuhaus, 1996; Leon, 1999; Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; Walter & Petr, 2000), and allows those in need to, at times, "fall through the cracks."

Responding to these concerns, legislative bodies and a grow-ing number of public and private funding initiatives have de-veloped mandates, which require human service agencies to engage in inter-organizational "collaborative efforts," "coordina-tion of services," and "partnerships" (Bush, 2000; CAPTA PL 104-235, 108-36; Farmakopoulou, 2002; Harrison, Lynch, Rosander, & Borton, 1990; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Springer, et al., 1999; USDHHS, 2000; Whittington, 2003). While a "policy space" (Berk & Rossi, 1999, p. 10) has been created for "collaboration," upon closer examination, the literature suggests this concept is far from clear.

What Does Collaboration Mean?

Walter and Petr (2000) observe that collaboration is commonly understood as "working together" (p. 5). Weiner and Ray (2000) maintain that the terms cooperation, coordination, and collabora-tion are often used interchangeably and have offered distinctions among these concepts. However, attempting to standardize the term "collaboration" is difficult as there does not appear to be a unified understanding of the concept (Alter and Hage, 1993; Reilly, 2001). Thus, how can human service agencies be expected to engage in "inter-organizational collaboration" when the mean-ing of the concept is not clear?

In a recent literature review, this author identified fifteen defi-nitions of collaboration. However, only the definitions developed by Graham and Barter (1999), Mattessich and Monsey (1992), and Wood and Gray (1989) are presented (Table 1) as they, taken as a whole, capture salient themes which emerge from a review of attempts to define collaboration.

Synthesizing a multidisciplinary literature across social work, education, psychology, sociology, management studies, and public administration, Graham and Barter's (1999) defini-tion of collaboration suggests four dynamic relational properties. First, collaboration is described as fundamentally a relationship that occurs between two or more entities. The relationship ap-pears to be an emergent property of a larger structure that links stakeholders together, which is the second property. Stakeholders can be conceived as individuals, groups, organizations, or even societies. Thus, collaboration is not an attribute of the stakeholder

Table 1

Definitions of Collaboration

A relational system in which two or more stakeholders pool together resources in order to meet objectives that neither could meet individually (Graham & Barter, 1999, p. 7).

A mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals. The relationship includes a commitment to: a definition of mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992, p. 7).

Collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures to act or decide on issues related to that domain (Wood & Gray, 1991, p. 146).

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per se, but an emergent property of a relationship, which links a collective body of stakeholders together. The synergistic quality of the relationship is the third property. In other words, that which emerges from the relationship is greater than what each of the stakeholders could have accomplished individually. And fourth, the relationship exists in a bounded structure with systems properties. This is not to say that the system is closed, but to emphasize the structural nature of the system.

In another review of the public administration, social science, education, and health literature, Mattessich and Monsey (1992) examined 133 publications and characterized most of the literature on collaboration as "how to manuals." Eighteen empirical studies emerged from a content analysis, which informed the identification of 19 factors that may give rise to collaboration. These factors were categorized within six conceptual domains, i.e., environment, membership, process/structure, communication, purpose, and resources.

The definition offered by Wood and Gray (1991) is informed by negotiated order theory (Day & Day, 1977). Gray (1989) conceptualizes collaboration between organizations as a developmental process, which emerges from an inter-organizational relationship.

This conceptualization of inter-organizational collaboration captures the idea of an "emergent property" that can characterize a relationship between organizations advanced by Emery and Trist (1965) several decades earlier. Gray proposes that the process of collaboration be conceptualized as building upon successive negotiated stages. Thus, movement from one stage to another is contingent upon the completion of specific "tasks," although O'Looney (1994) has critiqued Gray's stage model and argues for a more flexible and recursive conceptualization of collaboration.

The definitions offered by Graham and Barter (1999), Mattessich and Monsey (1992), and Wood and Gray (1991) share four broad themes. For example, each definitions stresses that (1) the fundamental nature of collaboration is that of a joint activity in the form of a relational system between two or more organizations; (2) an intentional planning and design process results in mutually defined and shared organizational goals and objectives; (3) structural properties emerge from the relationship between organizations; and (4) emergent "synergistic" qualities characterize the process of collaboration. However, Graham and Barter (1999) and Mattessich and Monsey (1992) maintain that a favorable outcome will occur as a result of inter-organizational collaboration. According to Gray and Wood (1991), the specific outcomes of collaboration should not be incorporated into the definition *a priori*, but left open to empirical analysis.

While the above researchers have substantively contributed to an understanding of collaboration, it is of particular interest that Graham and Barter (1999) and Mattessich and Monsey (1992) incorporate a positive outcome or consequence within the definition of collaboration. Mattessich and Monsey assume that the outcome of collaboration will be necessarily "mutually beneficial." In the same vein, Graham and Barter assume that the outcome of collaboration will result in an outcome, which neither entity could have achieved individually. The essence of this critique is not to question whether the process of collaboration will result in a consequence, but rather the specification of a particular consequence as an element of the definition.

The definition offered by Wood and Gray (1991) is viewed as superior to those proposed by Graham and Barter (1999) and Mattessich and Monsey (1992) because 1) the outcome of collab-

oration is not specified and 2) it is informed by a conceptual framework of organizational relations. However, as a practical matter, it is believed that the overwhelming popularity of inter-organizational collaboration as a statement of direction for social welfare policy and professional practice is predicated on an underlying assumption that positive outcomes will occur as reflected in the definitions proposed by Graham and Barter (1999) and Mattessich and Monsey (1992). Furthermore, it is proposed that the concept of collaboration has powerful symbolic qualities, which perpetuates its popularity despite the lack of a clear pattern of evidence to support that inter-organizational collaboration results in positive outcomes for human service recipients (Provan & Milward, 2001; Reilly, 2001; Schorr, 1998; Weinstein, Whittington, & Leiba, 2003).

Collaboration as Symbolism

Symbolism is often integral to social welfare policy development (Parsons, 1995) and central to an institutional theoretical framework of inter-organizational relations (Galaskiewicz, 1985; Hall, 1999). Provan and Milward (2001) and Reitan (1998) suggest organizations that reference "collaboration" enhance their legitimacy within the community or environments in which they operate. Oliver (1990) describes the symbolic meaning and importance of legitimacy to organizations within an institutional theoretical framework as follows:

> Institutional environments impose pressures on organizations to justify their activities. These pressures motivate organizations to increase their legitimacy in order to appear in agreement with prevailing norms, rules, beliefs, or expectations of external constituents. Legitimacy can originate from an organization's motives to demonstrate or improve its reputation, image, prestige, or congruence with prevailing norms in its institutional environment. (p. 246)

Weiss (1981) maintains that cultural values of "efficiency," "rationality," and "comprehensiveness" are projected through the rhetoric of "coordination." These same values appear to promote the public's demand for inter-organizational collaboration. However, merely relying on rhetoric without specificity often distorts

and oversimplifies complex inter-organizational realities that impact human service organizational processes and outcomes (e.g., lack of resources, economic circumstances, issues of power and control, and so on). A salient point advanced here is that during the 1990s and into the 21st century, "collaboration" has supplanted the symbolism of "cooperation."

Consistent with Wiess' (1981) formulation concerning the symbolic value of "cooperation," it is possible that collaboration conveys a "reassuring" quality. Morrison (1996) suggests that certain qualities of concepts are "attractive" to human service practitioners and incorporated into their professional lexicon and rhetoric for aesthetic rather than substantive reasons. Given the frustration, uncertainty, and anxiety some may experience when managing or operating within a human service system, Dye's (as cited in Parsons, 1995) insight is relevant to the popularity of collaboration as a statement of direction for social policy that informs human services:

> Policies do more than effect change in societal conditions; they also hold a people together and maintain and orderly state. For example, a government "war on poverty" may not have any significant impact on the poor, but it reassures moral persons, the affluent as well as the poor that government "cares" about poverty. (p. 612)

In this vein, perhaps the idea of "collaboration" taps a complex cognitive network of relationships within the collective unconscious psyche (Jung, 1964) that compels individuals to uncritically embrace the concept, without question.

The Spirit of Democracy and Collaboration

Alexis De Tocqueville writes extensively about the propensity of Americans to form associations (Heffner, 1956 [English translation]) in his classic study of the U.S. in the early 1830s. While Tocqueville did not use the term collaboration, his "principle of association" speaks to what Emery and Trist (1965) would identify as an "emergent property" of relations between individuals and groups. For example, Tocqueville describes an association as "unit[ing] into one channel the efforts of diverting minds, and urges them vigorously towards the one end which it clearly points out" (Heffner, 1956, p. 96). Tocqueville viewed the process of form-

ing associations as an active and central element for democracy in America.

More recently, "collaboration" has been referenced in discussions concerning civil society and linked instrumentally to actions or activities that promote civic and social responsibility. For example, Putnam (1995) described "networks of collaboration" in civically engaged communities that give rise to "social capital," which he defines as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 67). Within communities, Provan and Milward (2001) suggest social capital and an organization's legitimacy can be enhanced through "collaboration." Chrislip and Larson (1994) describe a process of "collaboration" between community and human service groups and link the concept to democratic principles and civic engagement.

Thus, from the plethora of mechanical descriptions that emerge from "how to manuals" identified by Mattessich and Monsey (1992) to the laudable vision of a more active role of community members in civic affairs, a clear meaning of collaboration remains illusive. However, while there does appear to be common themes, which cut across the more comprehensive descriptions of collaboration, should this unclear concept be unconditionally embraced and utilized to inform public social welfare policy and professional practice? For example, while invoking the idea of "working together" appears to promote deeply cherished democratic images, history sheds light on a time in the U.S. when community members arguably *collaborated* to support oppression and intolerance. Furthermore, Whittington's (2003) synthesis of critical language analysis (see Fairclough, 2001) suggests "the potential of collaboration and partnership to function as ideology by concealing and perpetuating unequal power relations, disadvantage and benefits to sectional interests" (p. 29).

Are the Outcomes of Inter-organizational Collaboration Always Positive?

Courtney (2000) comments that descriptions of inter-agency relations must move beyond an anecdotal "look at what we have been doing lately in our agency" (p. 756) to a more rigorous

empirically based analysis of outcomes. Courtney's observation is pointed as more recent studies and reviews raise questions about the efficacy of inter-organizational collaboration (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Morrison, 1996; O'Looney, 1997; Provan & Milward, 2001; Reilly, 2001; Reitan, 1998; Schorr, 1998; Weiss, 1981; Wimpfheimer, Bloom, & Kramer, 1990). For example, Helling (1998) maintains that the beneficial outcome assumptions, upon which much of the impetus to collaborate is predicated, should be balanced with the inherent impact on limited organizational resources such as "money, time, and effort" (p. 238). As follows, it is plausible that inter-organizational collaboration could conceivably result in fiscal waste and inefficiency, i.e., that which collaboration between organizations is supposed to remedy!

O'Looney (1997) maintains that the disappointing outcomes of inter-organizational collaborations "has occurred because collaboration (among organizations) has been incompletely realized" (p. 33). However, the findings of case studies reported by Reilly (1998; 2001) indicate that "despite many of the purported benefits, inter-organizational collaboration remains an uncertain process" (2001, p. 74). In addition, Schorr (1998) maintains that her study of human service organizations across the U.S. provided no evidence to support the contention that positive outcomes for human service recipients emerge from inter-organizational collaboration, per se.

A series of initiatives have been implemented to reform public child welfare systems across the U.S. that place a particular emphasis on the use of inter-organizational collaboration between federal, state, and local child welfare stakeholders (CAPTA PL 104-235, 108-36; Hoel, 1998; Page, 2003; Reilly, 2001; USDHHS, 2000). However, the ability of state child welfare systems to achieve "substantial conformity" (a minimally acceptable national standard) on outcome measures for child safety, permanency, and well being by state child welfare systems has been disappointing based on findings from the "results-oriented" national child and family services reviews that occurred during 2001–2004 (USDHHS, 2005). Of all the states in the U.S. (including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico), no state child welfare system achieved "substantial conformity" on key outcomes that measure 1) child permanency and stability in their living

situations and 2) whether families have enhanced capacity to provide for children's needs. In addition, only 6 states in the U.S. achieved "substantial conformity" on child safety outcome measures (USDHHS, 2005).

Glisson and Hemmelgarn (1998) reported a quasi-experimental longitudinal study that showed inter-organizational services coordinated among 32 children's service programs resulted in a negative impact on the quality of child and family services and had no effect on key service outcomes. Instead, Glisson and Hemmelgarn found that intra-organizational climate had a positive impact on the quality of services and key outcomes for children and families. Reviews of inter-organizational collaboration initiatives undertaken in Europe that focus on achieving specific outcomes for service recipients have been inconclusive (Gardner, 2003; Thomson, 2003). Although Gardner writes ""while the vision and rational for joint work between specialist groups are powerful, there is yet insufficient evidence to argue that greater collaboration between services will necessarily produce better outcomes for all children and families" (p. 156).

Recent studies on inter-organizational collaboration focus attention on the process (and strategies) of "collaboration" among human service stakeholders across agencies (Farmakopoulou, 2002; Harbert, Finnegan, & Tyler, 1997; Page, 2003; Provan & Milward, 2001; Reilly, 2001). However, there is accumulating evidence to question whether inter-organizational collaboration always translates into positive outcomes for those individuals who receive services from organizations that engage in "collaboration." It is time for human service stakeholders to ask, "whose needs are being met through the promotion and maintenance of inter-organizational collaboration?"

Recommendations

The apparent popular notion that collaboration will enhance human service delivery systems is questionable at best and deceptive at worst. Although the concept offers promise on conceptual grounds, explicating specific outcomes and clarifying the process of an inter-organizational collaborative relationship must receive the same enthusiasm, as promoting the popular and symbolically powerful phrase "let's collaborate" appears to garner. Therefore,

the following are recommendations for human service administrators and stakeholders to inform reflection, discussion, and action on matters pertaining to "inter-organizational collaboration."

Dialogue on Meaning and Assumptions

First, human service stakeholders must actively invite dialogue on what is meant by the term "collaboration" when this concept is presented as an element of social welfare policy and/or human service program design. It is not advisable to assume that a singular meaning of "collaboration" exists in the minds of human service stakeholders. Critical thinking can inform meaningful dialogue about inter-organizational collaboration, and efforts to conceptualize this concept should be nurtured and framed as an effort to inform and strengthen the capacity of human service systems to achieve specific outcomes for their target population. In addition, careful attention must be placed on ensuring that the definition of inter-organization does not incorporate a positive outcome, *a priori*.

Adequate and Sufficient Resources

Second, establishing and maintaining relationships between organizations can be resource and labor-intensive. A vague notion of collaboration emanating within and radiating from a collective body of agencies could potentially result in a decrease in limited funding for human service recipients as substantive resources are diverted towards the development of an increasing array of administrative structures and processes to maintain the inter-organizational relationship (see O'Looney, 1997). Thus, human service administrators and stakeholders should actively challenge the basis on which inter-organizational collaboration is presented as a cost saving measure, inexpensive, free, and/or a folksy plea for "the right thing to do," particularly when clear links have not been established to human service outcomes.

Human Service Program Accountability

The third recommendation is informed by the mandates of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA, PL 103-62). This legislation mandates clear links between the achievement of organizational performance benchmarks and the receipt of federal funding. For organizations receiving direct or indirect

federal funding contingent upon the application of an "inter-organizational collaborative," the inability to demonstrate specific outcomes achieved through collaboration could ultimately result in a reduction of resources for critical human services. While grant writers have learned that sprinkling a funding proposal with the term "collaboration" is very attractive to decision-making funding bodies, public administrators and human service stakeholders must establish operational definitions and consistent terminology to inform the implementation and realistic limits of what a specified inter-organizational collaborative relationship can plausibly achieve.

Data-Driven Decisions and Relevant Evaluation Models

Fourth, the development, maintenance, and evaluation of organizational relationships should be data-driven. Human service administrators and stakeholders engaged in inter-organizational relationships must collect on-going relevant quantitative and qualitative organizational process and outcome data to evaluate whether human service recipients are being harmed as a result of "collaboration" between organizations as many populations are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in the availability of needed resources. While this latter point may appear counter-intuitive, the history of human service policies and program outcomes overflows with case studies describing "unintended consequences" (Berk & Rossi, 1999).

Evaluation models must be developed to study and clarify the outcomes of collaboration between organizations. The use of logic models (Kellogg Foundation, 2000) can be particularly helpful in determining whether the achievement of specific outcomes are plausible using operational definitions to inform an understanding of inter-organizational collaboration. Logic models and concept maps (Trochim, 1989) can be conducted with stakeholders to tailor evaluation models to the unique needs and questions identified by the organization(s).

Sharing Knowledge

Fifth, human service administrators and human stakeholders must present research findings on the outcomes of collaboration between human service organizations to policy makers and the

public to inform social policy, programs, and resource allocation decisions. It is imperative that a body of knowledge is developed on how delivering human services, informed by a lucid model of inter-organizational collaboration, *impacts the lives of human service recipients.*

Conclusion

Inter-organizational collaboration among human service agencies is a statement of direction for social welfare policy, which has informed legislation, service delivery systems, and funding mandates. Unfortunately, the meaning of inter-organizational collaboration is unclear and the outcomes of the application of this concept are not well understood. In light of an array of existing public and private accountability and performance-based initiatives linking human service funding to agency outcomes, the wisdom of overzealously embracing a vague notion of inter-organizational collaboration predicated upon the alluring symbolic qualities of the concept is called into question. An urgent need exists for all human service stakeholders to engage in critical thinking, dialogue, and generating a knowledge base concerning the outcomes of inter-organizational collaboration in the specific context of the lives of individuals who received services from organizations that practice inter-organizational collaboration. The initiation and maintenance of inter-organizational collaboration should be grounded in the results of empirical studies that shows its efficacy as a means of achieving specific human service recipient outcomes, not a practice or political ideology.

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