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Introduction to the Issue on Organizational Partnerships

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Across a multitude of sectors and contexts, people and organizations are increasingly turning to partnership for the purposes of problem solving, growth, and change. In the public sector, partnership has come to be relied upon as an approach to “wicked problems” that are not amenable to narrow solutions. But partnership itself can be rather depraved, as it is a deceptively complex concept and practice that can frustrate attempts to apply it (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). In part this stems from a lack of definitional clarity. Partnership, collaboration, cooperation, coordination, and similar terms are often used interchangeably (Cropper, Ebers, Huxham, & Ring, 2008). At times these terms may also be used to describe typologies of interaction, but the terms and the qualities they are supposed to embody can differ across research projects (Williams, 2016). On the ground, partners may be unable to agree on aims or to believe that there is any point in working with the other participants at the table.

However, it is also clear that collaboration can be transformative for the beneficiaries of these efforts as well as the individual and organizational participants. Theory and empirical research continue to pursue the factors, processes, and circumstances under which such benefits are more likely to accrue. This issue adds to this body of research. The contributions to this special issue cover a lot of ground. They address a variety of contexts and levels of partnership.

Hollis’s qualitative study of a Texas county’s criminal justice coalition reminds the reader that partnership can be a full-contact sport. She examines the challenges of agencies and organizations working together across what are viewed as competing mandates. She argues that the nature of relationships among justice agencies, community-based service providers, and related business interests (e.g., commercial bail bond agents) are particularly prone to adversarial interactions compared to partnerships and coalitions in other arenas. Her findings suggest that communication barriers, conflict within the coalition, a lack of accountability for moving forward the coalition’s efforts, and difficulties navigating a highly political terrain are key issues to address. The issue of conflict within partnerships is not new, but it has received less attention than other areas in the interorganizational collaboration literature. Perceptions of conflict can differ; Menefee (2016), also pointing to the importance of communication and culture, notes that while some view conflict negatively, others see it as a potential opportunity for creativity and positive change. This can depend in part on the willingness of participants to see themselves as part of a cohesive unit and to focus on a common goal rather than their individual or organizational interests. This possibility

may itself hinge upon the specific nature of the conflict and whether it can be transformed.

McCarty, Cortez and Bee offer a look into women-led cooperatives in areas in Mexico influenced by the Zapatista movement. These cooperatives emerged after the Mexican government and paramilitary forces violently attacked and displaced Zapatista supporters in Chiapas. Although emerging originally as a way for women to help themselves and their families survive, these cooperatives have evolved to serve an empowerment role for the mostly indigenous women who previously had no voice. Although the focus is on collectives of individual women rather than interorganizational partnerships, the study raises important issues that can be applied in that sphere. In particular, the authors argue that the cooperatives would not be judged to be successful if viewed through a traditional neo-liberal lens that scrutinizes the bottom line. Nevertheless, viewed through the participants' perspectives, many critical benefits accrued through their involvement. Additionally, the authors consider not only the dynamic nature of the cooperatives but the shifting meaning of the cooperatives more fundamentally: "The cooperative development and work reported here was started in response to displacement and internal migration and generates a number of additional avenues for research. Could the cooperatives now be acting as a buffer to the push factors of continued migration? Is the cooperative work presented here providing a tipping point of new opportunities or the potential for new role opportunities for women that create an alternative to further migration?" As organizational partnerships are increasingly sustained, it will be important to think more deeply about how their missions and meanings change.

Simonds and Reynolds share a perspective from the street in which they discuss lessons they learned in developing a financial coaching program. They note several interesting observations from these efforts. Their article describes a situation in which partner roles can shift in ways that are vital to program success. While initially targeting clients directly for this new service, the authors realized that this was an unsuccessful recruitment strategy and, instead, needed to appeal to other service provider organizations that touched members of this population. At this point, these organizations were essentially in a client role, being recruited to participate in the program. Subsequently, these organizations became partners, providing referrals and in some cases becoming more actively collaborative, spurring lasting relationships with Family Services at Greater Houston. The process of selling these organizations on the benefits of participation also served to build trust, which is often a scarce resource in early stages of partnership.

Austin, Coleman, and Giardino describe a long-term collaborative effort to bring accessible, coordinated primary health care to underserved children in the Houston area. They argue that the Texas Children's Pediatrics' Community Cares initiative is an example of a sustained innovation that was able to spread to six locations in Houston that had flexibility to implement services based on the underlying "medical home" approach described in the paper. The case contrasts with the conflict described in Hollis's study. Here, the authors present what appears to show a group of collaborators with similar organizational mandates, common languages, and leadership and staffing committed to the overarching goal. "The sustained Community Cares program fits well within the mission of the various care teams, occurs in a data driven high performance administrative context that is responds to both internal and external factors, is led by effective leaders, and is modified and operationalized by teams well versed in quality improvement processes and techniques."

Walker, Littman and Rippenburg-Reesereport on a study of the Sense Of Community (SOC) among residents of a neighborhood in Tucson, Arizona, undergoing development projects. Menlo Park has a longstanding Latino/Latina resident base, some of whom have roots extending back several generations to before Arizona became a state. Recent plans to link streetcar access from downtown to the neighborhood that came on top of earlier "waves of residents of different demographics" generated concerns of gentrification and loss of cultural identity and memory. In this case, partnership concerns community cohesion. While acknowledging that the "blending" of generational and new residents certainly brought real consequences for the historic community denizens, the situation appears to differ positively from other neighborhoods' experiences. As the authors note, "The Menlo Park neighborhood is an example of a community that drew together investment and the gentrification process of residents with a commitment to maintaining the SOC and character. The blend of historic and new residents working together to maintain [block social cohesion] and neighborhood SOC are in stark contrast with nearby developments in Tucson, which were critiqued for relocating the Mexican American and Indigenous communities and in effect erasing social memories in favor of commodifying the place."

The variety in application of the concept of partnership within the various articles and other submissions in this issue offers insight into both the complexity and power of cooperation between individuals and organizations. Though partnerships can create challenges, such as conflicting cultural, organizational or social norms, the works in this issue

offer testament to working through such issues and highlight some of the benefits of navigating collaboration that enhance organizations and improve lives within our communities.

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