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# INTER- ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONS

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## CHAPTER 6

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# COLLABORATIVE SERVICE PROVISION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

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JODI SANDFORT  
H. BRINTON MILWARD

## INTRODUCTION

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OVER the last 40 years, a dramatic change has occurred in how government carries out public policies. Scholars have characterized this change as the 'hollowing of the state' (Milward and Provan 1993), a 'revolution that no one noticed' (Salamon 2002). Governments around the world, including New Zealand, Great Britain, China, and the United States, have shifted how they operate and how they work with and through private institutions. Six common ideas have supported this international public management revolution: the search for greater productivity; more reliance on private markets to achieve public ends; a stronger orientation towards service; more decentralization from national to sub-national governments; increased ability to conceive and monitor public policy; and increased tactics to enhance accountability for results (Kettl 2005). As these ideas have become widely accepted, the public sector has developed many ways of working with private business and not-for-profit charitable organizations.

Scholars of public administration and other policy fields have developed rich literatures exploring the multiple ways the public, private, and non-profit sectors now work together to implement public policies. Sometimes governments contract with private entities and buy staff, services, or expertise through 'purchase-of-services' contracts (DeHoog and Salamon 2002; Romzek and Johnston 2002; Van Slyke 2003). Sometimes, governments support business innovation by sponsoring research or providing infrastructure through public-private partnerships (Link 2006). At other times, the public sector works collaboratively with all other sectors, drawing resources and expertise across organizational boundaries as a partner rather than a purchaser or supporter.

While these 'ideas in good currency' (Schon 1971) have moved around the world, there has been the realization by policy-makers in many different countries that some public problems, such as homelessness, child welfare, or terrorism, transcend the expertise and capabilities of any one organization. Figure 6.1 is a visual illustration of such problems and their relationship with the conventional structures of public organizations. Each organization (labelled  $o_1$ ,  $o_2$ ,  $o_3$ , and  $o_4$ ) intersects with only part of the problem and none of the organizations is linked in any kind of a collaborative relationship (Hjern 1992: 4). The policy problem space is far outside the purview of any one organization.

In the world of practice, there are many benefits to creating collaborative structures that fill this void. As more complex, multidimensional problems appear in the public arena, additional knowledge, further tools, and more refined services need to be mobilized. Collaboration offers the promise of accessing more resources and sharing the risks associated with finding a solution to them. Policy-makers also argue that such partnerships increase efficiency and allow citizens to receive seamless services. Additionally, there are potential synergies that come from collaboration that can create opportunities for learning and organizational improvement. In all, there are many potential benefits of such structures that can create a 'collaborative advantage' over other forms (Huxham 2003; Huxham and Vangen 2005). In the words of one author, crafting public-private partnerships has the potential to 'make a world of difference and a difference to the world' (Heap 2000).

In practice, however, the creation of public-private structures that effectively and efficiently work in the public problem space and create the desired results is challenging. Rather than seizing the 'collaborative advantage', too often 'collaborative inertia' sets in (Huxham 2003; Huxham and Vangen 2005). In this chapter, we review literature written in the crevice between these espoused benefits of collaborative service partnerships and the reality that they are difficult to create, sustain, and use to mobilize resources in ways that create positive results. This literature delves more deeply into Powell's insight (1990) that networks are neither markets nor hierarchies, both of which are stronger forms of social action than networks. Networks are often viewed as the fallback position when markets or hierarchy fail.

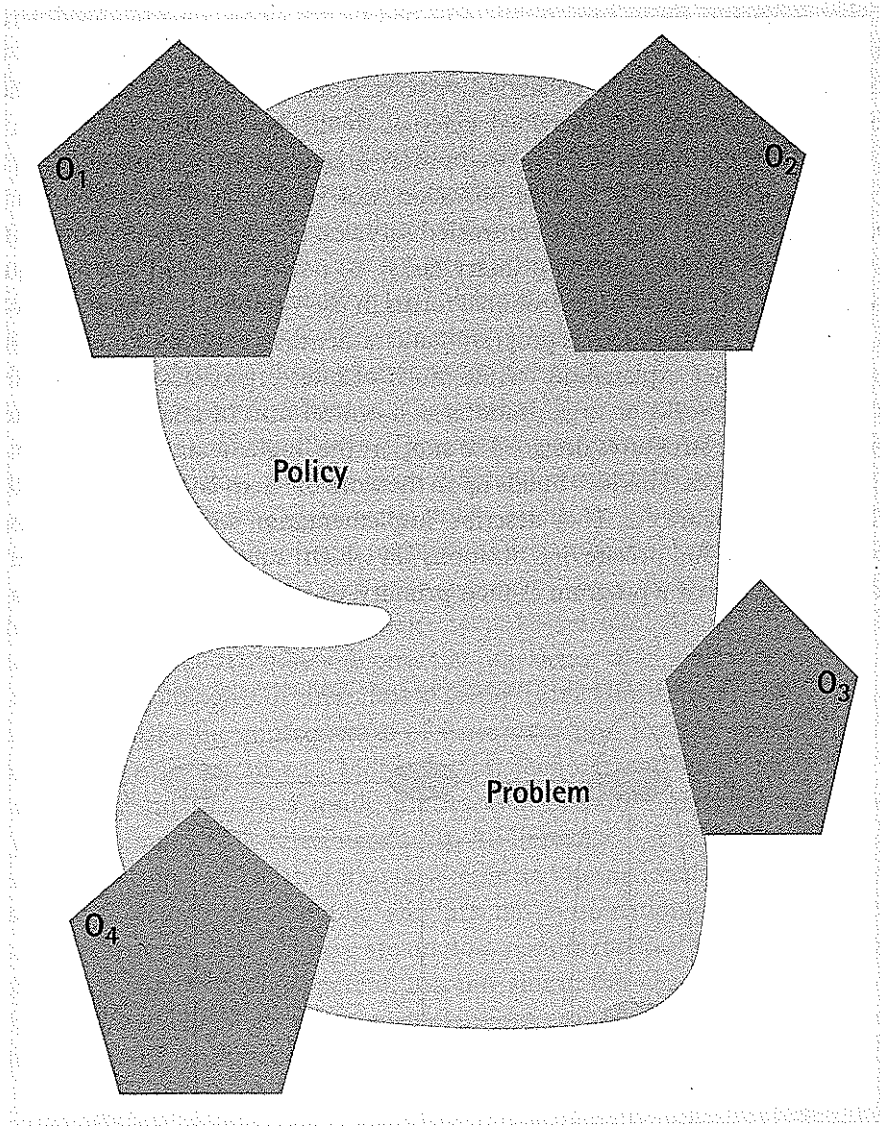


Fig. 6.1 The rationale for collaboration

Source: Hjern (1992: 4).

While research exploring the unique properties of these networks is found in other chapters in this volume, our contribution is to integrate lessons from scholarship concerned with how networks and other inter-organizational mechanisms are used to deliver services to the public. In our synthesis, we do not include scholarship that considers how multiple organizations work together to resolve conflicts, set agendas around public problems, or share information (Roberts and Bradley 1991; Gray 1996; Huxham 1996; Milward and Provan 2006). Instead, our charge is to focus

on what is known about how public and private resources are mobilized across sectors to deliver programmes and provide services to citizens.

In our conception, public collaborative service delivery has the following characteristics: (1) services are provided external to the government that funds it; (2) services are jointly produced by two or more organizations; (3) tasks focus upon horizontal management of service provision, not vertical governance; (4) funds flow to organizations to pay for contracted services; (5) cooperation, contracting, planning, and rationing are the primary tasks; (6) power is shared but not equal; (7) there are a mixture of organizational forms in use—public, private, non-profit, and hybrid; and (8) the focus is programmatic rather than organizational. This last point needs further explanation. While much of inter-organizational scholarship focuses upon networks or organizations as a central unit of analysis, our intent is to highlight the structures designed to support the implementation of particular programs or services. This idea builds upon the work of Hjern and Porter (1981) that is illustrated in Figure 6.2. They describe 'implementation structures' as 'a cluster of parts of public and private organizations [in which] subsets of members within organizations ... view a program as their primary, or an instrumentally important,

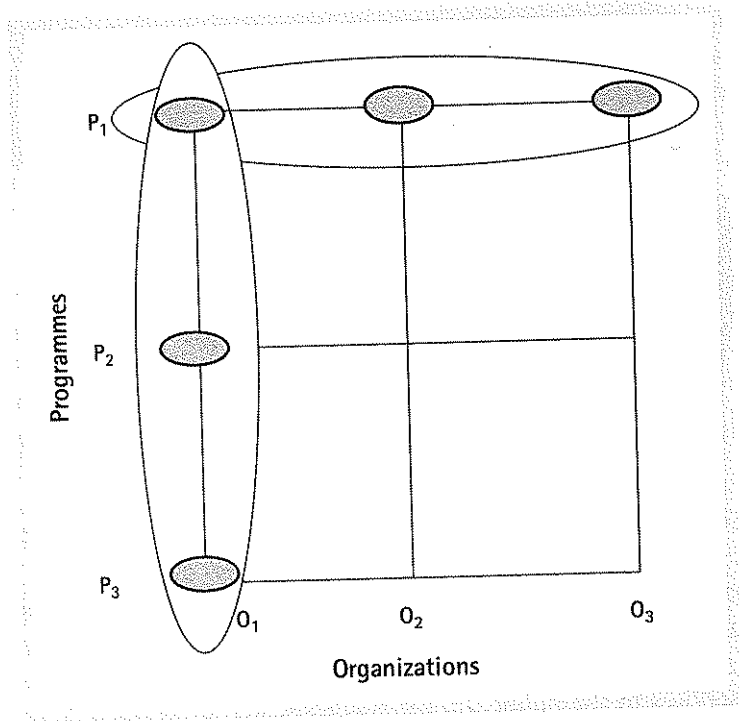


Fig. 6.2 Implementation structures: organizations versus programmes

Source: Hjern and Porter (1981).

interest'. In a national study of mental health networks, Provan and Milward (1995) found that the programmatic part of these implementation structures, which they called 'service implementation networks', served as the production function for services to the seriously mentally ill. Since every organization receiving external funds for service provision has a programmatic element within it, inevitably a tension is created between managing the organization and managing the programme carried out by the network or public-private partnership. This tension between programme and organization is a source of management problems, like mission drift or goal deflection. It can affect both the service partnerships and the organizations that house them, as it is often the same people who manage the organization and their piece of the service implementation network.

Much of the scholarship about collaborative public service provision is grounded in descriptions of field conditions. Because collaborative service delivery is prevalent in so many fields, scholars from different perspectives are involved in this discussion. Researchers in social work, public health, community psychology, public administration, non-profit management, and education explore this topic in multiple ways: some provide normative arguments about the importance of service integration and collaboration (Beatrice 1990; Kagan 1991; Bardach 1996; Harbert *et al.* 1997; Eilers 2002); others discuss the prevalence of new service mechanisms and develop typologies of these forms (Gray 1996; Himmelman 1996); and still others investigate the consequences of these structures for addressing important social problems (Provan and Milward 1995; Jennings and Ewalt 1998; Agranoff and McGuire 2003a). As a result, the research questions explored and research approaches employed vary tremendously. Additionally, it is difficult to coherently discuss public-private collaborative services in an international context because the institutional definitions of 'public' and 'private' are so nationally bound (Osborne 2000; Pollitt 2003). Finally, there are no dominant theoretical traditions or analytical frameworks currently apparent. It is our aim in this chapter to make sense of this diversity and highlight the important insights, gaps, and implications for future scholarly inquiry included in this literature.

## STATE OF THE RESEARCH

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The majority of articles written about inter-organizational service delivery in the public sector focus on describing the diversity of forms that have sprouted up during the last forty years. These sources document that 'collaboration', 'service integration', 'strategic alliances', and 'community partnerships' are occurring in many fields—substance abuse and criminal justice, HIV/AIDS prevention and

services, mental health provision, employment and training services, primary education, and children's services. Most articles tell the story of a particular case and, inevitably, mention the challenges inherent in these new forms of service delivery.

At the broadest level, the literature has two distinct streams. The first focuses on service partnerships as the main topic of interest. In other words, it treats the partnership, the collaboration, the network as an outcome of managerial, social, and political actions. It is an end, in and of itself. As such, the research delves deeply into the process of the new form and explores what motivates its development and what is involved in its maintenance and refinement. In this tradition, variations in a particular form—such as dyadic public–private partnerships or a network for service provision—are intriguing and some scholars consider theoretical or practical rationales to help explain them. Authors also catalogue and theorize about the various barriers that make achieving collaborative partnerships challenging.

The second stream of research focuses on the consequences of these inter-organizational forms; they consider the partnership, collaboration, or network as an independent variable. It is a means to an end. Often, this literature interrogates the purported outcomes of these new structures and investigates the effect they are having on a range of factors. Some scholars explore how they influence the operation of member organizations or the policy systems of which they are a part. Others consider consequences for specific citizens who receive services from them. In this second stream, the process of doing collaborative service delivery—so emphasized by scholars in the first stream—is often underplayed. Instead, the static structure of partnership is often assumed to explore the scholars' main interest: what consequence is this structure having upon other, important outcomes? While we will consider both, in turn, let us first examine, in more detail, the ways collaborative service structures are described.

## **Describing Variations in Form among Inter-organizational Service Delivery**

When scholars first explore this area, many are struck by the diversity of the form of public–private partnerships due to the transformation of public service delivery over the last forty years. Terminology abounds, with little consistency found between the way practitioners refer to 'public–private partnerships', 'collaborations', 'strategic alliances', and 'joint ventures'. A number of scholars try to make sense of this diversity through classification (Gray 1996; Himmelman 1996; Agranoff and McGuire 1998; Linder 2000). Some of these attempts occur inductively, as authors try to understand the various service forms used in a particular field and attach labels to the variety they observe (Gans and Horton 1975; Kagan 1993). Others start with social science theory and glean principles from academic literature that



help to create a defensible typology (Martin *et al.* 1983; Mitchell and Shortell 2000). While this descriptive process of field conditions is necessary, the typologies developed are rarely used as the foundation of any future research. As a result, while numerous field-based typologies exist, the models are seldom linked to any ongoing thread of empirical examination testing their validity or refining their terminology.

With this caveat, there are a few significant characteristics that transcend the various descriptive typologies. First, some authors emphasize the important of differentiating purpose (General Accounting Office 1992; Kagan 1993; Agranoff and McGuire 1998; Agranoff and McGuire 2003*b*), particularly in making distinctions between initiatives that attempt 'systems' change and those oriented towards 'service' change. Reorganizing or linking state and local government administrative entities, for example, has the potential of improving system efficiency. Similarly, initiatives that reorganize local services through collocation may create new links and decreasing fragmentation. These macro-'systems' change efforts are often contrasted with more modest attempts to improve the way services are provided for individual clients. Sometimes such change involves actually altering the content of services because new resources are brought to bear. At other times, such change is a mere repackaging of existing services through techniques such as case management (Dill 2001). In this approach, the collaboration is focused on work around and among the existing systems—rather than changing the systems themselves—to assure that individuals receive the services they need. Scholars describing the diverse conditions in the field illuminate that these purposes are distinct.

Another characteristic used to describe and differentiate collaborative service delivery arrangements is by the level at which they occur. A number of scholars (Agranoff and Pattakos 1979; Martin *et al.* 1983; Kagan 1993) distinguish four levels of service integration:

- *Policy level:* Decision-making bodies, such as commissions or policy councils, that allow information to be shared, programmes to be developed, and revenues to flow beyond the traditional boundaries of categorical programs (see Klijn, Chapter 5, this volume). Public-private partnerships that combine public and private revenue streams to create new programs.
- *Organizational level:* The reorganization and creation of unified 'umbrella' agencies within government to improve the sharing of information and administration of existing programmes. Joint ventures where government and private, non-profit organizations share administrative functions.
- *Programme level:* Strategies such as collocation, linking information systems, or integrated staffing that change the scope and implementation of programmes.
- *Client level:* Efforts that coordinate services for individual clients or their families and may include single application procedures or case management services.

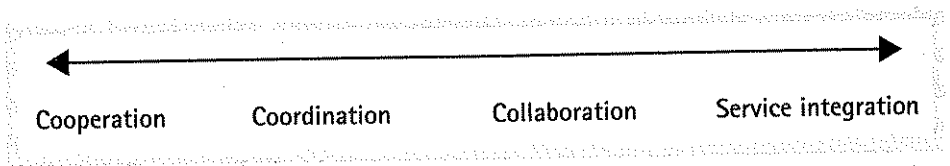


Fig. 6.3 Continuum of collaborative service arrangements

Within any particular level, a collaborative effort might focus on either improving systems or services. The purpose of collaboration is distinct from the level at which it occurs.

Finally, many authors that describe field conditions try to make sense of the varying intensity of collaboration among the examples they observe. One approach is to conceptualize the variation along a continuum that describes intensity from informal to more formalized relations (Kagan 1993; Himmelman 1996; Cigler 2001; Mattessich *et al.* 2001). Figure 6.3 illustrates a common representation of this continuum. At one end is *cooperation* supported by informal and personal relationships. At the other is formalized *service integration* in which two or more organizations work together to provide new services to their mutual clients. Between these two extremes are *coordination*, in which both organizations make an effort to calibrate their actions, although the organizations themselves remain independent, and *collaboration* in which organizations share existing resources, authority, and rewards. Collaboration can occur through multiple mechanisms, such as integrating staff, joint planning, or joint budgeting. Although these terms—cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and service integration—are often used interchangeably in practice, there are reasons for distinguish among relationships based on their intensity.

Another approach describes the various stages of a single collaborative relationship, considering what is involved in forming inter-organizational relationships in practice. Hudson and colleagues (Hudson *et al.* 1999), for example, highlight ten stages that seem to characterize the ‘collaborative endeavour’ from the practitioners’ perspective: (1) consider contextual factors, both expectations and constraints; (2) recognize the need to collaborate; (3) identify a legitimate basis for collaboration; (4) assess collaborative capacity; (5) articulate a clear collaborative purpose; (6) build trust; (7) ensure wide organizational ownership; (8) nurture fragile relationships; (9) select an appropriate collaborative relationship; (10) select a pathway to create it. Yet, like other descriptions, this model is not substantiated with subsequent empirical investigation. In fact, there are other cases that suggest other paths than this linear approach (Ramiah and Reich 2006). Based on 15 years of extensive action research, Huxham and Vangen (2005) question the validity of such a linear conception and, instead, suggest that many of the dynamics of the collaborative process are recursive. They do not get established at one time to be forgotten. Instead, purpose, membership, trust, power, leadership, and identity all

must be negotiated, nurtured, and managed continuously throughout the collaborative process (See Huxham and Beech, and Bachman and Zaheer, this volume).

While other chapters in this volume explore how various social science theoretical traditions conceptualize and describe inter-organizational relations, it is important to note that some scholars describing public sector service partnerships draw upon these traditions (see Part III, this volume). In fact, Hill and Lynn (2003) summarize two major paradigms for understanding cross-sector work. On the one hand, some theories such as exchange theory (Emerson 1962), principal agent (Williamson 1975, 1985), game theory (Axelrod 1997), collective action (Olson 1965) presume that the collaboration or public service partnerships are best understood as rational forms designed to maximize production abilities. On the other hand, many theories, including institutional (DiMaggio and Powell 1991), structuration (Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1990; Sewell 1992), and network theories (Jones and Hesterly 1997) point to more nuanced, social factors to describe these forms. Future work that describes the diverse forms of public service partnerships might be enhanced if it interacts with these theoretical traditions.

So while considerable attention is paid to describing the array of collaborative service structures found in professional fields, no dominant perspective has emerged. Those writing for more applied audiences stop at describing what they see. Their frameworks, while having some face validity, are not often explored in subsequent studies with more robust tests. New scholars intrigued with the diversity of service delivery forms found in their fields face significant choices in shaping their research. One viable approach is to test and refine the many field-based typologies that exist. Another approach is to embrace theories that frame these inter-organizational forms in economic or social paradigms and push those theories with the empirical complexity found in the field to glean new insights. Each approach would be valuable and would lead to differently scholarly products.

## Focusing on Service Partnerships as the Outcome of Interest

As mentioned earlier, there are two main streams of scholarship that move beyond a mere description of collaborative public service partnerships. The first focuses mainly on investigating various dimensions of these new service structures—what motivates their creation, what barriers must be confronted, what practices are most likely to predict their sustainability. In this approach, the structure itself and the social dynamics involved in its existence are important and worthy of enquiry. Other outcomes of the partnership are not focused upon.

*Motivations for Cross-sector Service Partnerships* Many researchers explore what forces cause or contribute to the proliferation of inter-organization structures and—as is summarized in other chapters of this volume—there are competing

theoretical interpretations. In the public service research literature, it is generally assumed that many forces are driving the proliferation of these collaborative forms (Bryson *et al.* 2006). When organizations face turbulent environments, they seek partnerships with other organizations to smooth out operational flows (Hall 1999), reduce resource dependencies (Aldrich and Pfeffer 1976), and gain institutional legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Oliver (1990) provides a concise summary of this literature that suggests six distinct motivations for the formation of inter-organizational relationships that transcend theoretical tradition: (1) mandated by legal or regulatory requirements as 'necessity'; (2) realized potential to exert power or control through 'asymmetry'; (3) desired 'reciprocity' with another organization through cooperation or coordination; (4) improved organizational 'efficiency'; (5) increased 'stability' of the organizational environment; (6) enhanced 'legitimacy' among other organizations and decision-makers. In practice, of course, the decision by an individual organization to enter into a relationship with another is commonly based upon more than one of these motivations.

In fact, while not explored systematically, there are suggestions about how these factors play out in scholarship about public service partnerships. As governments increasingly mandate collaborative planning, oversight bodies, or integrative service models, there are increasing *necessities* for public and non-profit organizations to engage in partnerships. In the United States, for example, federal employment policy requires that job training support be offered through 'one stop' service centres that bring multiple entities together to improve client access to services (Holcomb *et al.* 1993). Additionally, private philanthropic foundations find funding collaborative service models an appealing way to attempt systemic change (Ostrower 2005).

Similarly, there is a theme in this literature stressing that collaborative service models emerge because of the complexity of social problems and a desire to have *reciprocity* in services. (Mitchell and Shortell 2000; Huxham and Vangen 2005). Some efforts rise from the bottom up, as practitioners come together to address multifaceted problems, such as homelessness or substance abuse, with a larger spectrum of services. Interestingly, there is no empirical evidence that either mandated or emergent collaborative service models constitute a superior method of collaborating. In the literature, there is a bias towards highlighting emergent or bottom-up forms as more authentic and effective (Jones and Hesterly 1997). Yet, government and private funders often mandate from the top the form that collaboration can take.

Research on city economic development programmes (Agranoff and McGuire 1998, 2003a; Parkinson *et al.* 2006) highlights that complexity and uncertainty in the environment motivate city governments to engage in collaboration (see Geddes, Chapter 8, this volume). By using various strategies, managers try to *stabilize* the environments within which they must work. Finally, the literature about public sector service partnerships documents that *legitimacy* can come just from being perceived

by key stakeholders as participating in collaborations. In the current funding and political environments, the institutional forces encourage participation in inter-organizational initiatives (Mulroy and Shay 1998; Weiner and Alexander 1998).

It is worth noting that the terminology commonly used to refer to these new forms of public service imply different motivations. For example, 'collaboration' implies a consensual relationship created to improve operations, while 'partnership' reinforces the notion of reciprocal motivation. In contrast, 'joint ventures' and 'strategic alliances', the terminology adopted from the world of private business, imply purposive relationships designed to maximize efficiency and exert influence over competitors.

The factors noted by Oliver (1990) as motivating inter-organizational relationships certainly are mentioned within this literature. However, few public sector studies are undertaken in reference to social science theories regarding the motivation to engage in service partnerships. As a result, there are no systematic tests that explore the degree to which this framework applies to these forms. This might not be an oversight. Some authors (Hjern and Porter 1981; Alter and Hagen 1993; Agranoff and McGuire 1998) argue that research should not focus on the futile attempt of trying to isolate factors that motivate public service collaboration. Instead, they argue, research should focus upon what factors are important in sustaining and enhancing these efforts when they are being tried.

*Sustaining and Enhancing Collaborative Partnerships* The ongoing management of service collaborations has attracted considerable attention in the literature, possibly because of the interest among this community of scholars in the practical implications of research. Some studies try to isolate characteristics that can be used to predict longer-term collaborative success (Mattessich and Monsey 1992; Shortell *et al.* 2002; Bryson *et al.* 2006). Because of the inherent complexity in collaborative service delivery, other scholars highlight the significance of leadership and management skills (Mitchell and Shortell 2000; Alexander *et al.* 2001; Keast and Brown 2002; Agranoff and McGuire 2003b; Page 2003; O'Toole and Meier 2004; Crosby and Bryson 2005). In public sector partnerships and networks—where goals are often multiple and poorly defined, the specification of tasks ambiguous, and the articulation and assessment of results challenging—management is complex (Ferlie and Pettigrew 1996; Kickert *et al.* 1997; Milward and Provan 2000a; O'Toole *et al.* 2005).

As mentioned earlier, the new public management being implemented around the world emphasizes both measuring the results of public investment and using inter-organizational structures (Hood 1991; Kamensky and Morales 2005; Kettl 2005). In this context, some scholars specifically examine how performance measurements influence public service partnerships. For example, a US study of state-human service reform documents how performance measurement systems to help interagency collaborations survive and garner more legitimacy (Page 2004).

Similarly, an investigation of watershed management where collaboration was used for habitat restoration and public education found that articulating and measuring performance helped to direct activities, motivate stakeholders, celebrate accomplishments, and enhance learning and governance (Imperial 2005). Yet, both of these studies stress that performance measurement is not a panacea. In fact, this management tool can highlight conflicting values within collaborative service partnerships. It can also illuminate to participants that, even though a collaborative service partnership might exist, desired programmatic outcomes still might prove illusive. Future investigations of how performance measurement is used in public service partnerships could more systematically explore how this management technique influences the ability of these partnerships to form, be sustained, and perform the public good.

In addition to leadership and management, other scholars highlight the importance of governance in sustaining and enhancing service partnerships (Hill and Lynn 2003; Davies *et al.* 2005). Throughout much of this literature runs the assumption that these arrangements evolve because of perceived mutual benefit among the participants or strategic decision-making (Faerman *et al.* 2001). Governance, to the degree to which it exists, is emergent, resulting from the ongoing exchange relationships among the members of the collaborative. In this model, no one party is in a position to mandate a particular form of governance through the control of funding, contracts, or other valued resources. However, within contracted services areas, such as child welfare or mental health, collaborative governance is often designed by the funding authority. Often one organization—a public, non-profit, or private firm—is designated by the government to be the ‘fiscal agent’. This agent can deliver some services, contract for others, or simply procure; in practice, this form of collaboration can resemble hierarchy in many ways. While governance structures seem significant to the structure and operation of service partnerships, there is much left to be investigated. Some scholars are beginning to consider these different models of network governance and explore their relative strengths and weaknesses for service provision (Uzzi 1997; Kenis and Provan 2006).

Other scholars explore service partnership sustainability by examining the structural characteristics of the form itself, particularly when it is a network structure. In a study of workforce development programmes, Whetten and colleagues explore the significance of network linkages and the centrality of power and resources (Whetten and Leung 1979; Boje and Whetten 1981). An analysis of mental health networks by Milward and Provan (2000a) reveals that continued stability of network structures is important to providing effective service to clients. Yet, network stability is not always desirable because it might impede the ability to respond to changing circumstances as needed to survive. As Milward and Provan (2000a) conclude: ‘Stability of a system is both a strength and a weakness. The key is to find a balance between flexibility and rigidity.’

In contrast to focusing on structures themselves, another stream of this literature tries to unpack the actual social processes existing behind each network, each partnership agreement, and each case management model. Rather than seeing the structure as something that can be measured as a consistent factor, Huxham and Vangen's (2005) theory of the collaborative advantage stresses the complex negotiations that occur around defining objectives, navigating power differentials, building trust, battling partnership fatigue, and establishing leadership. Although each of these factors is widely cited as being necessary for the formation and maintenance of collaborative structures (Weiss 1981; Wood and Gray 1991; Gray 1996; Mitchell and Shortell 2000; Bryson *et al.* 2006), Huxham and Vangen suggest that they are not merely predictive of whether or not a collaborative service form will be sustained. Instead, there is a social complexity underlying collaborative service delivery that requires ongoing attention. Sandfort's (1999) analysis of welfare-to-work partnerships suggests that these human interactions—when embedded in the social systems of organizations—can be quite significant in the enduring form of service arrangements in a particular community. As individuals draw upon shared schemas to interpret events, make judgements about how to work with other organizations, and deploy resources, they shape the very structures that network scholars examine.

*Unresolved Issues* Many perspectives are brought to the study of the diverse forms of collaborative service partnerships. While the motivation to engage in inter-organizational partnerships has been an important focus in the sociological literature, many more scholars of public service partnerships focus on what is needed to sustain and enhance these relationships. A challenge remains, however, because there is no consensus about the most appropriate way to focus the inquiry. Some researchers try to isolate factors that predict success, such as leadership and management actions. Others examine the significance of structural form or focus on the human dynamics that must be negotiated and re-negotiated throughout the collaborative process.

These streams reflect the larger tension within the academy about the most useful way to conceptualize and explore social reality. Scholars have drawn upon positivist traditions that try to isolate causal factors and use them to make predictions about other cases. Other scholars embrace an interpretivist tradition that sees scholarly inquiry most effectively focused on unpacking the multiple ways in which social phenomenon come to have meaning. The literature also reflects a tension between individual-level and structural analysis. Some researchers highlight leadership and strategic management choices and emphasize the importance of individual agency in the operation of service partnerships. Others examine formal structures and highlight their significance in the traditions of structural functionalists.

There is a great need to overcome these intellectual divides. Given the proliferation of these alternative forms of service delivery, individuals need to know more about how to shape collaborative partnerships through strategic management

decisions. They also, however, must learn about the importance of structural factors in influencing the likelihood of success. New scholars could follow the lead of O'Toole and Meier (2004) who systematically explore how management action shapes and is shaped by larger inter-organizational structures. In their study of public education in Texas, they explore how both the structural features of inter-governmental networks and the networking behaviour of top managers influence an array of performance results. Another viable approach would be to draw upon insights gleaned from the descriptive writing that collaboration occurs at multiple levels within service systems. Research could more explicitly acknowledge and disentangle the various levels involved in collaborative service partnership—front-line, programme, organizational, systems—for it is possible that the dynamics of collaboration vary by level. By combining positivist and interpretivist approaches to research, new scholarship could both identify the causal relationships between factors and the causal mechanism that makes these relationships plausible (Lin 1998; Davies *et al.* 2005).

## Exploring the Consequences of Public Sector Service Collaborations

In various public arenas, such as education, social welfare, and public health, policy-makers now require administrators to document the consequences of public interventions—be they in seventh-grade classrooms, psychotherapy sessions, or immunization programmes. Scholars, too, are increasingly examining how management and organizational operations influence the programmatic and policy outcomes desired by the public (Heinrich and Lynn 2000; Kamensky and Morales 2005; O'Toole *et al.* 2005). This orientation is increasingly reflected in the research on collaborative structures of public service delivery. Rhetorically, collaboration is touted as providing important benefits to systems and clients. In an overview of research about service integration, Martin *et al.* (1983) reports that it is purported to reduce duplication, improve coordination, prevent inefficiency, minimize costs, and improve responsiveness and effectiveness within the system. It is also depicted as being able to better resolve the issues of multiproblem clients and improve overall client access (Beatrice 1990; Poole and Van Hook 1997; Farel and Rounds 1998). However, as many scholars are quick to point out (Gans and Horton 1975; Weiss 1981; Martin *et al.* 1983; Chamberlain and Rapp 1991; Kagan 1993; Zuckerman *et al.* 1995), most of these purported consequences are not substantiated by empirical investigation.

There are numerous reasons for this disparity between assertion and substantiation. First, as we have discussed, there are some inherent challenges in managing these relationships. The other stream in this literature documents the many challenges that must be confronted when forming, developing, and sustaining



inter-organizational partnerships. Secondly, it is often difficult to precisely define the desired consequences of these collaborative efforts. As mentioned earlier, there is a wide array of purposes embedded in many public service partnerships, such as systems or service change. Politicians may want the problem to be as hidden as possible, advocates may want clients to have more power over how their services are delivered, funders may want evidence of increasing effectiveness. Each group brings its own evaluative criteria to judge how well a network is performing, which makes it very difficult to focus on one outcome (Bardach and Lesser 1996; Ferlie and Pettigrew 1996; Provan and Milward 2001; Bryson *et al.* 2006). This, of course, is not a problem unique to inter-organizational models of service delivery. Lively debates occur among scholars about how to best understand and operationalize 'performance' and 'effectiveness' in public and non-profit organizations with consensus emerging that it is a multidimensional construct (Forbes 1999; Herman and Renz 1999; Rainey and Steinbauer 1999; Brewer and Selden 2000; Heinrich and Lynn 2000; Provan and Milward 2001; Sowa *et al.* 2004).

Finally, the gap between purported results and empirical evidence may be caused by the state of the research itself. This stream of empirical work is at the beginning of its development and there are many fundamental issues to be grappled with. A potent illustration is case management, a type of collaborative delivery for human services that has received considerable research attention (Dill 2001). Although the benefits of case management for both systemic and client outcomes are widely cited, it is rarely substantiated with empirical study (Bailey 1989; Chamberlain and Rapp 1991; Attkisson 1992; Dinerman 1992; Marks 1994). Like other strategies of collaborative service delivery, this is partly because there is no consistent definition of form. Although it is widely recognized as a set of techniques used 'to organize and order services that address an individual's problem' (Merrill 1985), there is considerable variation in how this is structured and implemented. A number of authors have tried to standardize the terminology by describing five functions of case managers that cross particular programmatic contexts (Chamberlain and Rapp 1991; Marks 1994; Merrill 1985). Yet, they acknowledge that even within these functions, there remains significant variation in the deployment of the tool and, as a result, it is difficult to generalize empirical results about the efficacy of the intervention (Chamberlain and Rapp 1991; Attkisson 1992; Solomon 1992). This example is not unique; the diversity of collaborative forms discussed earlier in this review serves to limit our ability to generalize research findings about the consequences of public sector partnerships.

There are, however, some solid empirical studies that begin to explore the outcomes of these structures. With the caveats offered above, we would like to highlight research about two distinct outcomes—organizational capacity and citizens' conditions. Like the other stream of this research, much of this literature is cross-sectional. It has not yet allowed us to consider how time might influence what collaborations achieve. In fact, Innes and Booher (1999) suggest that, in the case of

planning, collaboration might have first-, second-, and third-order effects. While some consequences might be immediately discernible, such as new knowledge possessed by participating professionals, other effects might not happen until the partnership is implemented. These second- and third-order effects might include new organizational practices or substantial change in citizen circumstances. It is important for future scholars writing in this vein to take care in conceptualizing and specifying how collaborative service structures can influence a variety of outcomes over a prolonged period of time.

*Alterations to Organizational or Systems Capacity* Because partnerships involve altering the connections between organizations and the arrangement of services, it is reasonable to expect that these efforts influence the capacity of front-line staff, managers, organizations, or systems to deliver services. Much of the existing literature supports this notion. For example, an article summarizing studies included in two special issues of the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* highlights many such outcomes: risks and costs were distributed among organizational participants; collective understanding at multiple levels was developed among professionals that, in turn, contributed to sustained links between organizations; incremental changes occurred in the organizations participating (Gray and Wood 1991). A study of youth service integration in eastern Australia illustrates how community-wide networks have helped to broaden notions of problems and solutions, build relationships, and resolve conflict that previously impeded effective service delivery (Keast *et al.* 2004). Studies of health alliances (Zuckerman *et al.* 1995), water systems management (Sabatier *et al.* 2001), and early childhood education (Selden *et al.* 2006) reinforce these findings of increased resources within the participating organizations.

It is possible that as more professionals and organizations have positive experiences with inter-organization service partnerships, they develop more 'collaborative know-how' and learn how to capture the 'collaborative advantage' (Huxham 1996). This involves the ability to identify, negotiate, manage, and monitor collaborations. Once such competencies are possessed, people and organizations may operate differently. In a study of private businesses involved in strategic alliances, Simonin (1997) documents that firms who are able to develop and institutionalize these skills, who are able to learn from the experience of past collaborations, receive more benefits from it, including financial advantages and learning competencies from other organizations. This perspective is supported by a study of private colleges over a 16-year period. Kraatz (1998) found that participation within small, more homogeneous consortiums created the opportunity for sharing high-quality programmatic information that, in turn, inspired the creation of new degree programmes in the colleges. Additionally, in their rigorous study of local government's economic development activities, Agranoff and McGuire (2003a) suggest that the level of collaborative activity is correlated with the type and number of policy tools being

used by public managers. Their work suggests that the strategic engagement of cities is clearly connected to their pattern of collaboration. The process of working in the public problem space with other organizations shapes the actions of public managers.

In the United States and United Kingdom, a number of regional-level governments have undertaken service integration since the 1980s (Kagan 1993; Waldfogel 1997; Parkinson *et al.* 2006). The consequences of these administrative reforms can be seen at multiple levels within the public system. At the most micro-level, new collaboration in preventative services for at-risk pre-school children has changed the nature of front-line workers' job tasks and their caseload size (Farel and Rounds 1998). At the organizational operations level, interagency collaborative efforts may affect provision of services and its duration (Dellario 1985; Rogers *et al.* 1989). At the systems level, Page (2003) illustrates how some US state governments made significant alterations in human service systems as a result of a collaborative endeavours. The comparative case study design he uses increases the external validity of his findings. However, like the case management example discussed earlier, the unique characteristics of service collaboration at these various levels mean that there is still much to be learned about how these ways of working influence organizational and systems operation.

*Influencing Citizens' Conditions* Public service collaborations might significantly alter how organizations and staff can respond to citizen's needs. In fact, the fragmentation of programmes, the desire for seamless service for citizens, and the need to increase effectiveness are oftens a rallying cry inspiring collaborative efforts. In the early 1970s when public service integration was just beginning in the United States, Gans and Horton (1975) conducted fieldwork studies on local health and social service programmes. From their fieldwork, they developed a set of generalizable hypotheses about how various collaborative strategies should affect client access and service continuity. For example, they suggested that joint planning, collocation, outreach, and case coordination should have a large impact on improving client access to services. Alternatively, they asserted that sharing or transferring staff, sharing information or grants management, improving record-keeping—while viable collaborative strategies—would have less significant impact on client access. This line of reasoning appears sound for it recognizes that different managerial strategies will have differential affects. However, in the review of the existing literature, no subsequent studies have built upon this framework to empirically test these hypotheses.

Taking their premise seriously would involve conceptualizing more fully how managerial change should affect the circumstances of citizens. It is quite plausible that collaborative service models have some type of effect on service accessibility. That is, in fact, what such service arrangements are often designed to do—make existing publicly funded programmes more coherent and less duplicative.

Yet, it is more challenging to conceptualize the causal mechanisms that might lead these service partnerships to directly change citizens' lives. When we consider the other factors important in determining how an individual's circumstances change—income, education, family background, experience within the particular intervention, the validity of the particular intervention in alleviating his/her problem—it becomes less apparent why service structures should—in and of themselves—influence well-being to any significant degree. Some research on collaborative partnerships is beginning to explore both types of outcomes for citizens.

Some research focuses on how service integration influences client access to services. Lehman and colleagues (Lehman 1994) studied four cities that reorganized the governance of their mental health delivery for the chronically mentally ill. They found that in three cities, the second cohort of clients accessed case management more frequently and had fewer disruptions of case managers. The research methodology used, however, is unable to determine what it was about collaborative governance itself that contributed to the finding of improved access to services. Another study summarizing demonstration projects in Australia to improve community-based services for the aged found that the collaborative efforts improved client knowledge of services and enhanced access (Fine 2001). Yet, the research design used in this examination cannot isolate whether the new collaborative administrative arrangements themselves created this change.

Studies using experimental designs do not face such a challenge. One such study (Franklin *et al.* 1987) examined the provision of case management to the chronically mentally ill. The 'treatment' was provided by seven case managers situated in one service unit and clients were interviewed at the beginning of the project and one year later. This study concluded that case management improved client access to in-patient treatment in hospitals and other community-based services (see Mandell and Keast, Chapter 7, this volume). It did not have a statistically discernible impact on outcomes related to clients' quality of life. Similar results—that case management influenced access but not client outcomes—are reported in other experimental studies of the severely mentally ill (Bond 1988, cited in Attkisson 1992).

Although the empirical support documenting improved citizen access to services is thin, conventional wisdom holds that partnerships must improve access. They are, in fact, created to address service fragmentation. Some scholars, however, suggest that they can, in fact, have the reverse effect (Moore 1992). Tightly connected systems can be unstable and difficult to manage because disturbances in any part of them quickly ripple from one side to the other (Simon 1962). Tightly connected systems may also exhibit a lack of innovation because as time passes, everyone knows the same thing and the same people. In contrast, there is evidence that loosely coupled systems (where everyone isn't connected to everyone else) dampen this effect (Scott 1985; Glisson and James 1992). Weak ties to other systems allow new ideas, people, and opportunities to enter the system (Granovetter 1973) and avoid the problem of entropy. While reasonable performance has been found

to require a certain level of stability in a network (Provan and Milward 1995), a testable hypothesis flowing from this debate is that collaboration will increase the performance of a system up to some point and then after that point, decrease it.

Because there are wide assertions that the new collaborative forms are more effective in changing citizens' outcomes, some scholarship tries to explore how these forms are related to service outcomes. A study of maternity care coordination for Medicaid recipients in North Carolina, for example, asserts that 'case management' reduced the number of low birth weight babies, decreased infant mortality, and lowered the cost of medical care (Buescher *et al.* 1991). In a study of early childhood collaborations (Selden *et al.* 2006), intensity of collaborative form is found to be a significant predictor of children's school readiness. Another study of clinical case management for the mentally ill reported higher levels of functioning and greater life satisfaction (Stein and Test 1980; cited in Attkisson 1992). However, in all cases, the research methodology used is not sufficient to assure that the research is isolating the effects of the service delivery form, in and of itself. What is more likely is that there is, at least, an indirect effect on these outcomes. Clients had increased access to pre-natal care or mental health services which, in turn, influenced these positive outcomes. This distinction is not just one that is important theoretically. Recognizing that the relationship is indirect, rather than direct, would help to explain the situation in which the same case management system, implemented in another community, did not have the same effect on low-weight births or infant mortality rates. In such a case, the explanation could potentially lie in the quality of the pre-natal care rather than the quality of case management.

In fact, as mentioned earlier, some studies of services for the severely mentally ill document that collaboration improved access but not client service outcomes (Franklin *et al.* 1987; Bond 1988, cited in Attkisson 1992). Another study of the use of case management in child abuse cases found no discernible impact on child outcomes (Cohn and Degraff 1982). Similarly, an experimental design evaluating case management in the national Comprehensive Child Development Program (St Pierre *et al.* 1997) found no statistically discernible differences in well-being between the group of clients receiving case management and those in the control group. The authors conclude, 'CCDP clearly was successful at organizing and delivering services to families, however, the evidence presented in this evaluation shows that the services did not have the intended impacts on mothers and their children' (p. 7). Again, though, this study does not have a clear way of describing how the intervention—*itself*—was implemented across the 21 sites examined.

Some research, however, does use more sophisticated analytical methods. In a study of US employment and training services, Jennings and Ewalt (Jennings and Ewalt 1998, 2000) construct a model that tests how administrative coordination and programme coordination are related to client outcomes, such as job placement and retention, and longer term wages. With their multivariate model, they find

that administrative coordination shows a strong positive effect on the majority of outcome measures, while programmatic coordination has a more limited (but still) positive effect. Unfortunately, the authors provide little discussion of their interpretation of these findings and, as a result, leave many questions unanswered about why different strategies of service coordination are having these quantifiable effects.

Milward and Provan's studies of mental health community service networks also explore how the structure of these networks influences client outcomes (Provan and Milward 1995; Milward and Provan 1998). Because they are primarily interested in the forces that influence network effectiveness, they develop a map of the network of organizations involved in the provision of mental health services to the severely mentally ill in each community. They probe characteristics of that network and develop the following hypotheses about the relationship between collaborative structures and service outcomes: (1) network effectiveness is enhanced when the organizations are integrated through a central authority; (2) networks that must respond to a single source of direct fiscal control are more effective; (3) other things being equal, network effectiveness will be enhanced with system stability, although stability alone is not sufficient for effectiveness; (4) in resource-scarce environments, networks are unable to be effective.

*Unresolved Issues* Scholars are beginning to explore whether or not the new public service partnerships have an effect—in and of themselves—on both citizen access and service outcomes. As these approaches gain traction, it is imperative that researchers carefully test the casual relationships they are asserting and clearly conceptualize the causal mechanisms that underpin them. They will require the use of more rigorous research methods, both quantitative and qualitative. More sophisticated quantitative modelling techniques must be used to isolate the influence of structure itself, particularly in these complex, multilevel service arrangements. More thorough qualitative analysis can help illuminate the causal mechanisms to help explain what processes create the causal relationships identified. To investigate whether or not these new forms of service arrangements influence citizen outcomes, both types of question about causality need to be explored.

## FOCUS OF FUTURE SCHOLARLY INQUIRY

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As is clear from this review, the literature exploring the collaborative public service delivery is diverse. This reflects the variation found in the field, as practitioners use an increasingly wide array of tools to work on complex, public problems. As

scholars from diverse disciplines and methodological approaches confront these complex field conditions, they have tried to respond. What has resulted is a disparate literature with two distinct streams of inquiry—one focusing on collaboration itself, the other on the consequences these new service arrangements have on organizations and citizens. Our review reveals some fundamental issues unresolved in the ongoing scholarly inquiry.

At the most fundamental level, the literature illustrates ambiguity about how scholarship should be conducted, indicative of larger debates within the academy. Much of the existing scholarship about public collaborative partnerships focuses on describing individual cases or making comparison among cases. Some scholars build upon such descriptions with inductive analysis that strives to create new propositions or theories about how service partnerships are managed. Others scholars use public service collaborations as sites for deductively testing concepts from social science theories.

Scholarship also does not come down on one side of the long-standing debate about the respective roles of individual agency and functional structures. Instead, some focus their inquiry on individuals and explore the role of leadership or strategic decision-making in the workings of collaborations and their consequences. Others try to isolate the structural form and make assertions about it, overlooking the individuals and communities that have created the collaborative partnerships. Additionally, there is no agreement about how to conceptualize the results of these complex service arrangements.

In the course of this review, we have identified questions that are could fruitfully be explored in future research: How does the purpose of collaborative service impact its implementation and its consequences? Does the level of partnership—policy, organizational, programme, front-line—and alignment among these levels influence collaboration implementation and outcomes? How does time influence how collaborative structures operate and how they produce results? How should we theorize about the causal mechanisms that link these new service arrangements to tangible results? New scholarship should explore these questions or work to resolve some of the other intellectual divides.

In spite of these challenges, the topic of public service partnerships has clear substantive importance. Governments all over the world are increasing their dependence upon collaborative partnerships to delivery public services. In part, this orientation is caused by shifting conventional wisdom about the appropriate role of the public sector. In part, it is caused by an increased recognition that the important issues of public service lie in the policy problem space beyond the purview of any one organization. In this context, it is important that researchers craft empirical work that improves our understanding of the operations and consequences of these complex service forms, informs policy formation, and hones management practice.

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