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# It's a Relationship: A Qualitative Exploration of the Challenges to Interorganizational Collaborative Relationships

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## ABSTRACT

Interorganizational collaboration is increasingly used to address social issues, but it can fail when the underlying relationships become damaged. This study explores the qualities, characteristics, and processes that can fracture collaborative relationships and the consequences of failing to correct these fractures. Using a qualitative design, interview data were collected from 19 executive directors of Canadian human service organizations. The findings highlight several challenges to collaboration and show the importance of exploring negative outcomes of inaction. An additional aim of this study is to provide strategies for building and nurturing collaborative relationships.

**Keywords:** collaboration, interorganization, relationship, interorganizational collaboration, collaborative relationship, health and human service agencies

## RÉSUMÉ

La collaboration interorganisationnelle est de plus en plus utilisée afin d'aborder des questions d'ordre social, mais elle peut échouer lorsque les relations sous-jacentes deviennent corrompues. Cette étude explore les qualités, les caractéristiques et les processus qui rompent les relations collaboratives et les conséquences de l'inaction. À l'aide d'un modèle qualitatif, des données ont été récoltées par l'entremise d'entrevues auprès de 19 directrices administratives et directeurs administratifs d'organismes de ressources humaines canadiens. Les résultats font ressortir plusieurs défis à la collaboration et montrent l'importance d'explorer les résultats négatifs de l'inaction. Un objectif additionnel de cette étude est de fournir des stratégies pour forger et entretenir des relations collaboratives.

**Mots clés :** collaboration, interorganisation, relation, collaboration interorganisationnelle, relation collaborative, services de santé et des services sociaux

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Social service organizations often engage in interorganizational collaboration to address social issues (Dunlop & Holosko, 2004; Gajda, 2004) which are too large and complex to address individually (Gajda, 2004; Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001; Winer & Ray, 1994). The term *collaboration* refers to a range of ideas and theories often focused on the “effort” of individuals and/or organizations working together to realize “ideal short and/or long-term goals” (Gajda, 2004, p. 65). Generally, “collaboration theory is comprised of the acceptable general principles and abstractions that have been generated by observing the phenomenon of multiple individuals or entities working together to develop a strategic alliance” (Gajda, 2004, p. 67). Gajda adds that “the literature makes clear that there are indeed observed facts about the development of strategic alliances for which principles of collaboration can be derived” (p. 67). In the theoretical framework she has derived, Gajda has pulled together five such “principles” that incorporate various elements of collaboration theory from collaboration scholarship (p. 67). Included in the principles of collaboration is relationship building. This is because according to collaboration scholarship, simply establishing a collaboration or engaging in the “collaborative effort” may not be enough to realize collaborative goals, no matter the determination to create social change (Gajda, 2004, p. 65).

As outlined in theories of collaboration, collaborative efforts “go through predictable stages of development” (Woodland & Hutton, 2012, p. 370) such as “forming,” “storming,” “norming,” and “performing” (see Tuckman, 1965, p. 396). Dialogue, negotiation, and other relational devices are needed to successfully navigate collaborative stages and process (Woodland & Hutton, 2012). As some scholars have argued, relationships can be more important than the formation or process of collaboration (Dunlop & Holosko, 2004; Perrault, McClelland, Austin, & Sieppert, 2011; Spatig, Swedberg, Legrow, & Flaherty, 2010). Attention must be paid to the “intra- and inter-personal needs” of the collaborative members throughout the effort (Austin, 2000; Gajda, 2004, p. 69).

Collaborative efforts that include strong, positive relationships are more likely to be successful (Austin, 2000, p. 173): achieve their goals, provide well-coordinated service, and ultimately, effect change (Nowell, 2009). However, members of a collaborative team do not always know how to foster, strategize, or prioritize collaborative relationships. This may be, in part, because more scholarship is needed on collaborative relationships (Dunlop & Holosko, 2004). The literature that does exist on collaborative relationships tends to focus on the elements and characteristics that contribute to success (e.g., Dunlop & Holosko, 2004; Perrault et al., 2011). Thus, effective and continuous communication (Lewis, Isbell, & Koschmann, 2010; Nowell, 2009; Perrault et al., 2011), trust (Lewis et al., 2010), establishing and nurturing personal connections among members (Einbinder, Robertson, Garcia, Vuckovic, & Patti, 2000; Perrault et al., 2011; Spatig et al., 2010), equal participation (Lewis et al., 2010), and balanced power (Lewis et al., 2010; Vangen & Huxham, 2003) are among the elements needed for relationships to be successful. Ultimately, successful relationships entail many factors, relational issues, and processes (Gray, 1985).

However, a number of relational issues, factors, and processes can challenge relationships, make the process of relationship building difficult, and potentially hinder collaborative success. Failing to dedicate time to the effort, competition, or a history of ill will between collaborating individuals or agencies (e.g., see Dunlop & Holosko, 2004); negotiating diverse perspectives, beliefs, and ideas (Gray, 2004); the absence of personal connections (Einbinder et al., 2000; Perrault et al., 2011; Spatig et al., 2010); lack of communication (de Gibaja, 2001; Lewis et al., 2010; Perrault et al., 2011); failing to achieve agreement on issues such as goals (Lewis

et al., 2010); and an unequal of distribution of power (Huxham & Vangen, 1996), for example, can challenge collaborative relationships. While some research has focused on challenges and tensions within collaborative *relationships* (e.g., see Lewis et al., 2010), more has highlighted challenges to collaborative *processes* in the context of the elements that create successful relationships (e.g., Einbinder et al., 2000; Huxham & Vangen, 1996). The aim of the current study, then, is to add the “observed facts” (Gajda, 2004, p. 67) of relationship building to the principles of collaboration theory by intentionally exploring the qualities, characteristics, and processes that can challenge collaborative relationships and the potential consequences of not addressing them. To this end, executive directors and those in similar roles in collaborative organizations were invited to share their experiences and expertise. While this research specifically contributes to understanding the challenges of collaborative relationships, it also offers recommendations for mitigating these challenges.

## METHODS

### Sample

In the current study, executive directors and those with similar job responsibilities were identified as potential participants. All participants provided direct assistance with or contributed to poverty reduction within the cities of Waterloo Region (i.e., Kitchener, Waterloo, and Cambridge) in Ontario, Canada. Executive directors were of particular interest because they are assumed to have a key role in collaborative efforts, including decision making, information sharing, and network building (Slater, 2008).

All recruited participants had been in their roles for several years. At the time of the interview, each participant agreed that they were involved in or had previously been involved in several collaborative efforts. They were not asked for explicit details but were invited to discuss their collaborative experiences generally. It was assumed that the participants’ diverse experiences with collaboration would enhance understanding of collaborative relationships and the issues that challenge such relationships.

Because poverty is often addressed through interorganizational collaboration, participants represented organizations that provided a variety of services to address poverty including childcare, employment support, mental health, income support, recreation, transportation, food, housing, and government. While participants represented the same sector in the Waterloo Region, each had distinct perspectives and priorities related to poverty. Since participants represented different services and geographic areas across urban Waterloo Region, a variety of perspectives was assured. This introduced richness to the study.

Identified participants were sent an information letter introducing the study, followed by a telephone call approximately one week later inviting their participation. Two declined to participate because of time constraints, leaving a final sample of 20 individuals (6 males and 14 females). Several participants were known to the researcher before the data were collected. They had participated in a previous study of poverty reduction, out of which the questions that led to the present study emerged.

### Data Collection

Face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix). The interview guide was designed to explore participants’ experiences of collaboration on the basis of how they

defined this term. Among other questions, participants were asked to discuss the qualities, characteristics, processes, and relational dynamics that can sustain, maintain, or challenge interorganizational relationship building. Each interview lasted an hour, on average. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Ethics**

The study was approved by Wilfrid Laurier University's research ethics board. Each participant was given a letter outlining the nature of the study and their rights and obligations. Participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured that their information would be kept confidential.

### **Data Analysis**

On the basis of a line-by-line coding process similar to that described in grounded theory (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), open coding and the constant comparative method were used to develop a coding scheme. With the aid of NVivo software (QSR International, 2008), all transcripts were systematically coded using the developed coding scheme (Richards, 1999). After all codes were generated, they were categorized into themes.

For the current article, this author subsequently re-examined the data from 19 of the 20 original interviews through the lens of collaborative relationships. Following Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), interview data were coded in two "stages" (p. 73). During the "first cycle," the data from each transcript were organized into "chunks" related to collaborative relationships (Miles et al., 2014, p. 72). After this was done, "patterns" were established and developed into themes during the "second cycle" of coding (Miles et al., 2014, p. 86).

Out of this analysis, five common themes emerged: (a) dedicating time, (b) managing conflict, (c) managing competition, (d) overcoming biases, and (e) establishing roles, responsibilities, and goals. These themes are discussed in the next section. Subsequent to analysis, transcripts were edited to replace each non-content word, hesitation ("um," "you know," "right," etc.), or redundancy with an ellipsis ("...").

## **FINDINGS**

Participants identified five main challenges to collaborative relationships: dedicating time; managing conflict; managing competition; overcoming biases; and establishing roles, responsibilities, and goals. Although presented separately, these challenges often overlap in practice and have complex consequences when they are not addressed. Anonymous quotations from the transcripts are presented to highlight issues that were important to participants.

### **Dedicating Time**

Many participants said that collaborative relationships cannot be successful without the intentional investment of time. This kind of effort to nurture relationships must be made; otherwise, they will break down.

You got to nurture it, you got to create time, you got to dedicate time to it.

[Collaboration is] a relationship really, if you think about it. So, if you don't put time and energy into a relationship, you're not going to have a relationship.

Most relationships are fairly difficult to maintain on an ongoing basis and that has a lot to do with just the energy that has to go into it. The relationship needs to be monitored, it needs to be invested, and you have to take the time . . . you can't simply set [a collaboration] up and just ignore it, because it will break down. Most human interactions at a social level [are] a lot of ongoing work and relationship building, right?

Another participant echoed these sentiments:

Collaboration is harder than you think it is, and it takes a lot longer than you think it's going to take.

Despite these sentiments, several participants mentioned the difficulty of finding time or prioritizing intentions toward nurturing relationships. The data suggest four aspects of relationships that are interconnected with the challenge of time: (a) time for collaboration, (b) time for building values, (c) time for communication, and (d) time for nurturing relationships outside the collaboration.

**Time for collaboration.** A number of interviewees stated that they and other collaborative members found it difficult to make time for relationship development or maintenance:

You don't have time, maybe this and that report need to get done . . . well, pick up the damn phone and say, "Hey . . . this is what's going on here. I'm really crazy busy but I think we need to touch base. These are the times that are good for me, what's good for you?" And stick to it . . . do not push it off . . . it's a relationship . . . it's like any friendship, romantic relationship, familial relationships. Why should a business relationship be any different?

As this respondent suggested, interactions and relationships are difficult to sustain without intentional, eager involvement and a willingness to invest the time necessary. Several interviewees noted that relationship building is a slow process and members who fail to realize that relationship building takes time can become frustrated:

It's slow, right? And I think people struggle with that sometimes. That kind of work takes time, because it's about relationship building . . . I think sometimes people get frustrated with the process.

Many participants stated that face-to-face meetings and other collaborative activities are important to sustain relationships, but the additional time required for arranging and attending these meetings was difficult. Nevertheless, as one participant noted, members must invest time:

We've got all kinds of great relationships, but if you don't foster it, if you don't nurture it, if you don't actually meet, if you don't develop it, it kind of dwindles off and we've seen that over time with different partnerships.

**Time for building values.** Several participants claimed that relationships are hard to sustain without values, such as trust, respect, and honesty. Without trust, for instance, members find it challenging to speak honestly, which is important when collaborating "with an organization which you typically see as competition [for funding] or worse" as one participant noted. Another added,

When trust isn't there, collaboratives move very, very slowly.

As one participant warned, however, it “takes time” to “develop those bridges, and to build the trust, and to get everybody at the table where they’re speaking openly and honestly and they’re not easily offended and those types of things” and added that the time needed is often “underestimated.”

**Time for communication.** According to some interviewees, relationships can become challenged and difficult to sustain without regular communication between members and with the larger group through phone calls, email, and face-to-face conversations. Without regular communication, relationships can lose steam. One participant stated that communication is one of the “basics,” like “openness and honesty,” and that each member must “be willing” to build it into the collaborative process. One interviewee added that “sometimes the time runs out and you don’t meet with people,” suggesting that the opportunity to engage in collaborative activities to engage in communication can be lost.

**Time for nurturing relationships outside the collaboration.** Relationships were difficult to sustain if efforts were limited to formal collaborative activities and members should volunteer their time to attend events or engage in other activities outside of the collaboration where they can get to know their collaborative partners. One participant explained that their organization has “all these great collaboratives and all these partnerships and things, but we haven’t done it on a 40-hour week.” Others noted, however, that this additional time can itself be a challenge:

I don’t have the energy for that stuff. Sometimes because you’re so busy with the day-to-day stuff, you don’t have the energy or the time to put in.

### **Managing Conflict**

According to a number of participants, although conflict within collaboratives and relationships is inevitable, it can “destroy” them. As one participant said,

If we’re sharing an incredible relationship today, all it takes is one issue or one incident to totally destroy that collaborative effort.

One participant stated that if members are not “willing to sit down and try and resolve the issue,” then the issue can become “some big, blown-out-of-proportion problem.” Indeed, another participant spoke of an instance where conflict was not addressed immediately and thus could have destroyed the relationship:

If [they] hadn’t come to me, it would have festered and it could have been the end.

Another said that members should discuss conflict so that they are not “surprised” by it. Further, several respondents stated that having too few protocols or no protocols for solving conflict within collaboratives is problematic for relationships. The responses suggested that collaborative members do not always take the time to establish protocols and that not doing so can catch members off guard and hinder conflict resolution and ultimately the collaborative effort itself.

### **Managing Competition**

**Collaboration among competing organizations.** Participants repeatedly highlighted the excruciating challenge of building relationships with members of competing organizations. Many participants said that

competition is inevitable when funds are limited, but collaboration is also crucial for organizations that address complex social issues such as poverty. A few interviewees said that the funds they compete for are often the same funds that support collaboration. Participant responses suggest that this paradox can make relationship building exceptionally complex and challenging. In some cases, said one participant, it causes members to engage in “jostling for position” instead of finding commonalities and truly collaborating. Relatedly, another participant said that “in the face of intense competition,” it is difficult to try to “remain collaborative and open and non-threatened.” Similarly, it is difficult not to be “threatened” or “triggered” when competitive partners collaborate.

A few participants made it clear that collaborating members should avoid competing for the same funding:

If people were to start applying for money that we’ve received, that would start to deteriorate the relationship a little bit, because it affects the programs that we run.

The same participant added that applying for the same monies can cause ill feelings like “resentment.” It is important to note that forging relationships with competitors is difficult, and these relationships are not always successful:

One of the things that I believe has happened historically is, as not-for-profits, we depend on funding, and to access funding is a very competitive process. So, often we are competing for funds with the same people we are trying to collaborate with, so sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t.

**Revealing and relinquishing personal agendas.** Competition can inhibit genuine and honest communication and ultimately damage relationships. This is problematic because positive relationships are founded upon openness and honesty about members’ professional and personal motivations and agendas. Paradoxically, several interviewees stated that a lack of trust in the collaboration makes it challenging to reveal personal agendas. Competition, especially for the same funding dollars, can prevent members from sharing their agendas, biases, and ideas:

In some cases, I hesitate ... because I have an idea that I want to move forward and because there is a sense of competition, there’s almost that fear of someone stealing your idea.

### **Overcoming Biases**

Pre-existing knowledge or ideas about other agencies, as well as different philosophical beliefs about social issues, can impede relationship building, according to a few participants. Several participants claimed that relationships are difficult to sustain if biases and negative attitudes toward partners are not put aside or addressed. One participant said that members must “recognize that [other] approaches are appropriate, or they feel [these approaches] are appropriate for them, and get over it.” Another claimed,

Being very rigid in terms of your thinking and not exploring things from another perspective can make [relationship building] more challenging.

Indeed, members who fail to understand others’ perspectives can cause relationships to fracture, as one interviewee stated:

We really have to understand what’s important to them. ... You have to be prepared to expand your approach a bit or there won’t be that relationship or that trust or that integrity.

According to a number of participants, members must overcome differences and find ways to work toward common goals. Otherwise, relationship building can become strained. As one participant explained,

There are other collaborations we've been involved in that we don't have strong relationships just because we're different characters, or have different ways of doing things, or people don't get along. At the end of the day, it's between people, not organizations, so those [relationships] fall by the wayside.

Another participant similarly claimed that when members do not like one another, relationship building can be impeded:

If you like the person or you find a good communication with the person, it's almost like you seek out areas for collaboration. If you don't know anyone, or worse, if you know someone but really don't like them, it's human nature, you're not going to go there.

Regardless of biases or feelings about one another, one participant claimed that within collaborative relationships,

There has to be mutual gain; otherwise, it's a transaction, not a collaboration, and it's not sustainable.

### **Establishing Roles, Responsibilities, and Goals**

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of establishing clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and goals at the beginning of a collaboration. Roles and responsibilities can include what each organization will contribute (e.g., time, financial support), as well as a commitment to provide them. Without such clarity, relationships can become damaged. As one participant said,

I think the most important thing is to be very, very clear and complete right out front about what the expectations are on the relationship so that people don't end up frustrated or disappointed.

According to one participant, relationships will "start to flounder" when members have not articulated their goals. Another added,

Some collaboratives are very messy and difficult in terms of personalities and lack of direction. I've been on some that have just wandered around in the wilderness for years and you want to pull your hair out.

Clarifying directions and goals that should have been already established can frustrate members and strain relationships. Moreover, a lack of direction delays progress since time must be devoted to these efforts rather than achieving goals.

[It's great] if you build a good relationship where everybody knows where they stand, what they are doing ... If you've been sloppy somewhere along the line, then it can be hell ... Then you're spending all your time trying to fix it.

Reaching consensus around goals "is difficult and takes time," said one participant. The time seems worth it since one participant noted that when goals "change," relationships can be "ripped apart." Indeed, in some cases, members may simply stop coming:

Your collaborators [need to] have a similar kind of vision. If they don't, then they just fall off the wagon anyways.

Further, as one participant stated,

If it's going in the wrong direction, then I don't show up.

Participant responses suggested that roles, responsibilities, and goals should be documented to mitigate some of these challenges. Otherwise, members can get "burnt," as one participant claimed. Another stated that members can become frustrated:

I think part of it is just clearly articulating the structure and the mechanisms. So having those really boring pieces of documentation in place are very key because when people don't understand how to fully participate or engage in collaboration, I think it can become frustrating very quickly.

## DISCUSSION

Failing to recognize, mitigate, and respond to challenges in collaborative relationships can damage relationships and cause collaborative efforts to be unsuccessful. This study adds to the literature by intentionally highlighting the challenges that can emerge within collaborative relationships and the consequences of failing to attend to them. As participants suggested, collaborative relationships not treated like any "friendship, romantic relationship, [or] familial relationship" can "break down." Nurturing relationships, however, requires "time," "energy," "effort," and intentionality, and members who fail to realize this can become frustrated. Without the investment of time, it is difficult to achieve relationships characterized by trust (Dunlop & Holosko, 2004; Lewis et al., 2010; Vangen & Huxham, 2003), respect, or honesty. Moreover, it is immensely challenging to collaborate with competitors. Successful relationship building must include ongoing communication (de Gibaja, 2001; Huxham & Vangen, 1996; Lewis et al., 2010; Perrault et al., 2011), which often takes place through informal and formal networking (Dunlop & Holosko, 2004; Einbinder et al., 2000; Lewis et al., 2010; Perrault et al., 2011) and personal connections developed outside of collaborative activities (de Gibaja, 2001).

But again, these activities take time. Without these relationship-building activities, collaborations are difficult to sustain and unique opportunities to collaborate may be lost. According to participants, collaborating members should expect the process to be difficult and not underestimate the time needed to build and nurture relationships. Finding time will be difficult but necessary so that collaborative relationships are nurtured and not treated like an add-on to existing work. Members must specifically dedicate time to building values such as trust, respect, and honesty through authentic, difficult conversations during regular face-to-face meetings. Members should also be willing to volunteer time to activities outside of the formal collaborative effort (e.g., attending one another's agency events).

Competition, while inevitable, can be a substantial challenge for collaborative relationships. This is particularly true among social service agencies, many of which are nonprofit, where competition for limited funding makes it difficult to forge relationships (Dunlop & Holosko, 2004). Collaborative members often simultaneously collaborate and compete with the same partners, and navigating relationships within this context is crucial and yet challenging and difficult. Members often have personal or agency-based agendas

and “constraints” on limited resources, such as funding and time (Perrault et al., 2011, p. 290). In this study, a few respondents claimed that settings characterized by intense competition can strain or inhibit relationship building. Members must spend time, then, seeking commonalities instead of what one participant described as “jostling for position,” paying attention to when they feel threatened or triggered by competition, and making every effort to avoid competing for the same funding as collaborative partners.

If members are not open, honest, and authentic, particularly with regard to their professional and/or personal motivations and agendas, it can be difficult or even impossible to build collaborative relationships and overcome the challenges associated with competition. A lack of transparency can inhibit authentic communication and challenge relationships. This is made more complex when motivations or agendas are driven by differing beliefs or philosophical perspectives about how social problems should be understood and addressed. Thus, members must be open and understanding toward one another (Perrault et al., 2011). As Gray (2004) notes, relationships can fracture when members refuse to understand one another’s perspectives, or “frames,” when considering issues or choosing interventions and cannot find ways to work together (p. 167). It may take many conversations and the development of personal connections between members for them to truly understand one another’s perspectives.

The absence of personal connections (Einbinder et al., 2000; Perrault et al., 2011; Spatig et al., 2010) and communication (de Gibaja, 2001; Lewis et al., 2010; Perrault et al., 2011), then, can be problematic. Not only does it reduce the opportunity for members to truly get to know one another, but those unwilling to communicate and build informal relationships and networks can become outsiders to the collaborative process and miss opportunities for its improvement (Lewis et al., 2010). Further, an unwillingness to overcome past negative experiences with collaborative members or agencies or to relinquish biases can negatively influence current and future collaborations (Dunlop & Holosko, 2004). Members must commit to open and difficult communication and attempt to reveal and/or relinquish agendas so a clear direction for the collaborative can be established.

As the current and previous research has shown, members can become frustrated or disappointed by failing to define the parameters of the collaboration, including member roles, responsibilities, and needs (Huxham & Vangen, 1996; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). When parameters are undeveloped or unarticulated, there can be what participants described as a “lack of direction,” delayed progress, frustration, and lost time fixing sloppiness instead of time directed toward other collaborative activities. When members become frustrated, relationships can “flounder.” Articulating these parameters is important, but so too is reaching agreement on them. Unanimous agreement on issues such as goals, while valued, is difficult to achieve (Lewis et al., 2010). However, it is worth the effort because, as participants noted, relationships can be “ripped apart” when goals “change” or the collaborative goes “in the wrong direction.” In some cases, however, rather than attempting to reach agreement around decisions, some members instead choose to leave the collaborative (Lewis et al., 2010). Members ought to be clear, as one participant said, about “where they stand [and] what they are doing.” Members must take the time to achieve consensus around goals. They must also make goals as well as roles and responsibilities clear. This should ideally take place at the beginning of the collaborative effort so that, as one participant suggested, members have “those really boring pieces of documentation in place” to refer to throughout the collaborative process and to prevent future damage that could cause members to become disappointed or frustrated.

The current study found that collaborative relationships and entire efforts can be destroyed by one conflict and issues that are not resolved quickly. Thus, members must establish resolution strategies early in the collaborative process (Winer & Ray, 1994); otherwise, as one participant said, they may be “surprised” by conflict if they are not aware it will happen. They may also struggle to resolve conflict or, as Lewis and colleagues (2010) found, they may leave the collaboration to avoid it. Members must dedicate time and effort to resolving problems immediately before they become “big” or “blown out of proportion,” in one participant’s words. Further, protocols for managing conflict should be established early in the collaborative process so members are prepared. Relatedly, nurturing informal personal connections between members outside of collaborative activities can facilitate openness, trust, and commitment within the collaboration (Einbinder et al., 2000) and mitigate conflict (Perrault et al., 2011).

Previous research shows that power issues can complicate relationships. For instance, organizational size can create feelings of “power” or “vulnerability” (Huxham & Vangen, 1996, p. 14). Larger, more established, or more powerful organizations (e.g., government agencies) that can provide more funding may have more authority, since “the power to dictate what the collaboration does is often felt to be in the hands of those who hold the purse strings” (Huxham & Vangen, 1996, p. 14). Yet, it is not uncommon for a member to seek power by trying “to influence and shape each other’s beliefs in the direction that they prefer” (Vlaar, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2006, p. 1630). Balanced power (Lewis et al., 2010; Vangen & Huxham, 2003) and equal participation (Lewis et al., 2010) are important for successful relationship building. Members who believe everyone has equal power feel responsible to the collaborative. They share credit and “territory,” which builds trust (Vangen & Huxham, 2003, p. 13). This sharing eliminates “free riding,” in which an individual member benefits from others’ efforts without contributing (Einbinder et al., 2000, p. 135). Members, then, ought to be aware of and monitor power.

The aforementioned challenges highlight some of the complexities that collaborative members must negotiate while building and sustaining relationships. There are additional issues that can challenge collaborative relationships. For instance, the already difficult and time-consuming efforts of collaboration and relationship building occur within a larger, complex environment that is influenced by policy and structural change (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). Such changes can affect individual organizations whose members are involved in the collaborative (e.g., members may leave their position at the agency) or the collaborative itself (e.g., priorities, goals, and agendas may change). Consequently, members must be prepared to renegotiate aspects of the collaboration, such as membership or goals (Huxham & Vangen, 2000).

One way to consider the findings presented from this research is that collaborating members face a plethora of internal and external challenges which have consequences—sometimes severe ones—when they are not considered or addressed. Another is that these challenges may represent an absence of success factors needed for strong relationships, especially those named in previous research (e.g., Dunlop & Holosko, 2004; Perrault et al., 2011). Either way, those involved in collaborations must be willing to recognize and respond to the qualities, issues, and processes that can challenge relationship building, and to invest the time, energy, and effort needed to nurture collaborative relationships. Regardless of their gender or the sector in which they worked, participants argued that relationships must be nurtured and the challenges attended to. While preventing and responding to challenges is necessary, it may also be fruitful to consider whether challenges, which are sometimes inevitable, ought to be considered a normal process of collaboration that

can serve a positive purpose, such as to invite members to increase communication, engage in self-reflexive processes, or terminate a collaborative effort. The findings from this study offer lessons for those involved in negotiating challenges in collaboration, so that such challenges are prevented or become constructive rather than destructive.

This study had several limitations. First, although the participants had extensive experience in collaborative efforts, the sample size was somewhat small. Second, participants represented agencies from an urban context, thus limiting the results to relationship building within that context. Future research may investigate how other geographical contexts, especially suburban and rural areas, influence collaborative relationships. Finally, participants were asked to speak generally about their experiences and therefore were not asked about the nature of the collaborations they were involved in, specifically the accomplishments or success rates of their previous collaborative efforts. Future studies may wish to concentrate on how such experiences influence collaborative relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Relationship building is a vital part of collaboration. The relationships that undergird collaborative efforts are intimately tied to collaborative success or failure. Damaged relationships can destroy collaborations. Thus, members and leaders of collaboratives and organizations should address potential issues that can challenge or fracture relationships. This study contributes to collaboration theory and the literature in several important ways. It focuses on qualities, processes, and issues that can fracture collaborative relationships, and illuminates problems that collaborative members should anticipate, thereby providing strategies for preventing and addressing these difficulties. By exploring some of the challenges, the current study offers direction for those interested or currently engaging in collaboration. It can guide them to recognize and mitigate potential issues, so that they can avoid fractured relationships and collaborations and facilitate efficient and successful interorganizational collaboration.

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## APPENDIX

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide

- 1) Can you tell me a bit about your organization?
- 2) How would you define collaboration?
- 3) Do you collaborate with other organizations?

If so, how come?

If not, how come? Go on to Question 7 (skip questions 4, 5, and 6)

4) With whom do you collaborate?

Probe: In what capacity?

5) How did you (or do you) initiate collaboration with other organizations?

6) How do you maintain/sustain collaborative relationships?

Probes: Is it easy or difficult to do so? How come? What are some of the challenges?

7) Who benefits from this type of collaboration?

Probes: Do you think that this type of collaboration is meaningful for the organization and/or the clients?  
If so, how?

8) What characterizes the nature and depth of your collaboration with other organizations?

9) What types of techniques do you use when you collaborate?

Probe: For instance, what secret formulas do you have to maintain collaboration with other organizations?  
Is there a secret formula (or a way) to engage the process?

10) Do you believe that other organizations should develop collaborative partnerships?

Probe: What are the merits and challenges of collaborative work? Do you believe that collaboration should be increased?

11) What insights or perspectives have you developed/learned on collaboration?

12) Do you feel that collaboration should be improved?

Probe: Do you feel that there would be benefits of improvement in collaboration?

13) Is there anything else you would like to say that you have not had a chance to say?