

Collaboration in social welfare

A framework for analysis

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Collaboration is a paradoxical concept in the field of social welfare. There can be little doubt that the notion is in vogue. The desirability of some form of collaborative activity has become a *sine qua non* of effective practice within the welfare professions, both at practitioner and policy-making levels. However, we know remarkably little about how collaborative activity works, why it may initially be developed, how it may be measured or even how it may be defined.

Social science research on organisations has tended to be principally concerned with *intra*-organisational phenomena. Psychologists have studied the individual in an organisation; social psychologists have focused on the relations amongst members of a group in an organisation, and the impact of a group on the attitudes and behaviour of group members; sociologists have studied informal groups, formal sub-units and the structural attributes of an organisation. There has been relatively little attempt to focus on *inter*-organisational behaviour, particularly in the application to welfare policies in Britain. This paper attempts to outline a framework for the analysis of collaborative activity, which may then be applied to a variety of welfare settings.

The significance of inter-organisational behaviour

At a broad level, the significance of interlocking networks of organisations has been established at least since the publication of C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite* in 1956, and it is now more widely accepted that it is interlocking organisations rather than individuals that are at the centre of power systems. Consumers or clients of welfare organisations are usually served, processed, changed or harassed not by a single organisation but by a number of related organisations.

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One approach to this difficulty would be to encourage awareness on the part of the related organisations of the impact of their activities upon the individual client or consumer. This is premised upon certain assumptions about the motivation of principal decision-makers, most notably that a prevailing spirit of altruism will result in co-operation as soon as individual or community needs become known. However, it may be more realistic to assume not only that inter-organisational collaboration in social welfare has no qualities of spontaneous growth or self-perpetuation, but also that organisations strive to maintain their autonomy.

From an agency's viewpoint, collaborative activity raises two main difficulties. First, it loses some of its freedom to act independently, when it would prefer to maintain control over its domain and affairs. Second, it must invest scarce resources and energy in developing and maintaining relationships with other organisations, when the potential returns on this investment are often unclear or intangible. Hence it could be posited that an agency prefers *not* to become involved in inter-organisational relationships unless it is compelled to do so, and that simple appeals to client well-being may constitute an insufficient motivation.

A much more powerful motivation concerns the realisation of organisational goals. Welfare organisations do not normally possess or control the entire complement of resources needed for their goal accomplishment. Funds, facilities, personnel or other resources may be lacking in some measure, and organisations may therefore enter into exchanges with one another to acquire needed resources. Yuchtman and Seashore (1967) go so far as to define 'organisational effectiveness' as 'the ability of an organisation to exploit its environment in obtaining resources, while at the same time maintaining an autonomous bargaining position'.

In Britain, there is a small but growing empirical literature on collaborative welfare activity. Much of this stems from 'community care' policies and focuses in particular upon the relationship between health and personal social services authorities, but the collaborative theme has also been scrutinised in other diverse fields such as child abuse, the treatment of juvenile offenders and the housing/social services interface. What has been noticeably absent is a theoretical framework to bring some order to the findings. Transfers of resources among profit-making organisations are mediated by money and behaviour may be explained in terms of economic theory and market behaviour, but these concepts do not appear suitable for explaining interaction amongst welfare organisations. This chapter will attempt to provide a more appropriate framework.

Modes of organisational co-existence

Not all organisational relationships are conducive to collaboration. Litwak and Hylton (1962) identify three modes of organisational co-existence, each with different implications for the likely development of collaboration - independence, interdependence and conflict.

Two organisations may be said to be *independent* of one another if neither needs the

other's resources to accomplish its goals, and neither is interfering in the other's goal achievement. When this occurs, there is little need for exchange between organisations, and since agencies do not generally co-operate unless they have to, one would predict a low level of collaboration. If the presence of collaboration is to be broadly accounted for, then perhaps the most general explanation for its occurrence may be found in the notion of organisational *interdependence*, where each organisation perceives that its own goals can be achieved most effectively with the assistance of the resources of the others.

Conflictrises when the goal achievement of one or more organisations occurs at the expense of the goal achievement of others. Although conflict *per se* may constrain or block inter-organisational exchange, its presence also indicates some potential for such exchange; therefore, inter-organisational conflicts may be considered a more favourable condition for collaboration than independence. Organisations may move from interdependence to conflict or vice versa, through relatively subtle shifts in goals or available resources. Molnar and Rogers (1979) further distinguish between structural and operational conflict. *Structural conflict* occurs over the basic identities and responsibilities that define a relationship, and reflects an inability to establish or maintain the basic rules or principles that govern the relationship. *Operating conflict* represents the disagreements over task expectations or role performance within an inter-organisational relationship, and can be viewed as a continual process of mutual adjustment between interacting organisations.

Given that some scope for collaborative activity seems feasible or actually exists, how can we explain any specific linkages that develop? A threefold focus is available: upon the environmental context; upon the comparative properties of an organisational network; and upon collaborative linkages themselves. These three approaches are not in conflict, but should be viewed as complementary approaches. A total analysis of inter-organisational relations would require a thorough understanding of the interplay between the variables operating on all levels, but such an analysis is dependent upon the delineation and operationalisation of these variables.

The environmental context

External factors in the environment may create the necessary preconditions for inter-organisational relations by affecting the ability of an organisation to function independently. In 'turbulent fields', individual organisations, however large, cannot expect to adapt successfully, simply through their own direct actions. Emery and Trist (1965) identify several indicators of 'turbulence' - a field containing a relatively large number of organisations; inability of agencies to satisfy the demand for services; an unstable social situation; a new programme or piece of legislation; a retrenching economy. Much of this could apply to Britain.

Although a turbulent environment establishes a context for collaborative decision-making and perhaps creates a necessity for action, the tendency of organisations to act as closed systems and resist such pressures to adapt is still powerful. In Emery and

Trist's research, it appeared that environmental pressures were great enough to induce agencies to talk together and enter a relatively loose confederative arrangement. It was not until much later, when the financial rewards for a closer relationship were tripled, that the agencies give up anything of value. Clearly the environment is important, but not of itself sufficient, to explain the existence and nature of inter-organisational relationships. More immediate factors require to be examined.

The comparative properties approach

The comparative dimension has been viewed as an initial determinant of the occurrence of collaborative activity and as a factor in its continued existence and success.

The comparative properties approach involves examining the similarities or differences of interacting groups or organisations on certain attributes or dimensions which constitute a set of conditions that continually shape the pattern of interaction. In effect, the comparative properties are seen as independent variables, and any subsequent collaborative mechanism as dependent variables. The literature identifies several comparative property prerequisites for the creation of collaborative activity.

Inter-organisational homogeneity

This variable is concerned with the degree to which the members of an interaction network exhibit functional and structural similarity. Reid (1969) takes the view that although similarity of goals is not necessary for collaboration to develop, it is likely to lead to additional cohesion, and more extensive and stable exchanges. Some of the literature on health/personal social services forums would certainly suggest that one obstacle to more fruitful collaboration is the difference in value-systems and goals amongst the participants. Whilst all may find virtue in a 'banner' goal of 'community care', the operationalisation of the goal may reveal conflicting underlying assumptions.

Hasenfeld (1972) makes a useful distinction between 'people-processing' and 'people-changing' organisations. Within the welfare field, the traditional focus has been upon the latter, whose explicit function has been to change client behaviour. Education and social work organisations are obvious examples.

'People-processing' organisations process people and confer public status upon them, and thereby shape people's lives by controlling their access to a range of settings. Examples would be Job Centres, Observation and Assessment Centres and Juvenile Courts.

'People-processing' organisations are much more likely to be involved in collaborative activity. Their *raison d'être* is the classification and disposition of clients, and the reactions to the status they confer occur mainly outside their boundaries. Staff activity will consist of transactions with clients at input, negotiations with them on a classification-disposition status at output, and exchanges with potential external recipients of the clients. 'People-changing' organisations are more likely to be insulated from the environment and from organisational boundary transactions. Hence it could be

hypothesised that 'people-changing' organisations will be less attracted to collaborative activity than 'people-processing' organisations. This notion would help to explain why, for example, social work has a poor record of 'boundary transaction' activity with organisations concerned with social security and housing.

Domain consensus

There is some overlap between the notions of organisational homogeneity and domain consensus. Any discussion of inter-organisational analysis either explicitly or implicitly deals with the concepts of domain and domain consensus.

Thompson (1967) defines it as:

a set of expectations, both for members of an organisation and for others with whom they interact, about what the other organisation will and will not do... it provides an image of the organisation's role in a larger system, which in turn serves as a guide for the ordering of action in certain directions and not in others.

Brato *et al* (1972) operationalised it as an organisation's statement as to whether or not a particular organisation should be involved in an agency formed for a specific purpose.

The establishment of domain consensus requires the resolution of some potentially difficult issues. First it requires agreement on specific organisational goals. Second it assumes a compatibility of organisational goals, philosophies and reference orientations. Finally, it requires some agreement amongst kindred professionals upon their position in a hierarchy of professionals. Clearly these will not be attained easily. An organisation's history and association with a particular problem should increase the possibility of the problem being within its domain, but even this may be insufficient to maintain the domain consensus. The public, political or other organisations may become dissatisfied with the progress of a particular organisation, question its domain and withdraw legitimacy. The manner in which in the 1940s local government lost its responsibility for both hospitals and poor law relief may be examined within this framework.

The establishment of a consensus over domain has two important implications. The most obvious is the securing of legitimated claims. Possession of a domain permits an organisation to operate in a certain sphere, claim support for its activities and define proper practices within its realm. Moreover, the authority to conduct activities is generally assumed to imply a claim upon money adequate to attain performance in a prescribed sphere.

The other implication is for collaborative activity itself, but the literature has conflicting views on this. When organisations have similar domains, they are likely to be aware of one another and to have the resources needed to help each other achieve their respective goals, but similar domains also increase the potential for territorial disputes and competition. Van de Ven (1976) proposes a concave-shaped relationship between domain similarity and collaborative activity, in which the polar ends of high and low domain similarity are unlikely conditions for collaboration, and the intermediate ranges the most likely.

Network awareness

It has already been suggested that interdependency is the most fertile ground for collaboration, but organisations must have *awareness* of their interdependence. Not only must they have knowledge of one another's existence, but they must also perceive a possible matching of goals and resources that would result in more effective goal achievement. Collaboration will also be affected by the extent of positive evaluation – the judgement by workers in the organisation of the value of the work of another organisation.

This may be affected by the length of time that organisations have been members of a network. A history of distinct administrative divisions, separate patterns of accountability and isolated patterns of training and professional socialisation all militate against positive network awareness. It is not uncommon in the literature to find not only a poor understanding of the roles of related professions and organisations, but also an unduly critical appraisal of any potential contribution. Most of the reports of inquiries into child abuse cases provide ample evidence of this.

Organisational exchange

The concept of 'exchange' can be traced back to the work of Marcel Mauss, who proposed an explanation for the seemingly one-way transfer of resources by suggesting that receipt of the gift created an obligation in the recipient. The concept, therefore, implies that no goods or services are ever transferred without reciprocity of some kind being involved. Theorists have utilised exchange notions to provide a loose conceptual framework for their analyses, but few attempts have been made to apply these to inter-organisational relationships in welfare.

In their seminal contribution, Levine and White (1961) defined 'exchange' as 'any voluntary activity between two organisations which has consequences, actual or anticipated, for the realisation of their respective goals and objectives'.

Cook (1977) points out that the problem with this definition is that it incorporates *any* form of voluntary activity, thereby rendering the term synonymous with *interaction*. She prefers to confine the concept to those situations where interactions are based upon reciprocal reinforcement – where exchange provides for *each* actor a reduction in organisational uncertainty.

An exchange analysis is fruitful because it focuses attention upon power processes, which are fundamental to an understanding of collaboration. In exchange relationships, power is linked to dependence. It is precisely because the needs of *both* participating parties need to be fulfilled by an exchange (i.e. it must be beneficial to both) that an integrated and rational system does not always evolve. There are many cases where a transfer of resources from one organisation to another may be desirable from the viewpoint of a co-ordinated system, but may be beneficial to only one party. The reluctance of the NHS to enter into unilateral resource transfers to local authorities in pursuit of a community-based scheme for some clients is an illustration of this. An exchange relation is balanced when the actors have equal power (or equal levels of dependency), but equality is not a precondition for exchange. What is necessary is that neither party is powerless in relation to others, otherwise exchange

will amount to little more than the formalisation of the clear dominance of one party over another.

Alternative resource sources

An important element in organisational exchange is the availability of alternative sources. An organisation is less dependent upon exchange relations with other organisations in its network to the extent that it has accessibility to elements it needs from 'outside' sources. In terms of Hasenfeld's (1972) 'people-processing' organisations, the availability of such alternatives will increase the discretion of personnel responsible for processing and reduce the pressure to form links with any one outlet. Without such alternatives, the organisation would be under pressure to control either its intake or its output of clients, or both. It may, for example, only accept clients for whom disposition resources are available, or it may confer a 'holding' status, linking the person to an outlet but defining him or her as unready for disposition. Hasenfeld's study of employment placement agencies found that clients for whom job opportunities were not available were more likely to be classified as requiring counselling than similar clients for whom job opportunities were available. In Britain, this framework could help to explain the functioning of observation and assessment centres, the availability of assessments and statements under the 1981 Education Act, and the continued high use of custodial options by juvenile courts.

In the comparative properties approach, the basic unit of analysis is the network of organisations, consisting of a number of distinguishable organisations having a significant amount of interaction with each other.

Such interaction may at one extreme include extensive reciprocal exchanges, and at the other intense hostility or conflict. [The] variables [...] above may help us to explain such variations. Benson (1975) puts forward the notion of 'inter-organisational equilibrium'. An inter-organisational network is said to be equilibrated to the extent that participant organisations are engaged in highly co-ordinated, co-operative interactions based upon normative consensus and mutual respect. He hypothesises that there is a tendency towards equilibrium, and argues that increases in one equilibrium component (partly covering [the variables] above) will tend to be associated with increases in the others. Similarly, decreases in one will be associated with decreases in the others.

The focus on collaborative linkages

The third and final focus is upon the actual *dimensions* of interaction or exchange between organisations. Four key dimensions tend to be used for examining linkage mechanisms.

Degree of formalisation

Several analyses have noted variations in the extent to which the requirements and characteristics of collaborative situations are made explicit. There are two main ways

in which we can attempt to assess the degree of formalisation of a relationship – the existence of administrative or legislative sanction, and the existence or otherwise of an intermediary co-ordinating body.

The extent to which an interdependency is given *official sanction* by the parties involved refers to the degree to which rules, policies and procedures govern inter-agency agreements and contracts. In social welfare settings, informal tacit arrangements occur quite frequently among organisations – cases may be referred from one agency to another and ideas can be exchanged – but formal agreements are less common. This may be in part attributable to the greater commitment required of a formal agreement, and the potential threat to organisational autonomy which it poses.

Formalisation increases as an agreement is verbalised, written down, contractual and, ultimately, mandatory. Mandated interactions involve laws or regulations specifying areas of domain, information and financial obligations, the most obvious form being one externally imposed by the legal or political system. Aldrich (1976) found that these tended to be more intense, unbalanced in favour of one of the organisations studied and associated with lower perceived co-operation.

Benson (1975) hypothesised that in voluntary, non-mandated situations, domain consensus and positive evaluation were preconditions for collaboration, and the organisations attempted to exert power as the exchange occurred. However, when collaboration is mandated by law, the roles of the interacting organisations have already been defined, and domain consensus should not be an issue.

In such situations, positive evaluation becomes a key issue for the interacting organisations. In the operation of joint finance, for example, a form of mandated relationship exists, but there may continue to be professional and organisational skirmishing over the respective abilities and perspectives of health and personal social services.

The second dimension of formalisation is the existence of an *intermediary co-ordinating body*, which offers a measure of *structural* as opposed to *agreement* formalisation. An agency may be considered 'co-ordinating' if one of its important functions is to bring about exchanges amongst other organisations. Reid (1969) distinguishes between two major strategies that may be used to achieve this – the facilitation and induction of interdependence.

The 'facilitation' of interdependence rests upon the assumption that the organisations to be co-ordinated are already close to interdependence or are ready to move in this direction. The degree of facilitation required will depend upon the degree of interdependence already present. At its simplest, this strategy could be executed by the development of inter-organisational awareness of potential interdependencies in relation to existing goals and resources.

A more common and problematic circumstance arises when a co-ordinating agency is confronted with either a high degree of interdependence or conflict among constituent organisations.

This may require interdependency to be 'induced' by effecting major changes in their goals and use of resources. This inducement may be generated by the use of

resources which the co-ordinating agency possesses or controls and which other organisations desire. In this way, for example, the Housing Corporation may be said to have brought a degree of order to the voluntary sector of housing. Alternatively, inducement may be accomplished through the use of 'power' or 'influence', whereby organisational goals are modified by external influences. For example, in the 1970s the DHSS and Department of the Environment attempted, by the use of Circular (18/74) and then legislation (1977 Homeless Persons Act), to impose collaborative activity upon local authority housing and social services departments. Such an approach may be tenuous and subject to rupture.

Degree of intensity

The level of intensity indicates the amount of *investment* an organisation has in its relations with other organisations. Aldrich (1979) identified two measures of intensity. First, the *amount of resources* involved in a relationship. Among welfare agencies, the number of services, referrals and staff support provided to another organisation are common indicators of the intensity of a relation, but measurement is much easier in the profit-orientated sector. Second, the *frequency of interaction* between organisations, although cognisance needs to be taken of the nature of contacts and the authority level at which they take place.

Most social services contacts involve boundary-spanning personnel who arrange the referral of clients, but these contacts may not be critical to organisational survival.

Rogers (1974) has attempted to develop a scale of intensity in inter-organisational relationships, ranging through director acquaintance, director interaction, information exchange, resource exchange, overlapping membership and written agreements. *Ad hoc* case co-ordination draws only minimally upon the resources of an organisation, whereas some form of 'programme co-ordination' encompasses a much larger portion. Unless the success of a venture has been clearly established, organisations will be inclined to choose the less intense situation over that which is highly demanding.

Degree of reciprocity

The reciprocal dimension to a collaborative relationship is based upon the notion of 'exchange', discussed earlier. Interactions need not necessarily be symmetrical – some parties to an exchange may have greater influence in determining the bases and conditions of the activity than others.

There are several elements of reciprocation, of which the most common is *resource reciprocity* – the extent to which the resources in a transaction (or in the longer run, a relationship) flow to both parties equally or benefit one of them unilaterally. The units of value transacted between agencies may encompass money, physical facilities and materials, and client referrals.

Information flows are also important – messages or communications about the units of exchange or the nature of the relationship. Resource and information flows constitute the bases of a social action system, but measurement within welfare settings is problematic because such transactions cannot be assigned an unambiguous value.

This is even more true of an intangible such as prestige – the judgement by workers in one organisation of the value of the work of another organisation. Indeed, where such judgements are negative, self-validating ideologies may be internally generated which negate the assessment criteria used by external groups. Collaboration will be unlikely in such circumstances.

A related notion is *definitional reciprocity* – the extent to which the terms of a transaction are mutually agreed upon, with equal contributions from all participants. Interaction is not limited to situations in which both parties set the terms of the agreement. Many welfare agencies must follow regulatory or legislative guidelines in establishing collaborative relationships, therefore many of the terms are pre-set. However, an organisation may be predisposed to joint activity, but avoid a specific encounter because there is no give and take in problem definition.

Degree of standardisation

This represents another dimension taken from traditional models of bureaucratic structure. Just as internal standardisation of procedures smooths bureaucratic operations and promotes efficiency, so the standardisation of external relations is sought by cost-conscious administrators. Two aspects of standardisation can be distinguished.

First, *unit standardisation* – the extent of similarity between the individual units or the resources in a transaction. Litwak and Hylton (1962) hypothesise that the institution of formal collaborative mechanisms requires some reliable determinant of the units of exchange and the repetition of the exchange. The argument implies that when the exchange elements are ill-defined and shifting, interaction is possible but formal interaction unlikely. Second, *procedural standardisation* – the degree of similarity over time in the procedures used for inter-organisational transactions. The intensity of interaction will have a positive effect on standardisation, because the larger the investment organisations have in each other, the more they are pushed into standardised modes of interaction for protecting their investments.

Standardisation does differ from formalisation. The latter refers to the extent to which there is an official agreement, but does not necessitate explicitness on details. An agreement that a relationship will be established may be found, but that agreement may leave open the nature and operation of the exchange.

Not all of the variables [above] are likely to be of equal significance. The resource indicator of intensity is particularly sensitive and likely to place constraints upon the others. In a situation involving large resources, one could anticipate formal agreements, standardisation of both units and procedures and reciprocal flow.

Marrett (1971) proposes two inter-organisational models. The first is characterised by a low degree of formalisation, standardisation and intensity and is represented by the kind of interaction that occurs among social welfare personnel over referrals. The second is highly formalised, standardised and intense, and is far less likely because it involves the kind of investments and commitments which organisations may not be inclined to make. Marrett argues that research is needed not so much on the first model as on the constraints to the realisation of the second.

Social change in inter-organisational networks

Given the preceding analysis, how might inter-organisational networks change in such a way as to promote collaboration? Benson (1975) identifies three sources of pressure.

Co-operative strategies

Change is sought through agreements and joint planning in which each affected social unit participates and exercises options, and any resultant network alterations are typically compromises agreed upon by the affected organisations. Such compromises will usually involve a process of negotiation and exchange through which each party voluntarily relinquishes some valued condition in exchange for similar concessions on the part of others. However, despite the frequency of co-operative strategies, the conditions for their success are restricted, since each party must hold something of value for the other party and be capable of resisting the other's demands. Agreements may cover a wide variety of products or behaviour – exchanges of funds, personnel, facilities and clients are among the most obvious, but agreements to cease disruptive and harassing activities may be of equal importance.

Incentives strategies

This constitutes the purposeful alteration of environmental constraints which may be inhibiting collaborative activity, but falls short of a directive. It may be seen as analogous to government regulation of the economy through manipulation of interest rates, tax rates and the money supply. Such a strategy may involve an alteration of the total volume of resources flowing into a network (as in the case of joint finance) or an alteration of resource channels as a means of changing priorities. Tactics such as these typically belong to an executive office or a legislative body.

Authoritative strategies

Organisations with common vertical ties may be directed to engage in joint activities that would not ordinarily occur on a voluntary basis. Relations between agencies may be precisely specified, covering the regulation of contacts, referrals, resource sharing and so forth. This is premised upon the possibility of an executive or legislative body utilising a dominant position in the flow of resources to specify the nature of programmes and linkages at subordinate levels, and not merely to encourage or reward such activities. This could cover the example of a local authority taking action to prevent 'departmentalism', as in the cases of corporate planning and the fusion of social services and housing departments in several of the London boroughs. It would also encompass attempts at national government level to rearrange boundaries in the pursuit of collaboration, such as the attempt to produce coterminal boundaries between health and social services authorities in the 1974 NHS reorganisation. Broadly, such a strategy could cover:

1. the introduction of new programmes of agencies;
2. the formalisation of linkages which had hitherto been informal or variable;
3. the rearrangement of an entire system of inter-agency boundaries and linkages.

Conclusion: a warning

This chapter has drawn upon American literature on management and the sociology of organisations to suggest an analytical framework for the analysis of collaborative activity in social welfare settings. The British approach to this important area has been unduly empirical. The usefulness of such a framework remains to be put to the test in a variety of settings. [...]

However, a provisional warning should be given against thinking that collaboration is likely to be a significant factor in resolving welfare dilemmas. Davidson (1976) has noted the paradox whereby:

commentators on the effects of co-ordination are almost uniformly pessimistic, yet co-ordination continues to be promoted as a means of providing greater rationality in the delivery of services.

Warren *et al.* (1974) have also pointed to the frequent failure of structural arrangements for collaboration in attaining tangible results. They found that out of a total of 406 reports of structured co-ordination, only 125 instances of positive tangible results were obtained, and 29 of these were simply tautological references to improved communications.

The state of the art in assessing the feasibility of successful collaboration is not well enough developed to include precise operationalised measures for the variables involved, and further research is needed on operationalisation of the concepts and on testing the relationships between them. But at the end of the day, the fashioning of collaborative relationships of substance remains a job for talented practitioners.

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