

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTNERSHIPS ADDRESSING COMPLEX CHALLENGES: A THEMATIC SYNTHESIS OF CASE STUDIES OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper reports the findings of a thematic synthesis of 11 case studies, in which two or more individuals or groups work in partnership, purposefully utilising social capital to engage in collective action towards a positive societal and/or environmental purpose. From the synthesis, a conceptual model is offered to support understanding of the characteristics of effective partnerships that may contribute to addressing complex global problems. **Approach:** The methodology used is a thematic synthesis, based on Thomas and Harden's approach to synthesising multiple case studies in the field of medical research. We adapted their method to the formation of general social theory. **Findings:** The conceptual model posits the presence of six characteristics of partnership, which occur in different combinations and to differing extents as mediated by the context, that contribute to a partnership's capacity to exchange social capital in order to address complex problems. **Originality/Value:** As society faces an increasingly complex set of global challenges, and as patterns of human behaviour become more individualistic, it will be increasingly important for the concept of partnerships to inform how organisations contribute positively to social outcomes. The conceptual model for the characteristics of partnerships in addressing complex challenges is a means to generate new understanding of this topic, and from which new organisational practices may develop.

Keywords: Partnerships, Complex Challenges, Corporate Social Responsibility, Social Capital

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Global Challenges Require Collective Action

Complex systems theory provides a lens through which to view and understand the increasingly complex set of global challenges faced by our society in the 21st century. Global challenges are problems for which the consequences can affect everyone on our planet (Tanter, 2008). While there is no universally agreed definition of the term and hence no definitive list, various non-governmental organisations (NGOs), policy institutes, and individual commentators routinely identify challenges such as climate change, global governance, wealth disparity, the effects of technology on human behaviour, social inequality, and access to education, as being challenges of this nature - see, for instance, The Millennium Project's (2024) *15 Global Challenges*. The increasing prevalence of these challenges results from the increasing influence of human actions on Earth systems (leading to the present era being called the Anthropocene), and are therefore reflective of the "increasingly tight connections between biophysical systems and socioeconomic systems" (Young, 2017, p. 4). Global challenges also reflect the effects of globalisation in meaning that "it is no longer possible to isolate or insulate developments occurring within spatially delimited areas from the interplay of forces operating in the world at large" (Young, 2017, p.4). Global challenges often inter-relate, meaning that actions to address one challenge can have consequences for efforts to address others. Consequently, what is beyond doubt is that global challenges can only be addressed successfully through joint and simultaneous action (Tanter, 2008).

There is resultant public pressure on organisations to engage their resources towards addressing such challenges; this is historically evident for national governments and international institutions but is now increasingly applicable to corporate organisations. The private sector has often seen its focus as the generation of financial value for shareholders, in accordance with the "Friedman doctrine" which holds that the obligation to be profitable is the only obligation that can properly be placed on a company (Friedman, 1970). However, in recent years the obligations of private companies in the public mind, particularly in the Global North, have broadened to

include the need to contribute to positive social outcomes (Moyo, 2019). This is evident from reading the annual reports of many publicly listed companies in countries such as the US and the UK, which now afford significant space to considerations such as “Environmental, Social, and Governance” (ESG) in demonstrating impact beyond the bottom line. Private companies, along with governments, international institutions, public bodies and authorities, charities, and community groups, are now cast as part of the necessary collective efforts to address complex global challenges.

Social Capital is Linked to Collective Action

Mustering resources within a complex network of different actors is itself a significant challenge, requiring new approaches to governance that reflect the insufficiency of national governments and existing institutions to solve problems through existing regulatory paradigms (Young, 2017). While there is an evident need for technical resources (for instance, in the example of climate change, which requires scientific and technological inquiry and innovation), how effectively such resources can be applied is a function of how effectively individuals and groups can partner to engage in collective action. Without collective action, technical resources alone will be insufficient in successfully addressing global challenges. Consequently, the concept of social capital has been invoked by scholars and policy makers to indicate the sociotechnical (rather than merely technical) nature of what is needed. Social capital is not a unitary phenomenon but rather a category of different phenomena that represent the resources upon which actors in a social situation can draw in engaging in collective action (Coleman, 1988). It might include, for instance, the trustworthiness attributable to the interactions between two or more individuals who are engaging in a transaction; it also might encompass concepts such as norms of behaviour, or the function of institutions - formal and informal - in establishing social rules and conventions; it can also include information channels used within a community (ibid.). Generally, social capital is seen not as an attribute of individuals within a community but rather as an attribute of the *inter-relations* that exist between them.

In the context of international economic development, social capital has been appealed to as a concept that can help explain the effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness) of certain economic programmes or interventions by pointing to the need for facets of social capital such as trustworthiness in how economic actors choose to engage with each other in a given market situation (Ostrom & Ahn, 2007). In essence, social capital is seen as a coefficient of the effectiveness of applying technical solutions to complex problems involving human behaviour, especially where the solution to the problem necessarily involves collective action.

Where historically we have relied on ties of kinship to generate the social capital needed to engage in collective action (Eastwood, 2021), we live in a world that sees growing globalised movement of labour and migration. We are also increasingly seeing our careers as a fundamental aspect of how we derive meaning in our lives (De Smet *et al.*, 2022). We can consequently expect an increasing need for the interactions between people who do not possess kinship ties, particularly in a workplace environment, to be characterised by high levels of social capital.

Challenges to Generating Social Capital

Sadly, at the point where our society's need for collective action built upon strong social capital is at its zenith, forces bearing down upon it are increasing our alienation from each other. Arendt (1958), drawing on the work of Marx and others, points to the increasing marketisation of human endeavour in the modern age as the basis of our alienation from each other in society:

...the people who meet on the exchange market are primarily not persons but producers of products, and what they show there is never themselves... It is this lack of relatedness to others and this primary concern with exchangeable commodities which ... [is] in striking reversal of the ancient relationship between private and public, that men show themselves only in the privacy of their families or the intimacy of their friends. (Arendt, 1958, p. 209)

The rise of the market economy can be linked to the rise of individualistic cultural norms in various parts of the world, as each of us is positioned as a human resource from which value can be derived, in competition with other human resources. This echoes the concept of the “entrepreneurial man”, as distinct from the earlier concept of the “organization man” (Gill, 2013, p. 332). Where the archetype of “organization man” sought to explain the propensity of 20th-century workers to take up a job at a single company and climb a career ladder internally, the newer “entrepreneurial man” archetype reflects the growth of neoliberal ideology, which:

...has fostered a cult of the individual that... discounts collaborative or community-centric practice. Instead, the private individual is idealized as the sole agent in her or his life and community. (Gill, 2013, p. 332)

Thus, at the point where they are held to the greatest levels of responsibility for contributing to social outcomes, private companies - along with other employers such as public sector bodies and non-profit organisations - will find unprecedented levels of challenge in generating high levels of social capital between stakeholders.

Partnerships as Sites for Generating Social Capital

What is needed is a renewed focus on the “socio” aspect of the sociotechnical challenges with which such organisations increasingly seek to engage - on the question of how best to generate high levels of social capital between people in and across organisations in order that these organisations can address complex global challenges. This consideration might appear to be addressed by the substantial existing body of scholarship which deals with the characteristics of high-performing teams (see, for instance, Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Pentland, 2012; Salas et al., 2009); indeed, the “team” is a potential site for the productive generation of social capital in an organisational setting. However, it is clearly not the only, or perhaps even the predominant, site. The realities of modern organisations include stakeholders having multifaceted identities that may not belong only to a single team, and/or possessing

peripheral membership of multiple teams. The concept of team membership is also challenged by the discrepancy between formal team membership and the lived realities of team functioning. Most definitions of the word ‘team’ include the presence of a common purpose, as might typically be codified in a set of company values. A recent poll of workers in the US indicated that only 27% of workers believe in their company’s values (Dvorak & Nelson, 2016), challenging the idea that being part of a corporate team means anything other than in name only for a significant majority of staff. Even where stakeholders feel genuine connection to their team, they will interact with each other within, across, and beyond the ‘team’ concept - for instance, during trading, customer service, public relations, etc.

We aver that a broader conceptualisation of the sites for generating social capital is needed to reflect the complexities of modern organisations. We propose that the concept of ‘partnership’ is sufficiently broad to encompass the various ways in which individuals, groups and organisations interact with each other, utilising social capital to engage in collective action. Our operationalisation of the “partnership” concept rests within the Eislerian tradition of partnership studies, with Eisler’s work on the dominator/partnership dichotomy indicating ways in which forces of domination (via the acquisition of individual power, for instance) oppose the partnership approach, which evokes hierarchies of actualisation rather than domination, more caring and human interactions, and the application of creativity by people to generate mutual benefit (Eisler & Montuori, 2001). The exchange of social capital through partnerships is therefore seen as a means by which to supersede technocratic, power-based mechanisms of social change which, as noted above, are not sufficient to address the challenges of the present day.

Existing literature on partnerships has a particularly rich vein in the field of international development. This is not surprising when considering the relationship with social capital, which is seen as a necessary element of the response to the complex global problems that international development studies frequently seek to address. In this context, partnerships are generally taken to mean external relationships between

organisations - for instance, between NGOs and businesses (Vestergaard et al, 2021). A similar inter-organisational meaning for partnerships is addressed by literature from business and management research, for instance those dealing with cross-sector partnerships (Le Ber & Branzei, 2009) or public-private partnerships (Dewulf et al., 2011). In contrast, this article seeks to employ a more vernacular and conceptually broad understanding of partnerships, to mean a situation in which individuals or groups of people purposefully utilise social capital to engage in collective action. The connection between this conceptualisation of partnerships and the utilisation of social capital is evident in research by Dhillon (2009) in an educational context and it is in this same vein that we position our work. Partnerships offer the distinction of recognising, rather than erasing, the role of the individuals involved in the interaction - reflecting the more individualistic positioning of stakeholders in modern social settings - while also pointing to the collective nature of the action in which they are engaged. It is this holonomic characteristic of the concept of partnerships that, we argue, makes it particularly suitable for this research.

Methodology for Thematic Synthesis

Having made a case for the relevance of the concept of partnerships to the generation of social capital in an organisational context, the remainder of this article reports the findings of a thematic synthesis of existing literature which sought to identify the characteristics of effective partnerships in and across organisational settings in addressing complex challenges. A thematic synthesis is a means to generate new theory from existing literature in response to a specific question or inquiry. It draws on work by Thomas and Harden (2008) from the field of medical research, which outlines the key methodological elements of a thematic synthesis:

- Identification and evaluation of relevant literature using predetermined criteria
- Qualitative analysis of literature using line-by-line coding leading to broader “descriptive themes”

- Synthesis of codes, “translating” concepts from studies into one another via “analytical themes.” (Thomas & Harden, 2008)

Thomas and Harden are clear that synthesis involves generating theory via inference rather than merely illuminating what is already present in existing studies, as might be the case for a more traditional literature review. Our choice of thematic synthesis as a method stems from the paucity of existing research on partnerships (Dhillon, 2009) and the fact that the word ‘partnerships’ has been employed variously in ways that differ from our treatment, and that much of the research that may be relevant to our conceptualisation of partnerships has not used the same terms of reference but is nonetheless relevant when sensitive conceptual “translation” occurs (Thomas & Harden, 2008, p. 3).

The criteria used to select studies for inclusion in the thematic synthesis, and to perform a “sensitivity analysis” to evaluate the quality and applicability that each study offers to the synthesis (ibid., p. 4), are shown in Table I.

Table I. *Criteria for Selection and Evaluation of Individual Studies*

#	Selection and Evaluation Criteria
1	Studies featuring primary data related to the effectiveness of two or more individuals or groups working in partnership
2	Studies taking the form of a case study
3	Studies occurring in an organisational context
4	Studies conforming to the conceptualisation of partnerships as a situation in which individuals or groups of people purposefully utilise social capital to engage in collective action
5	Studies featuring collective action serving a positive societal and/or environmental purpose

Source: Thomas & Harden, 2008

In addition, two overarching criteria were used related to the diversity of study contexts, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Overarching Criteria for Ensuring Diversity of Study Contexts*

#	Overarching Criteria
1	Studies representing a spread of different organisational / industrial contexts
2	Studies including a range of data from direct interpersonal relationships (between two or more individuals), group-to-group relationships, and inter-organisational relationships

Source: Authors

Applying these criteria, 11 studies were identified, listed in Table 3.

Table 3. *List of Studies Included*

Author(s)	Publication Year	Organisational / Industrial Context	Main type of relationships
Albats et al.	2020	Education	Inter-organisational
Brewer	2013	Policing	Inter-organisational
Calabrese	2006	Education	Inter-organisational
Calnan & Rowe	2008	Healthcare	Interpersonal
Davenport & Hassan	2020	Conservation project	Inter-group
Dhillon	2009	Education	Inter-organisational
Jamali et al.	2011	NGOs and Businesses	Inter-organisational
Larsen & Tascón	2020	Education	Inter-organisational
McKean et al.	2017	Healthcare and Education	Inter-organisational
Soderberg & Romani	2017	IT Outsourcing	Inter-organisational
Yin & Jamali	2021	NGOs and Businesses	Inter-organisational

Having identified the studies, line-by-line coding identified relevant information from their findings (which were generally taken to be the text featured in any section titled “Findings”, “Results,” etc.). Qualitative coding software was used both to allow for

online collaboration between the researchers and also, as Thomas and Harden describe, to provide a means of recording how descriptive and analytical themes were derived and the role of data from each study in their development (ibid., p. 7). This emphasis on recording aims to respond to calls such as that from Koch that qualitative research should demonstrate a decision trail, securing rigour in the process of reaching findings that possess the characteristic of trustworthiness (Koch, 1994).

Results and Discussion

Sixteen descriptive themes were developed, from which a final list of six analytical themes emerged: Ways of Working; Mutual Recognition; Conflict and Disruption; Trusting Relationships; Engaging Resources, Systems, and Structures; and Shared Values and Goals

Across the 11 case studies, these themes present themselves in different ways and in different contexts. It is not the case that all six themes are extant in the way each individual case study is reported; it may well be that the themes present differently according to context and therefore vary in their importance and application to individual cases (for instance, mutual recognition appears to be a particularly relevant and prevalent characteristic of successful partnerships that rely on cross-cultural working). We also aver that the themes may well constitute tacit components of the case in some instances, as they may be taken for granted by participants and researchers during data generation and/or analysis. They may therefore not be present in the way the case is reported but may still form a relevant aspect of the case's social setting. Taken together, these six themes present a conceptual model for understanding the characteristics of successful partnerships in which individuals, groups and whole organisations interact with each other, utilising social capital to engage in collective action to address complex challenges.

Theme 1: Ways of Working

A prominent characteristic of effective partnerships includes their ability to establish commonly understood ways of working that underpin the respective partners' actions. This includes determining means of open communication, collaboration, and engagement. In some instances, partnerships rely on formal rules in order to succeed. For instance, Davenport and Hassan (2020) outlined the role of formal legal rules in the successful partnerships at the heart of a community project in South Africa. The legal underpinnings of the partnership are not in themselves sufficient to ensure the exchange of the social capital that is necessary for the project's success, but they combine with human behaviours to ensure the legitimacy of the project. They also help to align the project with existing social structures such as leadership hierarchies inherited from the traditions and cultures of the existing local community, ensuring representation from this community in a way that meets the expectations of the project's stakeholders and allows the local community to continue to grant its approval to the project.

Conversely, in other settings, lower levels of formality are required in how ways of working are established, and flexibility is demanded of the partnership's participants. Yin and Jamali (2021) outlined how the formation of partnerships between multinational companies and non-profit organisations in China for the purpose of pursuing corporate social responsibility goals requires a continuous dynamic adjustment to power relations. Power relations in the partnerships in question are generally asymmetrical, so this dynamic adjustment helps to ensure that the partnership remains focussed on its goals while accommodating the individual objectives of the partners, particularly in light of the power wielded by the corporate partner and the corporate objectives they may hold. The unwritten, non-formalised nature of the power relation is a prerequisite element that facilitates the dynamic nature of this process.

In being so established, ways of working require open and transparent communication in order to be understood and applied consistently by partners (Jamali et al., 2011; McKean et al., 2017; Søderberg & Romani, 2017). Søderberg and Romani, in their case

of an Indian IT outsourcing company that has a mature partnership with a European bank, articulated the vital role of communication in creating transparency around the processes used by the partnership, its structural features, and the current progress of the partnership towards its goals. In the absence of such transparency, partners are likely to be more sceptical of one another and may be unable to establish and sustain the ways of working needed to make the partnership work.

Theme 2: Mutual Recognition

Partners require a level of legitimacy in each others' eyes in order for there to be an understanding of why the partnership exists and what each partner contributes to it. However, how partners form the basis for their judgement of the other partner's legitimacy may vary according to the context in which the partnership is occurring. Albats et al. (2020) pointed to sector knowledge and knowledge of market trends as playing key roles in legitimising the participation of staff from partner companies in their case study of university-industry partnerships in the US. Technical knowledge of this nature is seen as key to the corporate partners' ability to add value for their university-based counterparts as the latter seek to achieve their objectives in the context of a sector whose processes are governed by very specific rules and requirements.

While a partner must be able to demonstrate why they add value to the partnership, a key determinant of the extent to which legitimisation is successfully established is the disposition of the other partner towards granting them legitimacy. Partners' attitudes and behaviour towards each other become crucial in this regard; tact and diplomacy are dispositions that allow for legitimisation to occur, as they facilitate partners' listening to one another, showing understanding and courtesy, and not allowing differences to become sources of offence or barriers to mutual recognition (ibid.).

Legitimation and mutual recognition by partners, as well as comprising a cognitive component (for instance the analysis of technical knowledge and skills), also comprises a significant affective component. Partnerships rely on human relationships, and as

such, while they may involve stakeholders interacting professionally, they will certainly rely on them interacting personally. McKean et al., in their study of partnerships between educational psychologists, schoolteachers, and speech and language therapists working in a local authority setting in the UK (2017), pointed to the personal relationships between the various specialists, which are established and perpetuated by interactions beyond those solely related to work, as contributing to the success of the partnerships (McKean et al., p. 523).

In some contexts, personal relationships arise from shared ground - for instance, in drawing on a shared context such as that exemplified in Brewer (2013). In this case study of partnerships between different agencies engaged in crime control activities at a U.S. port complex, where previously the interactions between the agencies had been characterised by reticence to share information or support each others' efforts to control waterfront crime, a "shift" was noted following the terrorist attacks on various U.S. locations including the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. "...[T]his shift fostered a sense of inclusiveness at the Port Complex - reinforced by the notion that "everybody [was] a critical element of getting the bad guy off the street, stopping a terrorist incident, or protecting the community" (Brewer, 2013, p. 382).

An inclusive culture that supports a sense of belonging therefore supports the mutual recognition of partners, as it acts both to illuminate the value of the contribution made by the partners and to increase their propensity to see their commonality. Where partners are committed to investing time and resources generating shared experiences, mutual recognition can occur even in the absence of a prior shared context. This is the case in Larsen and Tascón's study of a partnership between two universities in Canada and Cuba (2020). The study illustrated how stakeholders from the partner organizations, while working across cultural divides, established a programme of shared learning experiences, generating close personal relationships that both enriched the partnerships and lasted well beyond the period of involvement of the respective individuals. It is possible that mutual recognition, and the diplomatic and respectful personal relations that underpin it, can be a choice of those involved in a partnership.

Theme 3: Conflict and Disruption

Davenport and Hassan's case of a community project in South Africa (2020) indicated that some forms of conflict that are destructive to the aims and effectiveness of a partnership must be managed through deliberate approaches to resolution. They observed that disputes relating to human resources had required the project partners to develop a tiered mediation system in which conflict could be resolved through the most appropriate body or authority. In general, however, the theme of conflict (where it arose in the cases) was not presented as a threat to be managed but rather was seen as an opportunity for mutual learning and innovation. For instance, in the article by Yin and Jamali (2021), a multinational corporation's proposal for a methodology for a school outreach campaign was amended by a conflicting suggestion from a non-governmental organisation (to run debate competitions rather than delivering lectures and producing informational material), the result being a more successful and engaging campaign. McKean et al. (2017) reported similar findings in their discussion of the characteristics of successful partnerships between specialists working to support students with speech and language needs: "Feeling safe to challenge and to be vulnerable developed optimal co-practice, where professionals could challenge and disagree with one another and acknowledge the limits of their own knowledge and skills without any reduction in the respect afforded them by others" (p. 523).

What is especially noteworthy here is the close connection between this form of productive conflict and the earlier theme of mutual recognition - to manage and operationalise conflict effectively in the pursuit of optimal co-practice reinforces the inclusive and mutually respectful relationships between partners, which in turn become a resource for approaching conflict positively.

While the discussion above is about conflict that results from differing perspectives among partners on how best to achieve shared objectives, it is evident that in some cases conflict can arise because the partners also hold their own individual objectives that come into conflict with each other (see theme 6, Shared Goals and Values). For instance, Yin and Jamali (2021), in describing the goals of multinational corporations

operating in China, which are generally commercial in nature, included objectives that are distinct from those held by the NGOs. However, rather than this presenting an insurmountable impediment to the success of the partnership, Yin and Jamali described how through an “either/and mindset” (p. 674), the partners navigated the distinct objectives of the respective partners by understanding each others’ goals and, through this understanding, engaging in compromises and trade-offs as needed where the objectives were in conflict (“either”) and simultaneously drawing on mutually-held objectives as the basis for “harmony, synergy, and complementarity” in the partnership (p. 688).

Theme 4: Trusting Relationships

Trust was the most frequently and consistently cited characteristic of partnership as reported in the case studies, with all 11 studies referring to it in some way. Trust was seen as being closely connected with the related concept of respect; for instance, for Calnan and Rowe (2008), whose case examined trust relations between clinicians, patients, and managers in the U.K.’s National Health Service, trust was earned through the partners’ mutual regard for each others’ competence and professionalism. Key to the earning of such trust was stakeholders’ direct interpersonal experience of each other (Calnan and Rowe, 2008, p. 100). Time spent together, experiencing each others’ contribution and thereby building mutual respect, is a key mechanism for the development of trust. This is echoed in the article by Larsen and Tascón (2020), wherein time spent in each others’ company served to build personal connections that fostered interpersonal trust, especially across a cultural divide (p. 101). Likewise, McKean et al. (2017) observed noticeably stronger and more trusting relationships between professionals who had worked together for longer - and conversely, that trust could be damaged by the failure to foster and facilitate such relationships (p. 521).

However, across the studies there is evidence that different types of trust exist that may or may not rely to the same extent on individual interpersonal relationships. Brewer made the distinction between “communal trust norms” and “exchange trust norms” (2013, p. 378), the former being based on interpersonal characteristics such as

concern for one another's wellbeing and anticipation of each others' needs. While communal trust norms were noted to be important in Brewer's two cases, to the point where their absence in relation to one of the cases made it challenging for the partnerships to be effective (p. 388), the same was true also of exchange trust norms, which Brewer defines as "...shared beliefs that individuals and/or institutions are trustworthy if they conduct themselves in ways that are consistent, predictable, competent, orderly, and also fulfill commitments in a timely/efficient manner" (p. 378).

The importance of exchange trust norms includes that they may exist in the absence or paucity of communal trust norms; that is, they do not depend necessarily on a warm interpersonal relationship that has resulted from time spent together in person, because they focus on the issue of whether the other partner will fulfil commitments. They do, therefore, depend on perceptions about how committed the partner is. Albats et al. (2020) found that a characteristic of effective partnership management professionals was that they were "ecocentric", meaning that they "[care] about the needs of a collaborative ecosystem and not solely the needs of the company he/she is serving" (p. 11), such that they have been able to meet the needs of the partnership in the past and are motivated to continue to do so. Exchange trust norms are therefore closely associated with the concept of shared ownership, whereby partners are invested in the partnership and able to recognise the same investment in the other party.

With trust established through shared ownership, partners are able to enjoy the opportunities for reciprocity that an effective partnership brings. The most cited manifestation of this reciprocity in the studies was the capacity for partners to learn from each other (Calabrese, 2006; Jamali et al., 2011; McKean et al., 2017; Larsen & Tascón, 2020). Jamali et al. (2011) presented a series of case studies based on partnerships between businesses and NGOs in the UK, in which participants noted the complementarity of skills and knowledge that existed between the partners and how sharing of ideas led to the creation of new opportunities (p. 386).

Theme 5: Engaging Resources, Systems, and Structures

Dhillon (2009) examined the role that engaging resources, systems, and structures plays in making a partnership sustainable. In a cross-organisation education partnership facing an absence of external funding, it was the willingness of the partners to engage their own resources that enabled it to flourish. The partnership had originally come together to seek joint funding from the U.K. government, but when its funding bid failed they determined that the basis for a partnership was still present and committed jointly to establishing shared resourcing - for instance by allocating an administrator to provide support to the partnership, and by one of the partners offering his organisation as a free-of-charge venue for events (p. 698).

Resource allocation may therefore involve a degree of risk, as partners must commit resources upon the reliance that this will be reciprocated. However, it is precisely this risk-taking that enables innovation and adaptability such that the partnership becomes sustainable. In Yin and Jamali's (2020) case, a multinational corporation working with a non-profit to pursue a clean water initiative in China realised that the non-profit did not have sufficient resources to make its programmes effective, and chose to utilise its own resources (for instance, by engaging its workers as volunteers and inviting its supply chain partners to join the initiative) in order to ensure its sustainability (p. 686). The willingness of partners to allow some degree of permeability between each others' resources and systems is key to a partnership surviving changes to the circumstances that first led to its establishment.

Theme 6: Shared Values and Goals

Across the cases, it was evident that partners often shared a set of values with each other that enabled the partnership to grow and develop. Dhillon (2009) found that the values held in common between the partners acted as a form of "bonding social capital" (p. 699), particularly at the core of the network where a small number of individuals acted to hold the partner organisations together. The partnership was therefore able to exist across a broad network of peripheral individuals and groups even where ties between these peripheral participants were weaker, because comparatively the ties at

the centre of the network were strong given their shared values - which in this case focus on a shared “passion for widening participation” in learning in the later stages of secondary education (Dhillon, 2009, p. 699).

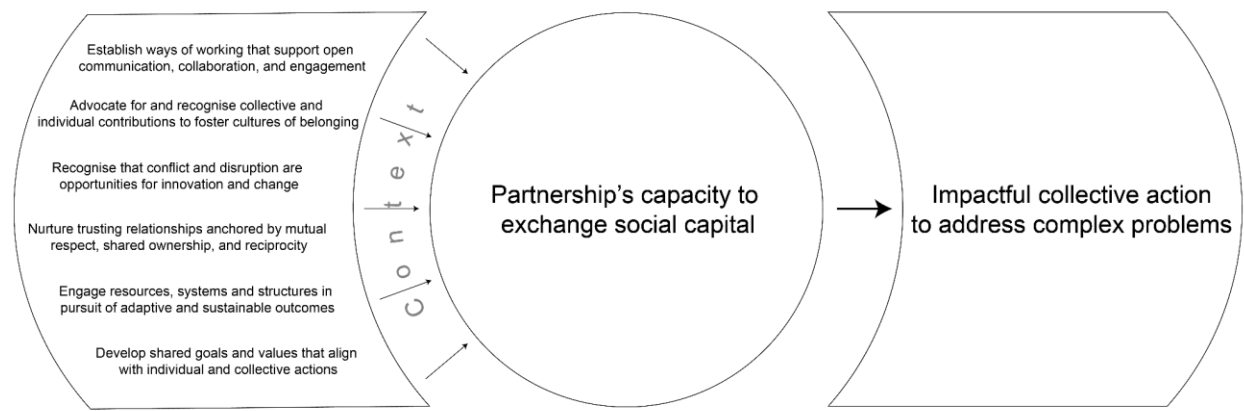
Within the cases, the existence of a shared goal was axiomatically a key precursor to the possibility of collective action. Calabrese (2006) identified the success of a school-university partnership as being rooted in a common goal around the value of appreciative inquiry, with teachers at an underperforming inner-city high school in the US working with researchers at a local university to uncover what practices could lead to student success. The author posited that the appreciative inquiry undertaken could be seen as playing a role in the subsequent turnaround in student performance. However, what is especially notable about the shared goal is that it emerged from individual goals held by the partners; the teachers’ interest was in “learn[ing] how to work with students” at the school, whereas the researchers’ need was for a “substantive action research experience” (p. 179). It can therefore be seen that the goal shared between the partners was at the confluence of their respective individual goals, and that finding a common basis for the work of the partnership was supportive of, and not at the expense of, the partners’ individual aspirations.

Similarly, Jamali et al. (2011) found that the more successful of the six partnerships they studied featured motivation that was not merely a vague aspiration towards philanthropy, but rather was integrated within the specific strategic needs of each partner. For instance, in a youth project to address antisocial behaviour at a supermarket, the result of the partnership was seen as a ‘win-win’, as it benefitted various stakeholders simultaneously: fewer insurance claims for the corporate partner, greater focus of resources by the NGO, and increased safety for customers (p. 386). This ‘win-win’ characteristic demonstrates that shared goals in successful partnerships generally do not sublimate partners’ individual goals, but rather are inclusive of them, demonstrating added value that provides iterative reinforcement of the partnership over time.

A Conceptual Model of Partnership Characteristics

The six analytical themes identified from the selected case studies inform a model for understanding effective partners that engage social capital in order to address complex challenges. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Model of Partnership Characteristics*



As noted above, the six characteristics do not occur in identical ways or to the same extent in every instance of a successful partnership. The precise ‘recipe’ for the partnership relies on different combinations, and they play roles to varying extents where each is deployed. The deployment of the characteristics is therefore to be seen as highly dependent on context, and the arrows between the left and central segments in the above model are designed to illustrate the mediating role that such context plays.

The importance of the model is in informing an understanding of what characteristics may be required to form the types of partnerships that will be increasingly demanded of companies and other organisations as society holds them to a growing level of accountability for their social impact. Such partnerships may be needed at an inter-organisational level; they may also need to be built within organisations, or between individual professionals, especially in the event that it continues to be challenging to

engage organisational stakeholders in collective action in the face of a growing culture of individualism.

Conclusion

As complex global challenges continue to arise, effective partnerships will be key to addressing them. This article has provided a conceptual model for six characteristics of partnerships addressing complex challenges. The characteristics speak to the capacity of partnerships to exchange social capital, which is key to their utility in the process of engaging in collective action. They are a means to develop new understandings of the role partnerships can play in addressing complex challenges, and to generate new organisational practices towards the creation and furtherance of such partnerships, for the betterment of society and our planet.

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