

## Organizational Choice and Key Questions for Forming Partnerships

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Partnerships receive significant attention in public administration scholarship, with the mass of this literature focusing on whether partnerships work, how to make them work, or how they fit into existing institutions (Provan and Milward, 2001; Vigoda, 2002; McGuire, 2006; Thomson and Perry, 2006; Andrews and Entwistle, 2010; McQuaid, 2010; O'Toole, 2015). Although partnership has been used variously by different scholars, in general, partnerships refer to formal arrangements between two or more organizations that are characterized by defined responsibilities, obligations, and/or governance structure, as compared to other forms of cooperative behaviors which may be more informal, unorganized, or involve few obligations. In general, existing scholarship on partnership formation argues that partnerships are a function of resource-exchanges, available partners, or fragmented authorities, and assumes a pragmatic managerial approach to these arrangements (Grady and Chen, 2006; Feiock and Scholz, 2009). However, scholarship is limited in linking these mechanisms together and explaining how organizations go from isolated and autonomous to integrated and interdependent. As such, it is difficult to determine how initial decisions in the partnership process eventually lead to success or failure in collaboration. Furthermore, much of this scholarship is written with a solely academic audience in mind, making difficult for practitioners, non-academics, or non-subject area experts to consume.

To remedy this, we use Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) Garbage Can Theory (GCT) of organizational choice as a guiding framework to identify key issues that affect partnerships formation and tie this disjointed set of literature together. We then synthesize these issues into three key questions that can be operationalized by practitioners: 1) is there a problem that cannot be managed unilaterally?; 2) what new capacities are needed?; and 3) what partnership opportunities are there? From this perspective, forming partnerships unfolds in organized anarchies, where decision-makers must sort through ambiguous problems, solutions, and participants in order to determine if partnership is the right choice for their organization. In general, the purpose of this discussion is to identify and examine key issues that likely affect partnership choices made by practitioners and that can provide guidance to those who are considering engaging in collaboration or partnership. Finally, we discuss links between partnership formation and broader understandings of collaborations and networks.

**Keywords:** partnership formation; collaboration; organizational choice

### Partnerships as Organizational Choice

In recent decades, understanding the why's and how's of managing public services through multiple linked organizations has been at the center of the public administration research agenda. Contemporary literature in this area mainly focuses on inter-organizational ties as an independent variable and implications for organizational performance, management strategies, and normative questions for the administrative state. On the other hand, scholarship focusing on partnership as a dependent variable argue for pragmatic bureaucrats that seek resource exchanges and work with who is available (Graddy and Chen, 2006; Lee, Lee, and Feiock, 2012b; Park and Rethemeyer, 2014). In general, scholarship contends "there may be good political reasons to add actors to implementation arrangements to reduce threats or increase support for programs...or as part of an effort to distance state-centric institutions from contentious policy issues" (O'Toole, 2015, p. 364). Normatively, shifts in the intellectual approach to government's role in society contribute some understanding as to why concepts such as hollowed-out state, joined-up service delivery, and multi-dimensional governance have emerged in practice (Kettl, 2006; Osborne, 2010; Hill and Hupe, 2014). As a whole, scholarship is cautiously optimistic about how partnerships, collaboration, and networks affect public services (McGuire, 2006; Thomson and Perry, 2006; McGuire and Agranoff, 2011; O'Toole, 1997, 2015).

However, a common criticism of scholarship on both partnerships and networks is a lack of theoretical frameworks to integrate the array of nuanced findings (O'Toole, 2015; Kapucu, Hu, and Khosa, 2017). Research on partnership formation suffers from the same limitation; although there is some

existing scholarship that takes initial steps in this direction (Graddy and Chen, 2006; Thomson and Perry, 2006). One potential solution to this problem is to examine partnership formation as a special case of organizational choice, where distinct institutional settings shape how decision-makers interpret their responsibilities and actions (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972). As social relationships are a key component of collaboration, partnership formation is likely similar to other organizational choices made in organized anarchies, where there is a lack of linear logic or coherent structure. While hierarchy and markets surround public agencies as organizational principles, partnerships are principally driven by the need of an alternative to more conventional mechanisms by which public agencies interact with other organizations to solve public problems. On one hand, thinking about organizational choice in this way is in keeping with the environment in which partnership choices are made, which tend to be defined by complex administrative situations that function outside of conventional hierarchies (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; O'Toole, 2015).

On the other hand, it also recognizes that partnerships are steeped in ambiguity (i.e., different and often competing ways of thinking about the same phenomena) (Zahariadis, 2014). In other words, the pros and cons of partnerships can be thought of in a lot of different ways and there are no clear right or wrong answers, which influences how policy actors approach collaborating with others. For example, Boswell and Rodrigues (2016) find that cooperative relationships between local and national organizations are influenced by how interactions between policy, politics, and problems shape the way policy actors view the context of implementation. Suffice it to say, more information may provide clarity to the questions underlying partnership choices, but it rarely provides answers. While there are alternative frameworks to examine organizational choices, the basic ideas of GCT provide theoretical grounding to the pragmatic nature of partnerships and the unique circumstances that are required for them to materialize (Cohen, March, Olsen, 1972; Bendor, Moe, and Shotts, 2001; Olsen, 2001). As such, GCT provides a way to integrate disjointed scholarship that examines both the systematic factors that increase the likelihood of partnership formation and the serendipitous nature of partnerships that appear to occur as much by chance as by design by focusing on a few central structural components that unpack the complex decisions that practitioners make.

From this perspective, organizational decisions result from “a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work” (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972, p. 2). As such, organizational decisions are a function of several relatively independent streams related to problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities, which move through a primordial soup waiting to be coupled together at opportune times (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972; Kingdom, 1995; Bendor, Moe, and Shotts, 2001; Olsen, 2001; Zahariadis, 2014; Herweg, Zahariadis, and Zohlhofer, 2018). While there are many nuances, existing scholarship suggests these apply to partnership in the form of: *problems*, related to complex policy problems that may require collective action; *solutions*, related to needed capacities to overcome organizational limitations; and *participants*, related to organizations available for partnerships (McGuire, 2006; Thomson and Perry, 2006; McGuire and Agranoff, 2011; O'Toole, 2015). While highly interrelated, these represent distinct factors affecting partnership formation decisions, where the many ways in which managers can think about these problems, solutions, and participants cause ambiguity.

In organized anarchies, ambiguity arises from three properties: problematic preferences, unclear technology, and fluid participation (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972; Ostrom, 1998, 2000; Bendor, Moe, and Shotts, 2001; Olsen, 2001; Peters, 2005; Sager and Rielle, 2013). Specific to partnerships, ambiguity is caused by vague organizational and/or shared goals, uncertain organizational capacities, shifting availability in partners, or unclear collaboration technology (i.e., processes and techniques for collective action). Furthermore, when partnerships include multiple organizations and become structurally more like networks, ambiguity increases as decisions parameters become more complex (Huxham and Vangen,

2000; Teisman and Klijn, 2002; Kelsey and Spanjers, 2004; Thomson and Perry, 2006; Noordegraaf, 2007; Stazyk and Goerdel, 2011; Davis and Stazyk, 2015). Additionally, there is an important temporal dimension that exists and “who pays attention to what and when is critical” (Zaharidias, 2014, p. 68). Often, problem parameters are shifting, causal pathways between solutions and results are unclear, and distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information strains the limits of information processing capacity. Thus, at opportune times, decision-makers find they at least partially comprehend an incomprehensible world, which allows them to make choices that are otherwise bogged down in ambiguity and uncertainty.

In practice, managers act pragmatically in responding to both internal and external organizational environments in order to form inter-organizational ties. Otherwise, partnerships fail to materialize. Although the specific purposes for which actors design and implement goal-directed partnerships or networks likely reduces ambiguity compared to the serendipitous variety, practitioners are always grappling with how to forge concrete ideas from abstract circumstances (Provan and Lemaire, 2012). Importantly, this creates a distinctive practical nature to partnerships, where they occur as much by chance as by design (Bendor, Moe, and Shotts, 2001; Olsen, 2001; Sager and Rielle, 2013; O’Toole, 2015). As such, managers sift through ambiguous conditions to clarify what purpose partnership might serve, how it can help overcome organizational limitations, and what actions it would require. Although these issues are complex, ambiguity in these streams can be effectively summed up by three key questions: 1) is there a problem that requires partnership?; 2) what new capacities are needed?; and, 3) what partnership opportunities are available?

### Identifying Literature

While collaboration, partnership, and network (as well as a litany of other terms) are highly interrelated, they represent distinct academic concepts (Lecy, Mergel, and Schmitz, 2014; O’Toole, 2015; Kapucu, Hu, and Khosa, 2017). As research in this area has increased, scholars have emphasized the need for consistency in terminology in order to clarify concepts. However, these efforts have been met with some resistance, as some scholars still tend to use terms interchangeably or alternatively define concepts. In turn, the lack of consistent terminology and conceptual applications creates barriers to comparing and compiling lessons from the literature, or even in identifying extant studies that are applicable (McNamara, 2012; Lecy, Mergel, and Schmitz, 2014; O’Toole, 2015; Kapucu, Hu, and Khosa, 2017). To this end, rather than attempt to systematically review an inconsistent and fluid body of literature, we identified seven review articles published in *Public Administration Review* between 2001 and 2015 that serve as a guide through the literature. Additionally, we also rely on two recent articles that provide a meta-analysis of the network research in public administration (see table 1). While there may be other studies in this area that are not included, we believe that these articles are generally representative of a set of core concepts, arguments, and factors that summarize the literature on partnership formation.

Review articles	Meta-analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agranoff (2006)</li> <li>• Bryson, Crosby, and Stone (2006)</li> <li>• McGuire (2006)</li> <li>• O’Toole (2015)</li> <li>• Provan and Lemaire (2012)</li> <li>• Provan and Milward (2001)</li> <li>• Thomson and Perry (2006)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lecy, Mergel, and Schmitz (2014)</li> <li>• Kapucu, Hu, and Khosa (2017)</li> </ul>

Table 1 Articles Used to Guide Literature Review

After identifying core concepts that consistently appeared, we grouped those into three categories as they related to factors that drive partnership choices in regards to problems, solutions, and participants. Then, we used a snowball technique (i.e., tracing cited sources) to sift through the source material for the reviews and meta-analysis to drill down to the core research questions examined. We identified 54 journal articles and book chapters based on these steps. Of those, 19 addressed aspects of problems, 26 solutions, and 19 participants, with seven addressing more than one. In general, this would indicate that solutions seem to be a more popular point of inquiry in comparison to problems and participants. Additionally, it appears the vast majority of scholarship only focuses on one component, which would further suggest a need to account for how problems, solution, and participants interact during partnership formation. Finally, after reviewing these articles, we distilled three key questions that serve as overarching points of inquiry that we use to frame our discussion of the literature.

In addition to our broader review, we find two notable epistemological trends that appear across much of this body of scholarship. First, the unit of analysis tends to be the organization, rather than individuals. For instance, there is a focus on identifying systematic factors that drive partnership formation, which assumes there are a series of environmental or organizational factors that increase the probability of partnerships. On one hand, this overlooks the potential micro-level social interactions that play a role in partnerships. On the other hand, it lends itself to thinking about partnership formation as a function of organizational choice, as we do here. Second, most scholars focus on partnerships that successfully form, as compared to partnership that were proposed but never came to fruition. While the latter may be difficult to identify, it may also hold some potentially significant insight to why partnerships form, especially where administrative logic and contextual factors would predict a partnership, but in reality, one never manifested (Fowler, 2019).

In interest of conceptual clarity, we bound our discussion of partnership in two ways. First, we define partnerships here as a formal arrangement between two organizations to collaborate on a specified set of functions based on explicit or implicit obligations and responsibilities and well-defined governance structures and/or organizing principles. Second, in many cases, partnerships are the building blocks of formal governance networks. Specifically, networks are a collection of interdependent organizations tied together with both formal and informal arrangements that may be based on unclear organizing principles, but that involve a set of shared interests, functions, or goals (Thomson and Perry, 2006; McNamara, 2012; Lecy, Mergel, and Schmitz, 2014; Kapucu, Hu, and Khosa, 2017; O'Toole, 2015). While previous scholars argue that partnerships are not always networks and networks are not always partnerships, these differences are more clearly identifiable during service delivery and policy governance than during the formation of collaborative arrangements (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Teisman and Klijn, 2002). As such, existing research tends to use scholarship on partnership and network formation to inform one another (Graddy and Chen, 2006; Lecy, Mergel, and Schmitz, 2014; Kapucu, Hu, and Khosa, 2017). Therefore, in the context of our discussion, partnerships and networks are so highly interrelated that any analysis of the former must consider the latter. Consequently, network scholarship permeates our examination of partnerships in many ways and provides a broader perspective on how collaborative arrangements evolve with multiple organizations.

## Key Questions

*Question 1: Is there a problem that requires partnership?*

Problem ambiguity occurs when determining if complex problems or organizational goals are manageable unilaterally or through existing inter-organizational mechanisms. If not, some form of partnership is essential to success. Consequently, most scholars identify two distinctive features of partnerships used for public service delivery. First, in principle, partnerships are organized around collective action problems or shared goals, in one form or another (Thomson and Perry, 2006; Feiock,

2013). Typically, these occur when complex problems cross legal or geographic jurisdictions and require efforts from more than one organization, but also result from limited organizational capacities (Bryson, Crosby, and Stone, 2006; Thomson and Perry, 2006; Feiock and Scholz, 2009). These complex problems take on many forms and may range from wicked problems to spillover effects (Lozano and Walles, 2007; Feiock and Scholz, 2009; Head and Alford, 2015). Climate change is one of the more prominent illustrations of the need for partnerships, where both causes and effects transcend jurisdictions and require collective action (Verweij, et al., 2006; Gore, 2010). Local economic development is another example. Although individual local agencies can pursue development goals unilaterally, efforts are more effective if coordinated at a regional-level across multiple stakeholder organizations (Gordon, 2007; Feiock, Steinacker, and Park, 2009; Lee, Lee, and Feiock, 2012a, 2012b).

Second, these problems cannot be managed through conventional inter-organizational relationships (e.g., hierarchies or markets) and require alternative mechanisms (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; O'Toole, 2015). Complex problems create dilemmas for public sector organizations where they can only exercise control over a portion of a problem that is insufficient to address the problem unilaterally (Feiock and Scholz, 2009; Feiock, 2013). However, fragmented authorities create institutional barriers, transaction costs, and power struggles that limit the utility of existing inter-governmental ties and make alternative mechanisms of organization more utilitarian, adaptable, or sustainable. These alternative mechanisms (e.g., contracting services, public-private partnership) reduce obstacles to public agencies working with other organizations and increase their control over or capacity to manage problems (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001; Ling, 2002; Thurmaier and Wood, 2002; Keast, Mandell, Brown, and Woolcock, 2004; Feiock and Scholz, 2009).

As such, practitioners should ask: 1) is the problem or goal too complex to manage alone? and 2) can relationships with other organizations be managed through conventional mechanisms? Despite the collaboration fad in recent decades, not all problems require a partnership. In fact, partnerships may hinder managerial performance in some cases (Longoria, 2005; Hodge and Greve, 2007; Andrews and Entwistle, 2010). Practitioners must understand the problem they want to solve, as well as the existing institutional mechanisms that might support those efforts. Only when they find that existing organizational capacities and inter-organizational relationships are inadequate to address a problem is partnership the right answer (Longoria, 2005). For example, Lundin (2007) finds that for simple policies that readily fit within local government missions and capacities, cooperation has no impact on policies outcomes but creates new transaction costs in coordinating organizations. On the other hand, implementation of more complex policies improves significantly when national and local governments cooperate. However, this requires managers to develop new mechanisms to cooperate in implementation, so partnerships are only an effective strategy under certain circumstances (Lundin, 2007). As such, it is incumbent on managers to develop a sophisticated understanding of the circumstances surrounding problems and whether they are manageable either unilaterally or through existing intergovernmental mechanisms.

#### *Question 2: What new capacities are needed?*

Solution ambiguity occurs when determining what additional resources or capacities are needed to manage complex problems or achieve goals. In most cases, limitations on capacities boil down to political, economic, or institutional constraints that hamper the effectiveness of public sector agencies (Bryson, Crosby, and Stone, 2006; Feiock and Scholz, 2009; Andrews and Entwistle, 2010). Capacity is a nuanced concept with numerous dimensions that may be useful for public agencies, including procedural flexibility, access to special resources or other organizations, infrastructure, operational support, or leadership abilities. Scholars typically discuss these issues within the context of resource exchanges or dependencies, which are also the most prominent explanations for partnerships. From this perspective, organizations seek ties with other organizations in order to gain access to new resources that would



otherwise be unavailable (Graddy and Chen, 2006; Lee, Lee, and Feiock, 2012b; Park and Rethemeyer, 2014). Commonly, these are thought of as tangible resources, such as funding, manpower, or infrastructure (Graddy and Chen, 2006; Provan and Huang, 2012), but intangible resources, such as credibility, influence, or information, are also valued in partnership exchanges (Andrew, 2009; Feiock, Lee, Park, and Lee, 2010; Provan and Huang, 2012). In general, resources can be thought of as a special category of capacities in as far as they are valuable to partnerships as a mechanism to address organizational limitations.

However, there is not necessarily a clear distinction made between resources or capacities across the partnership scholarship as some refer to intangible resources in the same way that others refer to capacities (e.g., political capital, leadership). Importantly, the character of exchanges, including which capacities or equity in distributions, affect how engaged organizations are in partnerships (Park and Rethemeyer, 2014). Furthermore, not all dimensions may be needed or even advantageous, and capacity can be exchanged in whole or in part (Fredericksen and London, 2000; Boyne, 2003; Brown and Potoski, 2003; Christensen and Gazley, 2008; Yang, Hsieh, and Li, 2009; Andrews and Entwistle, 2010; McGuire and Silvia, 2010; Andrews and Boyne, 2011). Generally, frameworks tend to distinguish partnership forms based on level of inter-organizational integration (Mandell and Steelman, 2003; Bovaird, 2006; Thomson and Perry, 2006; McNamara, 2012). For example, Feiock and Scholz (2009) place mechanisms for coping with institutional collective action dilemmas on a continuum based on whether they preserve autonomy (e.g., informal policy networks) or impose obligations (e.g., consolidated government). Alternatively, Teisman and Klijn (2002) argues partnerships differ based on who is making decisions, and may include scenarios where goals are set by public agencies (e.g., contracting) as well as those that allow for joint decision-making.

Organizations may only need to integrate to the extent that they have access to the most utilitarian capacities (Mandell and Steelm, 2003; Bovaird, 2006; Thomson and Perry, 2006). In practice, it is not always necessary or feasible to fully integrate two or more organizations, especially for simple service delivery functions that can be better accomplished with a contractual relationship (Mandell and Steelman, 2003; Bovaird, 2006; McGuire, 2006). For example, a local government does not need to integrate with a garbage collection firm in order to access its expertise in garbage collection or flexibility in public service delivery. Rather, a contractual agreement between a local government and garbage collection firm can provide needed capacities without creating unnecessary transaction costs. Additionally, capacities can be obtained from more than one source, so multi-organizational partnerships (i.e., networks) may be a viable option as goal or problem complexity increases (Provan, Veazie, Staten, and Teufel-Shone, 2005; Agranoff, 2006; Bryson, Crosby, and Stone, 2006).

As such, practitioners should ask: 1) what capacities are limiting organizational efficacy? and 2) what capacities need to be gained from a partnership? Not all capacities are offered from every partner, and different forms of partnership may be more or less suitable for specific problems, organizational capacities, or available partners (Keast, Brown, and Mandell, 2007; Andrews and Entwistle, 2010; Lofstrom, 2010). Practitioners must determine which capacities are most advantageous, and which may be redundant in a partnership. For example, in an infrastructure development project, partnership with a financial services firm may provide financial resources as well as expertise on project or contract management. However, a financial services firm may not be capable of construction, so another firm may need to provide construction services. On the other hand, another public agency without specific capacities or resources in these areas would create more complexity without providing specific benefits (Koppenjan, 2005; Hodge and Greve, 2007; Garvin and Bosso, 2008; Koppenjan and Enserink, 2009). Nevertheless, it is incumbent on practitioners to sort through ambiguous advantages (and disadvantages) of capacities in relation to their own organizational limitations.

*Question 3: What partnership opportunities are available?*

Participant ambiguity occurs when determining what partnership opportunities are available and viable. Opportunities that emerge from unique contexts are an important driver of partnership formation and can be defined by two parameters: 1) availability of partners and 2) barriers to partnership. First, availability of partners is one of the strongest predictors of partnerships, as well as size and scope of networks. In the most practical sense, partnerships cannot form if organizations are not available to collaborate with or are unaware of each other's availability. While the myriad of organizations now participating in public service delivery creates plenty of potential partners, there are numerous limitations to availability, including shared goals or problems, resources, collaborative capacity, partnership density, social clustering, organizational type, and geography (Brinkerhoff, 2002a; Graddy and Chen, 2006; Weber, Lovrich, and Gaffney, 2007; Jasny, 2012; Lee, Lee, and Feiock, 2012b; Hill and Hupe, 2014; O'Toole, 2015). Additionally, too many potential partners can lead to information overload, where managers cannot fully analyze every option (Brinkerhoff, 2002b; Ramiro, 2009; Reynaers, 2013). Importantly, for a partner to be "available," managers have to be aware of the viability of potential partnership with that organization.

Second, there are a number of barriers to partnership with any organization. In the most basic sense, these include the "operational, performance, or legal barriers that prevent the next action step...in converting solutions into policy energy, assessing internal effectiveness, surmounting the inevitable process blockages, mission drift, and so on" (McGuire and Agranoff, 2011, p. 265). Internal capacities are also among these barriers, where issues such as structures, processes, and social norms related to risk management, problem-solving, short- and long-term planning, accountability, decision-making, and performance management affect the ability of organizations to effectively engage in collaborations (Thomson and Perry, 2006; Weber and Khademian, 2008; O'Toole, 2015). Furthermore, inter-organizational ties create a tremendous amount of risk, where investing resources into a failed venture can be devastating to organizational missions, reputation, and political capital (Akintoye, Beck, and Hardcastle, 2003; McGuire, 2006; Feiock, Lee, Park, and Lee, 2010). For example, cross-sectoral partnerships run inherent risks of principal-agent problems due to mission conflicts (Gazley and Brudney, 2007; Hodge and Greve, 2007; Acar, Guo, and Yang, 2008). As a result, public agencies may find themselves investing tremendous resources into a partnership that may eventually collapse.

Barriers can also emerge from existing partnerships or networks, which create preconditions to facilitate (or not) further partnerships (Fischer, Ingold, Sciarini, and Varone, 2012). Some scholars argue that a balance between loose structures and a foundation that embeds partnerships is necessary to attract new partners and expand networks (Laven, Kyrmkowski, Ventriss, Manning, and Mitchell, 2010; Robins, Bates, and Pattison, 2011; O'Toole, 2015). When partners are too loosely associated, issues such as uncoordinated goals, defensive strategies, or unpredictable demands emerge (Robins, Bates, and Pattison, 2011; O'Toole, 2015). On the other hand, when partnerships are too embedded, organizations lose autonomy and there are high hurdles for new partners (O'Toole, 2015). Additionally, social clustering and network density may help maintain commitments between partners and increase desirability of partnerships (Graddy and Chen, 2006; Jasny, 2012; Lee, Lee, and Feiock, 2012b). However, when partnership multiplexity (i.e., separate ties between organizations) increases too much, coordination costs overburden transactions and lead to collaborative inertia. Essentially, collaborative capacity can only be stretched so far, and eventually maintaining ties creates more burdens than benefits (Provan and Milward, 2001; McGuire and Agranoff, 2011; Provan and Lemaire, 2012).

As such, practitioners should ask: 1) what other organizations are available for partnership? and 2) what barriers are there to those partnerships? Public-sector agencies are surrounded by other public, private, and nonprofit organizations, but some are in a better position to engage in partnership than others (Graddy and Chen, 2006; O'Toole, 2015). Practitioners must identify which other organizations have the necessary attributes to make good partners, which includes the potential barriers to partnership (Brinkerhoff, 2002a; McGuire, 2006; Feiock, Lee, Park, and Lee, 2010; Fischer, Ingold, Sciarini, and

Varone, 2012; O’Toole, 2015). Although some organizations may appear available, they may have bad partnership habits or be over-extended with too many partners, which limits their ability to effectively collaborate (Weber, Lovrich, and Gaffney, 2007; Weber and Khademian, 2008; McGuire and Agranoff, 2011; Provan and Lemaire, 2012). However, the balance between availability and barriers is tied to the unique circumstances of partnership goals. For example, a joint venture for urban renewal creates significant limitations for identifying potential partners capable of overcoming complex barriers related to the project (Hodge and Greve, 2007; Gordon, 2007; Feiock and Scholz, 2009). Nevertheless, partnership opportunities are unique to every context, and practitioners should consider which organizations are best positioned for success.

## Discussion and Conclusions

A key goal of research on partnerships should be to guide practitioners as they sift through ambiguous circumstances surrounding what purpose they serve, how they may enhance organizational efficacy, and what they look like in practice. While more information may not always eliminate the ambiguity in an inherently chaotic and complex environment, practitioners can better address challenges when more information is available (Zahariadis, 2014). Therefore, scholarship plays an integral role in helping practitioners understand the connections between their organizational missions and shared goals, capacities that improve specific policy outcomes, identifying organizations that make good partners, and processes by which partnerships form, among other things. While there are extensive analyses of these points in existing scholarship, much of it is inaccessible to practitioners. In this vein, one of our goals here is to synthesize theory and findings into a form that practitioners, non-academics, or non-subject area experts can consume, where many scholars present the same concepts with a solely academic audience in mind (Bushouse, et al., 2011). While asking the key questions identified above may not lead to better partnerships or stave off disaster, it may help practitioners understand potential pitfalls from the beginning.

From a theoretical perspective, using GCT to synthesize key questions that actors may ask when making choices provides both practitioners and academics some guidance on how to think about partnership in the public service as organizational choice. The assumptions of GCT largely align with the reality of forming partnerships in complex administrative environments that lack clear hierarchies and that are steeped in ambiguous circumstances. Furthermore, GCT also helps capture the distinctive practical nature of partnerships, where they succeed or fail as much by chance as by design. While existing literature tends to focus on goal-directed partnerships or networks, serendipitous partnerships are a common phenomenon in practice and play an important role in collaborative governance (Provan and Kenis, 2008; Provan and Lemaire, 2012). Thus, developing analytical frameworks that account for components of decision-making that occur when faced with ambiguity and unanticipated opportunities provides new depth to scholarship on how and why partnerships and networks form. Still, this analysis may be over-simplistic in many ways and may not fully account for all the nuances in partnership formation. While we draw our inferences from key literature that is consistently cited, this body of scholarship lacks coherence along several dimensions, so it is difficult to integrate competing epistemological and theoretical perspectives into a single framework of partnership formation (O’Toole, 2015; Kapucu, Hu, and Khosa, 2017).

Despite the inherent challenges, partnership formation is still an important point of inquiry. As policy and governance scholars argue, choices made during formulation are fundamental in understanding policy, including its intended purpose and the relationship between different organizations in its implementation (Nakamura, 1987; Hill and Hupe, 2014). In that same vein, understanding choices made when forming partnerships can provide important insights into their design, mechanisms, and intended purposes. For instance, although both are public-private partnerships, service delivery partnerships (i.e., partners each contribute particular expertise to provide public services) and financing



partnerships (i.e., private partners provide access to capital financing for public agencies) are built on different interpretations of problems, solutions, and participants. Consequently, they require different managerial tools and strategies to be successful (Bovaird, 2006). For both practitioners and academics, expanding our understanding of these connections can support more effective uses of scholarship in informing practical decisions about partnerships (McGuire and Agranoff, 2011; O'Toole, 2015). As such, further developing theoretical frameworks for partnership formation can provide deeper insights into the nuances of collaboration, and practitioner-oriented scholarship can guide decision-makers to choices that are more likely to yield success (O'Toole, 1997, 2015).

Partnership formation is only a small part of public administration's research agenda into collaborative governance (O'Toole, 1997, 2015). Scholarship focused on other aspects of partnerships, collaboration, networks, and governance provided a significant portion of the insights and observations above that account for which factors should be considered in partnership decisions. Understanding what leads to better collaborative outcomes helps reduce the ambiguity around deciding what problems require partnership, what solutions partnerships can offer to organizational limitations, and what partnership opportunities are available. However, this is a two-way street, and partnership formation offers insight into managing collaborative relationships as well. Although performance management, collaborative technologies, and inter-organizational accountability are at the center of the partnership research agenda, scholarship does not clearly account for how partnership formation affects these issues (McGuire, 2006; McGuire and Agranoff, 2011; O'Toole, 2015). Specifically, scholarship does not always connect partnership formation to program outcomes, managerial strategies and tools, or network management. Furthermore, there are implications for normative questions, including why public management is becoming more reliant on collaborations and how this fits into democratic institutions.

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