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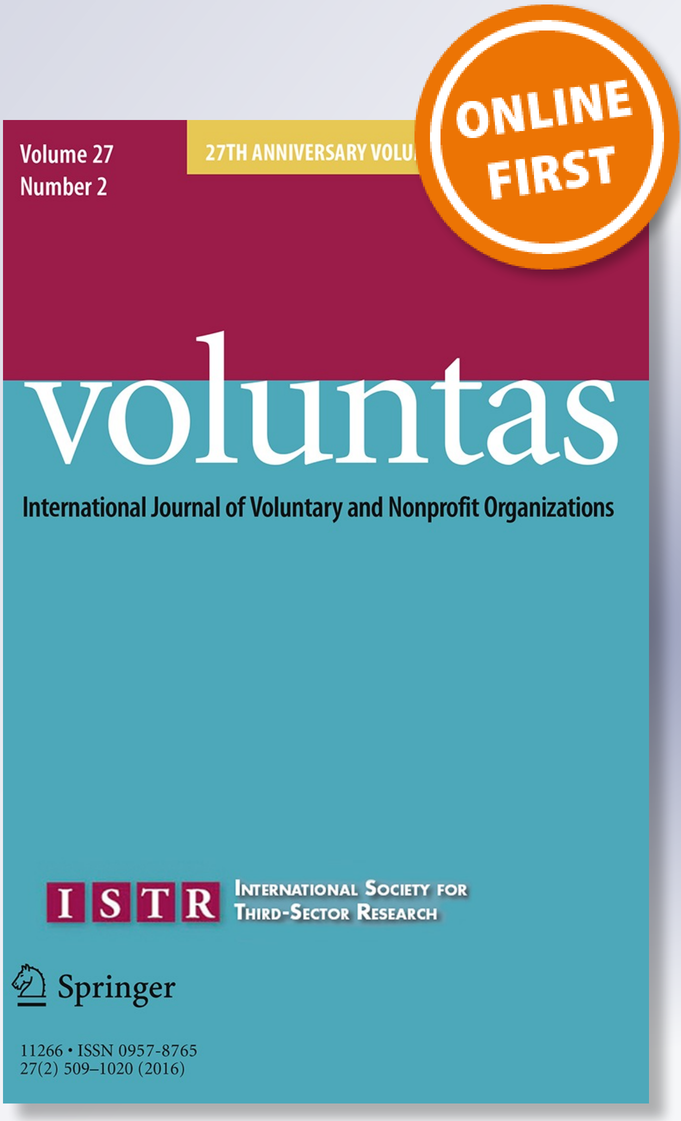

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ORIGINAL PAPER

Civil Society Partnerships: Power Imbalance and Mutual Dependence in NGO Partnerships

Nina F. O'Brien[1] · Sandra K. Evans[2]

Abstract This study examines the distinction between power imbalance and mutual dependence to better understand how NGOs manage resource dependencies in their relationships with civil society partners. The NGO leaders we interviewed emphasized mutual dependence in the relationships they developed with other NGOs regarding access to financial and information resources. In contrast, discourse about their relationships with IGOs focused on the acquisition of legitimacy and access, and was dominated by power imbalance. NGOs were largely accepting of both forms of dependence in pursuit of the community's shared goals and for the greater good of constituents. Our finding that NGOs refrain from terminating sub-optimal relationships also reflects the extent to which mutual dependence governs NGOs partnering strategies.

Résumé La présente étude se penche sur la distinction entre le déséquilibre du pouvoir et l'interdépendance, pour mieux comprendre la façon dont les ONG gèrent leur dépendance aux ressources dans leurs relations avec des sociétés civiles partenaires. Les dirigeants d'ONG que nous avons interrogés ont mis l'accent sur l'interdépendance qui existe dans leurs relations avec d'autres ONG pour l'accès aux ressources financières et documentaires. Par opposition, le discours sur leurs relations avec les OIG accentuait l'acquisition de légitimité et d'accès et était dominé par le déséquilibre du pouvoir. Les ONG acceptent largement les deux

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formes de dépendance dans la poursuite des objectifs partagés de la communauté et pour le plus grand bien des électeurs. Nos résultats confirmant que les ONG évitent de mettre fin à des relations sous-optimales reflètent également la mesure dans laquelle l'interdépendance gouverne les stratégies de partenariat des ONG.

Zusammenfassung Diese Studie untersucht den Unterschied zwischen Machtungleichgewicht und gegenseitiger Abhängigkeit, um zu einem besseren Verständnis dahingehend zu gelangen, wie nicht-staatliche Organisationen mit Ressourcenabhängigkeiten in ihren Beziehungen zu Partnern in der Bürgergesellschaft umgehen. Die von uns befragten Leiter nicht-staatlicher Organisationen betonten eine gegenseitige Abhängigkeit in den Beziehungen zu anderen nicht-staatlichen Organisationen mit Hinblick auf den Zugang zu Finanz- und Informationsressourcen. Bei ihren Beziehungen zu internationalen staatlichen Organisationen hingegen konzentrierten sie sich auf die Erzielung von Legitimität und Zugang, und die Beziehungen wurden von einer Machtungleichheit dominiert. Die nicht-staatlichen Organisationen akzeptierten weitgehend beide Arten der Abhängigkeit zugunsten der Ziele der Gemeinschaft und des allgemeinen Wohlergehens der Gemeindemitglieder. Unser Ergebnis, dass nicht-staatliche Organisationen von einer Beendigung suboptimaler Beziehungen absehen, spiegelt auch den Umfang wider, in dem die gegenseitige Abhängigkeit die Partnerstrategien nicht-staatlicher Organisationen bestimmt.

Resumen El presente estudio examina la distinción entre desequilibrio de poder y dependencia mutua para comprender mejor cómo gestionan las ONG las dependencias de recursos en sus relaciones con socios de la sociedad civil. Los líderes de ONG que entrevistamos destacaron la dependencia mutua en las relaciones que desarrollaron con otras ONG con respecto al acceso a recursos financieros y de información. En cambio, el discurso sobre sus relaciones con Organizaciones Intergubernamentales (IGO, por sus siglas en inglés) se centró en la adquisición de legitimidad y acceso, y estuvo dominado por desequilibrio de poder. Las ONG aceptaban ampliamente ambas formas de dependencia en la búsqueda de objetivos compartidos de la comunidad y para el mayor beneficio de los componentes. Nuestro hallazgo de que las ONG se abstienen de terminar relaciones subóptimas refleja también la medida en que la dependencia mutua rige las estrategias de asociación de las ONG.

Keywords Partnerships · NGOs · Resource dependence · Power imbalance · Mutual dependence

Introduction

Partnerships, defined as strategic collaborative activity among entities to facilitate the exchange of resources or improve services, are critical to the performance of civil society organizations (Gazley et al. 2013; Khagram et al. 2002; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Civil society organizations have been active in using alliances and partnerships to achieve their goals (Austin 2007). Well-managed partnerships can generate significant benefits, including identity reinforcement (Choi et al. 2005), access to the political process (Carmin 2003), organizational legitimacy (Baur 2012), and access to essential tangible and intangible resources (Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

We apply resource dependence theory (RDT), which differentiates between power asymmetry and mutual dependence, to better understand how NGOs manage partnerships to acquire resources while also maintaining their autonomy. Analysis of interviews with 32 NGOs in the Children's Rights community reveals the resource concerns that influence NGOs' decisions to partner and their perceptions about the ways that power asymmetry and mutual dependence structure their relationships.

Literature Review

Power Imbalance and Mutual Dependence in NGO Partnerships

RDT argues that an organization's behavior can only be understood in the context of the environment in which it is located, or "the ecology of the organization" (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, p. 1). This ecology consists of the resources an organization needs in order to survive, as well as other organizations with which the focal organization competes, collaborates, or interacts in pursuit of those resources. An organization's behavior shapes and is shaped by its orientation to resources, and is best understood by knowing the challenges that organizations face in extracting resources from their environment. Chief among these challenges is the negotiation of organizational dependence.

Organizational Dependence

Because organizations rely on resources, they do not control, survival and success are contingent on an organization's ability to engage in interorganizational relationships that allow it to acquire those resources (Drees and Heugens 2013). These exchange relationships are problematic because control over resources constitutes a fundamental measure of organizational power (Ulrich and Barney 1984). Drawing on Emerson (1962), organization A is powerful and organization B is dependent to the extent that A controls access to resources sought by B. This power imbalance has been the object of most RDT research (Hillman et al. 2009) and explains "how actors benefit from being in a position of power and claiming greater power in the distributive process" (Gulati and Sytch 2007, p. 33). RDT literature tends to employ the concept of power broadly, including for example, the power organizations have to make decisions, to act, to exercise financial independence, and so forth (Drees and Heugens 2013). Past research demonstrates different ways that power has been conceptualized in relation to resources, such as assessing the impact of resource needs (Katila et al. 2008) and the ownership of resources by different actors on organizational relationships (Ellstrand et al. 2002).

Research in this area has advanced predictions about how organizations can balance their desire to maintain power and autonomy against their resource needs (Gulati and Sytch 2007; Hillman et al. 2009). Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) proposed that organizations engage in several strategies to acquire resources without ceding power or becoming excessively dependent on others. Among these is for firms to coordinate their efforts with other organizations in what Davis and Cobb (2010) describe as "entangling" arrangements such as consortia, alliances, and partnerships (p. 28). While other theories, such as Principal-Agent Theory examine the way a principal is tasked with decision making on behalf of another agent (Jensen and Meckling 1976), RDT provides a the best framework for this study in which we examine how types of resources inform views about interorganizational relationships. As well, in addition to the extremes of power and dependence, recent work in RDT also attends to the more nuanced phenomenon of organizational interdependence.

Interdependence

Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) described how organizations might find themselves in positions of *interdependence* with others in their environment. Emerson's construction of power imbalance applies in only those cases where organization A has complete control over resources desired by organization B. By contrast, "Interdependence exists whenever one actor does not entirely control all of the conditions necessary for the achievement of an action, or for obtaining the outcome desired from the action" (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, p. 41). Interdependence is a matter of degree: organization B's dependence on A hangs on the mix of resources each brings to the table, how badly they are needed, and whether they can be acquired outside the relationship.

Casciaro and Piskorski (2005) revisited the concept of interdependence, arguing that it reflects two discrete dimensions: "Power imbalance captures the difference in the power of each actor over the other," whereas "mutual dependence captures the existence of bilateral dependencies in the dyad, regardless of whether the two actors' dependencies are balanced or imbalanced" (2005, p. 170). The distinction is material since "for any value of power imbalance, a power-dependence relation can be characterized by varying levels of mutual dependence. Conversely, for any given level of mutual dependence, there can be different levels of power imbalance in the dyad" (2005, p. 170). The authors found that the two constructs have opposite effects on an organization's ability to reduce dependencies. Their analysis of mergers and acquisitions showed that organizations' mutual dependence promoted mergers, while power imbalances prevented them.

Gulati and Sytch (2007) also examined interdependence as a combination of power imbalance (*dependence asymmetry)* and mutual dependence (*joint dependence*). Noting that it is "puzzling that, with few exceptions, most subsequent [post-Emersonian] research has been drawn only to the implications of dependence asymmetry and its related power dynamics," Gulati and Sytch argued that high levels of dependence may promote advantages for *both* parties to an exchange (p. 36). The authors drew on the concept of embeddedness which describes how multiple, overlapping interactions promote cohesion, commitment, trust, and frequency of exchange between firms (Granovetter 1985; Uzzi 1997). Gulati and Sytch (2007) argued, "The increased quality of interaction between jointly dependent partners would enhance the relationship's value-generating potential, subsequently driving both actors' performance in it" (pp. 38-9). Their analysis of procurement relationships in the U.S. auto industry tested the hypothesis that mutual dependence would lead to higher performance outcomes, and found that mutual dependence was associated with performance gains by both parties to an exchange. The authors concluded, "In better performing exchange relationships, partners are more likely to increase their levels of joint dependence" (Gulati and Sytch 2007, p. 58).

Villanueva et al. (2012) also explored interdependence in resource exchange relationships, focusing on new ventures that are particularly susceptible to exploitation. Like Casciaro and Piskorski (2005) and Gulati and Sytch (2007), Villanueva et al. (2012) separated power imbalance and mutual dependence assumptions to determine which strategy produced the best results for resource acquisition by new firms. They found that resource flows were better predicted by mutual dependence than by power imbalance between firms.

Resource Dependence in the Not-for-Profit Sector

In addition to emphasizing power imbalance over mutual dependence, most RDT research has focused on the for-profit sector. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) only briefly treated the non-profit sector as a special and challenging case. Identifying charitable contributions as the single resource of interest for not-for-profit organizations, they predict that "participating agencies may willingly exchange their autonomy for the promise of some funding rather than face drastically reduced resources. No other options are available to them" (1978, p. 177). However, more recent RDT research shows that civil society organizations are subject to more complex power dynamics and challenges (den Hond et al. 2015; Gray and Wood 1991; Vlaar et al. 2006).

Studies using RDT to examine relationships among civil society organizations have emphasized the consequences of power imbalance in exchange relationships with donors, funders, and governments. Edwards and Hulme (1996) argued that NGOs' reliance on funding from official sources would lead to weakened NGO legitimacy and more circumscribed arenas of possible activity, but did not find consistent patterns in the cases they examined. Ebrahim's (2003) analysis of NGO-funder relations found that power asymmetries led to "excessive conditionalities" and "onerous reporting requirements" on the part of funding recipients, which threatened to undermine NGOs' official mission and downward accountability to clients and constituents. These findings have been elaborated upon by other studies (AbouAssi 2013; Khieng and Dahles 2015; Parks 2008) documenting how the volatility of donor-NGO relationships over time impacts resource strategies, as well as the organizations themselves. The impact of volatility tends to be even more pronounced among NGOs in developing countries (AbouAssi 2013) and influences NGO strategy (Khieng and Dahles 2015; Parks 2008). For example, Khieng and Dahles (2015) found that, to reduce the volatility of external financial resources, Cambodian NGOs placed greater emphasis on lower volatility sources like earned income. Parks (2008) and Khieng and Dahles (2015) also found that the goals of NGOs may change depending on their sources of financial resources, and that donor demands can influence the structure and processes of organizations themselves.

Studies examining NGO–NGO relationships have also emphasized power imbalance. Hudock (1995) described NGOs operating in the global south (SNGOs) as particularly vulnerable to external control because of their resource reliance on NGOs in the global north (NNGOs). Lister's (2000) case study of the relationship between an American NGO and a Central American NGO found that the NNGO's own dependence on external donors produced a condition of "double dependence" for the SNGO, whose reliance on the NNGO was contingent on the relationship between the NNGO and its donor. Lister (2000) noted, "The framework and activities of the donor and the NNGO are constructed so as to reduce the need for the resources of legitimacy and local knowledge and thus diminish 'downward' dependence" (p. 12). In other words, although the contributions of the SNGO had the potential to even the playing field of power imbalance, dependencies in the larger organizational environment constrained the organization's ability to realize this potential. While these studies successfully apply resource dependence theory to the civil society sector, this literature's focus on power imbalance and on the relationships between NNGOs and SNGOs may underestimate the role of mutual dependence in civil society partnerships.

While partnerships are acknowledged as critical for civil society organizations (Khagram et al. 2002), the complex power dynamics of these relationships require further attention. Lister (2000) describes a "disparity between the rhetoric and reality of NGO partnership" which centers on the fact that NGO consensus around common issues or social problems "does not therefore eliminate the possibility that power is somehow being exercised" (p. 6). RDT has provided a powerful framework for examining power imbalance in NNGO-SNGO and NGO-donor relationships. However, attention to the mutual dependence dimension of interdependence specified by Casciaro and Piskorski (2005) may account for NGO's partnership strategies and challenges more fully. To better understand the roles power imbalance and mutual dependence play in NGO partnering for resource acquisition, we pose the following questions:

RQ1 What resources do NGOs seek to acquire as a result of partnerships with other civil society organizations?

RQ2 What is the nature of power imbalance and mutual dependence as they emerge in the resource acquisition partnerships NGOs have with other civil society organizations?

We address these questions by investigating how NGO leaders describe their partnerships with other civil society organizations in terms of the resources they hope to acquire from these partners, and their perceptions of the asymmetries and dependencies they balance as they manage civil society partnerships.

Method

Context

NGOs are "formal (professionalized) independent societal organizations whose primary aim is to promote common goals at the national or the international level" (Martens 2002, p. 282). We examine NGOs' partnerships with other NGOs as well as with Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) which are defined as transnational organizations created by treaty or agreement between state bodies (Kegley and Blanton 2011). We focus on partnering in the children's rights sector of civil society. The children's rights movement has a long and active history that can be traced back to the 1919 establishment of the NGO Save the Children International Union which was responsible for drafting the first Declaration of the Rights of the Child. This was adopted by the League of Nations in 1924 and adapted as the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959. The UN marked the twentieth anniversary of that ratification by declaring 1979 the International Year of the Child, and authorized the Human Rights Commission to draft a new convention on children's rights, which became the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the General Assembly in 1989, and the basis of the existing international framework for the advancement and protection of children's rights (Franklin and Franklin 1996; Price-Cohen 1990).

The formal role of NGOs in the children's rights movement has been well documented, in part, because of the 1983 formation of the "Informal NGO Ad Hoc Group on the Drafting of the Convention of the Rights of the Child," a coalition of NGOs which made recommendations, compiled reports, and monitored progress throughout the drafting of the CRC. The importance of NGOs and IGOs to the movement was codified in Article 45 of the CRC, which states that "the Committee [on the Rights of the Child] may invite specialized agencies, UNICEF and other competent bodies as it may consider appropriate to provide expert advice on the implementation of the Convention in areas falling within the scope of their respective mandates" (Price-Cohen 1990, p. 146). The long history of the children's rights movement, and the central and explicit role played by NGOs in it suggests that children's rights NGOs may provide unique insight into the strategies and perceptions NGOs have about partnering, power imbalance, and mutual dependence.

Participants and Procedures

To examine resources and dependencies in NGO partnerships, we conducted 32 structured interviews with leaders of NGOs in the children's rights community between 2009 and 2011. The NGOs interviewed for this study either have children's rights as their primary focus, or report partnerships with children's rights NGOs. All are NNGOs headquartered in developed economies. These organizations were identified during the collection of longitudinal partnership data for a larger social network analysis of the children's rights community (Margolin et al. 2012) and were selected from the Yearbook of International Organizations (YIO). The annual yearbooks are among the most authoritative sources of information about international NGOs (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Smith 1997), providing data on approximately 40,000 international NGOs, including each organization's name, address, date of founding, aims, and partnerships with other civil society organizations.

To develop our sample of organizations for this study, we first selected entities with the terms "child" and "rights" in the organization name, description, or activity fields from yearbooks dating back to 1990/1991, yielding 20 organizations. 1990/91 was chosen at the start year to capture what Price-Cohen (1990) suggests was an increase in activity in this community following the adoption of the CRC in 1989. Additional members of the community were identified by including organizations nominated as partners by at least two of these 20 seed organizations. Of 79 total organizations identified, 32 NGOs agreed to participate in interviews. Additional information about the 32 NGOs can be found in Table 1.

We used a structured protocol for all interviews (see Appendix) which mixed closed- and open-ended questions about NGO's resources, partners, partnership challenges, and partnership termination. For each organization, the Executive Director or a representative of comparable rank was contacted and recruited, following the selection strategy employed by Smith et al. (1998) in their study of Human Rights NGOs. Selection of staff members with a high level of authority ensures that respondents possess relevant knowledge about the organization's partnering strategies (Smith et al. 1998). Because this project focused on questions about the relevant organizations, and in keeping with Institutional Review Board ethics guidelines, we did not include questions about the interviewees themselves. Interviews lasting 45–60 min were conducted in English by telephone or using the voice-over-IP service, Skype. Interviews were digitally recorded, professionally transcribed, and cleaned by a research assistant before analysis.

Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using a theory-driven thematic coding process (Boyzatis 1998; Saldaña 2009). Codes stemmed from the literature on partnerships, resources, and dependencies, and allowed for the emergence of unexpected themes. For each code, we developed a definition, description, and discussed examples (Boyzatis 1998; Saldaña 2009). Using the qualitative analysis platform Dedoose, we grouped interview responses into categories suggested by the theoretical frameworks, such as "partnership types," "resources," and "partnership end." Some categories reflected the language used in the research questions directly, such as resource types. For example, through the process of identifying and labeling comments related to resource types, we were able to establish common thematic patterns that cut across the interview data. Additionally, we examined perceptions about interorganizational relationships in terms of discourse that addressed power differentials (power imbalances) such as greater or lesser degrees of dependence on other organizations (e.g., power stemming from donating resources to other entities), and in terms of the management of relationships in which entities were dependent on each other in some way (mutual dependencies; Casciaro and Piskorski 2005). Within these

Table 1 Information about interviewed NGOs

Org ID	Primary social cause	Informant title	HQ country	Decade Founded[a]
2	Children's rights	Information and Communications Coordinator	UK	1990
4	Children's rights	Director of the Secretariat	Norway	1990
5	Children's rights/Human rights	Executive Director	Switzerland	1970
8	Children's rights	Director General	Canada	1990
11	Children's rights	Secretary General	Switzerland	1920
12	Religion	Assistant to the General Secretary	Sweden/ Switzerland	1940
13	Human rights	Deputy Director	UK	1970
15	Children's rights	General Secretary	UK	1990
19	Older youth	Acting Secretary General	Denmark/UK	1940
20	Women and girls	Communications and Advocacy Director	Hungary/UK	1920
22	Coordination/Communication	President	Switzerland	1920
23	Women	Secretary General	Australia/Greece/ Malta/UK	1900
24	Women	President	UK	1930
27	Health	Executive Director	USA	1910
29	Human rights/Women's rights	International Program Director	Switzerland/UK/ USA	1920
34	Women	Chairman	France/USA	1910
37	Health	Director	Canada/Finland/ USA	1940
40	Criminal justice	Chair	USA	1970
42	Social justice/Economic development	General Secretary	Belgium	1990
44	Environment	Campaign Manager	Australia	1990
45	Coordination/Communication	President	Switzerland	1940
46	Children's rights	Senior Advisor (former Director)	UK	1990
49	Social Justice/Sustainability	Executive Director	Belgium/UK/ USA	1990
50	Social Justice	Director	Belgium/ Switzerland	1960
51	Migration	Director	Belgium	1990
52	Children's rights	Secretary General	Belgium	1990
53	Missionary work	President	UK	1970
54	Disarmament	Communications Officer	USA	1990
58	Coordination/Communication	Policy Officer	Switzerland	1960
72	Economic and social development	Secretary General	UK	1950

Table 1 continued

Org ID	Primary social cause	Informant title	HQ country	Decade Founded[a]
77	Humanitarian aid	Program Director	Belgium	1990
78	Health, human rights, women	General Secretary	UK	1970

[a] Decade of founding, rather than year, is presented to preserve anonymity of our respondents

categories, emergent sub-themes were assessed, discussed among the coders, and adopted into the data coding framework. During the code development and application process, the authors discussed inconsistent codes, resolved discrepancies, and assessed intercoder reliability.[1] Below, we present the results of our analysis, focusing first on resource exchange, power imbalance, and mutual dependence in NGO–NGO relationships, before moving on to describe NGO-IGO relationships.

Results

Resource Exchange in NGO–NGO Partnerships

To understand the dependencies that emerge as a result of partnerships with other NGOs, we asked NGO leaders to describe the resources they exchange with NGO partners, the challenges and drawbacks they experience in partnering, and what causes their partnerships to end. In discussing their motivations for partnering with other NGOs, our respondents described financial and information resources as particularly important to their work, and as motivations for partnering with other NGOs.

Financial Resources

While financial resources, such as funding, donations, and grants, are "basically sine qua non" (Org 58), NGOs only rarely described partnering as the primary strategy for directly receiving these resources. Interestingly, direct financial exchange was most often discussed in the context of the aid and donations our informants reported *giving* to other organizations. Consistent with previous research on NNGO and SNGO partnerships, one of our respondents allowed that "the most common for us would be a partnership that involves the transfer of money to our southern partners" (Org 13). Another respondent noted that the funding they raise from consortium membership dues is used to "support our young members and members from developing countries" (Org 24). Only one organization of the 32

[1] Ten percent of the data were coded by two authors. A Krippendorf's Alpha score of .75 or higher was used as the benchmark to gauge intercoder reliability.

interviewed described themselves as recipients of funding from another NNGO partner.

More commonly, NGOs described financially motivated partnering in terms of joint fundraising activities. As one respondent revealed:

> One of the things that increasingly organizations have to do is spend time fundraising …. Fundraising has really changed in the last ten years and there is a lot more time, energy and money spent on fundraising than was the case before (Org 78).

Partnering allows NGOs to pool the costs and energies they must expend to solicit contributions. However, even joint fundraising efforts were largely described as a means to an end, rather than as the primary motivation for collaboration. For example, the same respondent noted that partnering created "a possibility of building a stronger base, either for raising funds to support the work, or for actually implementing the work" (Org 78).

NGO leaders were generally reluctant to describe the struggle for resources in terms of competition with other NGOs. For example, when asked with whom they compete for resources, most respondents first distanced themselves from the term *competition*, like this interviewee who said:

> I don't think we can use the word 'compete' in a very clear sense … I would like to talk less about competition and more about the value of teaming up with other similar organizations to make our voice heard to advance on one issue or another issue (Org 11).

This stands in contrast to some previous research on Asian advocacy-oriented NGOs (Parks 2008) which points to the overwhelming role of competition for resources especially when donor sources of funding are volatile and unpredictable. However, this may stem in part from the fact that our sample included only NNGOs, which are more likely to play the role of donor than recipient. In only one case, the struggle for financial resources was described as an impediment to partnership formation. This respondent noted:

> The sources are very limited for NGOs, so everybody is competing for the same funding, which makes you look at others not as a natural partner, but as someone you are competing against. So, it's very difficult to form those partnerships by saying, look: together we can actually accomplish more than if we were competing against each other (Org 46).

Information and Knowledge Resources

While access to financial resources represents one motivation to partner, our respondents tended to skip over this aspect of partnering in favor of discussing their relationships with other NGOs as a strategy for acquiring information and knowledge resources.

The majority of our respondents indicated that partnerships with other NGOs were significantly motivated by the need to produce, share, and disseminate information within and beyond the children's rights community. Describing the resources they seek from NGO partners, informants more frequently discussed the access partnerships provide to information than the access they provide to funding. For example, one respondent said simply that ideal partners "have informational resources or interests that intersect with our own. And they're willing to share them" (Org 53).

Informants noted that information in the form of data is distributed throughout the community through conferences, consortia, listservs, and databases where research reports and findings are widely circulated. One NGO focuses its efforts on maintaining an email group to which it circulates a curated monthly electronic newsletter. Another respondent stated, "We publish material. We distribute on CDs and we also put them [sic] on the internet" (Org 37). This informant emphasizes that the materials they create are intended to be appropriated and reused at will by other organizations to support their own projects. This is an example of a generalized exchange of knowledge which takes place beyond the boundaries of specific partnerships and across the community as a whole. Another respondent applauded the fact that this generalized access to data and information allows diverse NGOs to "speak with a bigger voice" and to present "general consensus on the issues, so that we're presenting a united front" (Org 34).

Our NGO respondents distinguished this kind of data-based information from what was variously described as "experiential knowledge" (Org 12), or "technical abilities" in program implementation and administration (Org 27). In addition to the data-based informational resources described above, procedural knowledge was actively sought in the context of NGO–NGO partnerships. One interviewee, who represented a humanitarian aid program, stated that ideal partners contribute "knowledge: and by that I don't necessarily mean technical knowledge, but knowledge of circumstances on the ground" (Org 12). Partnerships between NGOs were highly motivated by the desire to "actually promote the coordination, the exchange of experience, exchange of best-practices, [and] the transfer of know-how" (Org 15). In the children's rights community, partnering between organizations is associated with the circulation of knowledge in use (Maurer et al. 2011), while data are more widely disseminated in a manner consistent with the norms of generalized exchange common in scientific and academic knowledge production.

While the search for both financial and information resources inspires NGOs to partner, organizations are also concerned with their ability to remain autonomous and independent. As Casciaro and Pikorski (2007) note, managing the tension between obligation and autonomy results in organizational interdependence, which consists of two dimensions: power imbalance and mutual dependence. Both dimensions are evident in our respondents' discourse about their partnerships. Particularly in the context of financially motivated partnerships, the articulation of one's organization as a donor to other NGOs is suggestive of power imbalance, whereas the community norms around information circulation and partnerships organized around joint fundraising emphasize mutual dependence. These themes are further developed in the stories NGO leaders shared about the benefits and challenges they faced in partnering with other NGOs.

Power Imbalance and Mutual Dependence in NGO–NGO Relationships

The NGO leaders we spoke with tended to underplay the extent to which partnerships with other NGOs were characterized by power asymmetries and to strongly emphasize mutual dependence, even as they addressed the challenges they encountered in these partnerships. For example, respondents tended to avoid describing how other organizations or entities had more or less power over their organization (e.g., having influence or a say in their agendas, a sense of responsibly to another organization). Although NGOs deemphasized financial resources as a motive for *initiating* a partnership, more than one third of our respondents revealed that financial considerations were a crucial part of their decision-making process about whether or not to *maintain* NGO–NGO relationships. For example, a representative from an NGO focused on women's rights noted that they retreated from membership in a coalition of NGOs which was created to pool financial resources "not because it wasn't good to collaborate, but we felt that the money we were putting there, we could have put into our own projects" (Org 34). Among our respondents, the value of financial and other resources accessed through partnering is constantly balanced against their need to maintain authority, autonomy, and independence as described by Guo and Acar (2005). In the case described, the costs of collaborative contribution were seen as too high to justify the costs of continued participation. The respondent was clear on this point:

> If one organization is bearing the brunt, whether it's financial or whatever the situation may be, then it becomes an unequal situation … if this partnership is not helping us to meet those goals, then it's time to end it and move on. (Org 34).

It is worth noting that this reply comes from the representative of one of the oldest, best endowed, and most established NGOs in our sample, in other words, a relatively powerful member of the children's rights community.

However, in this community, partnership termination appears to be rare. Most respondents revealed that, even in situations where the costs of partnering are viewed as unacceptably high, NGOs are reluctant to terminate partnerships with other NGOs. For example, one respondent began by saying, "You would end it if you feel that you are doing something together, but the other one is only piggyback riding and you have to do all the work," but immediately shifted gears and described that "you will still tolerate it…for the sake of the best interest of the child" (Org 5). This tendency to accept asymmetries for the sake of the greater good was recurrent in our discussions with NGO leaders. While "you would still tend to look for another partner who will be more of a real partner" (Org 5), the overwhelming impression communicated by these NGO leaders is that imbalance is not generally viewed as a sufficiently high cost to provoke partnership termination.

A particularly interesting theme in our discussions with NGO representatives is the finding that leaders rarely describe partnerships as ending, even under challenging conditions. For example, when asked about ending partnerships one respondent said "I don't think that we ever do that formally at all…. We just kind of let it go, and don't do anything about it, which to be honest is something that we would need to do better, because it takes a lot of energy to let something dribble out, rather than just going, ‘No this isn’t working for us’” (Org 20). This sentiment was echoed by several other respondents, like this one whose answer was very direct: “No, I can’t think of official partnerships that were ended in my period” (Org 42). A third example came from a respondent who indicates that formal partnership termination is uncommon in the community overall:

> We wouldn’t see an organization saying, no, we don’t want to work with you. They may reduce the amount that they are involved, but I’ve not come across one that says, right, we are taking you off our books, we are not dealing with you anymore. I am not aware of that happening (Org 72).

An interesting adjunct to this tendency to maintain suboptimal partnerships is the fact that many of our respondents expressed some discomfort in discussing asymmetries in partnering. One respondent whose NGO had engaged in a partnership with a larger and higher profile NGO described their relationship in the following way:

> The big issue for both partners is, ‘What’s in it for me’? And this is the supporting organization or the partnering organization carving out identity so that each organization gets the attention, the PR, the notoriety, the fame, the recognition for their part of the activity (Org 29).

The distribution of recognition and credit for achievement is another dimension of potential power imbalance. Our respondent was disappointed in their partner because:

> In every case they got publicity for their work they are doing on the ground. They have many, many, many partners. We are a good partner of them, but we are not their only partner. And they did not mention their partners (Org 29).

However, having registered disappointment, the interviewee immediately reframed the problem in a more positive light: while the higher profile partner “did not mention their partners, they mentioned the women in the work. So the organization doing the work is focused on the work” (Org 29). This appeal to a shared mission and to the greater good of the constituency both organizations serve discursively smooths over the power imbalance experienced in the partnership. In their responses, NGOs overwhelmingly emphasized the mutual dependencies they share with partner NGOs.

Resource Exchange in NGO-IGO Partnerships

To understand the dependencies that emerge as a result of their partnerships with Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs), we asked respondents to describe the resources they exchange with these partners, the challenges and drawbacks they experience in these partnerships, and whether and why these partnerships end. Our respondents described financial, legitimacy, and access resources as motivations for initiating partnerships with IGOs.

Financial Resources

While our respondents frequently named IGOs like the UN, UNICEF, UNIFEM, the European Union and the African Union as sources of their funding, they did not dwell on financial resources as a primary reason for partnering with IGOs. When respondents did discuss financial rewards of IGO partnerships, they often qualified the benefit by highlighting their impression that this funding generally came with strings attached. IGO funding was contrasted with "the unrestricted kind of funding, particularly the kind we get normally from the public, from ordinary people, because they're not putting down specific demands that my money should be used for this issue, or in that country" (Org 15).

Legitimacy

According to our informants, IGOs promote legitimacy for the community at large, as well as provide organizational legitimacy to their NGO partners. By legitimacy, we mean the adherence to commonly accepted social norms or guidelines (Suchman 1995). Several respondents described the work IGOs do to highlight specific issues as important on the international stage. For this community of organizations, the UN in particular was responsible for defining the rights of children as a separate human rights issue through the Declaration of the rights of the Child in 1959, the proclamation of the Year of the Child in 1979 and the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1989. One respondent emphasized the continued support and existence of UNICEF as a particularly strong signal of community legitimacy, because "you can see that every United Nations project *indirectly* deals with children, but not at UNICEF. UNICEF is more focused on it" (Org 19). The power of IGOs to set the stage for NGO action extends also to the formalization of language to define the issues around which NGOs operate. In this community, the definition of a child, of rape and of child soldiers have all been negotiated and codified through the leadership of IGOs (Org 23).

In addition to the legitimacy IGOs provide for the community at large, their partnerships with specific NGOs also generate organization-level legitimacy. NGO respondents described the protection these IGO relationships offer when working in challenging environments. The UN was especially cited as facilitating the ability of NGOs to work in places where governments do not recognize or support work on a specific issue, such as child labor or corporal punishment of children, or where the political environment is a barrier to action. As one respondent put it, "of course, we would maybe not work with governmental agencies from countries where democracy is not the primary rule, but if we're talking about the agency of the United Nations, we will" (Org 52). The use of partnerships with IGOs to gain legitimacy was closely aligned with how our NGO informants spoke about the ways IGO partnerships provided them access.

Access

The third resource our respondents attributed to their relationships with IGOs was access: access to the political process, to governments, and to other NGOs. As one respondent noted, partnership with the UN "is crucial, because often they are the founders and implementers of action" (Org 54). The role of the UN and other IGOs as coordinators of movement activity is clear. One representative noted that his organization's relationship with UNICEF "links us to the governments and to NGOs … It has coordinated activities" (Org 15). This respondent also told us about what he described as problems in working with particular governments:

> Sometimes, the government is resistant to any innovations or any programs or initiatives that [our organization] or other organizations want to bring into their countries. Sometimes they really don't like the approach. Sometimes they think that organizations are biased (Org 15).

However, what is interesting is that his understanding of what happens when these programs actually fail is that the organizations do not adequately make use of the access and legitimacy IGOs can provide. He continues:

> The key thing here is that the UN, particularly UNICEF, is the leading world agency that is, let's say, supported by governments, so they are recognized by governments and acknowledged by the governments as, let's say, as a leading agency for children in the world. So, sometimes the lack of cooperation with UNICEF, and other UN agencies bring some difficulties to the work of these NGOs because some of the programs and initiatives that these organizations want the government to accept should also get some support from UNICEF (Org 15).

This respondent clearly expresses the value of IGO-NGO partnerships in terms of both the access and legitimacy they provide to NGOs working around the world.

Power Imbalance and Mutual Dependence in NGO-IGO Relationships

As Stohl and Stohl (2005) describe, "The United Nations (UN) charter is grounded in the sovereignty of the state, and thus it cannot interfere with the domestic jurisdiction of states … This context creates a fundamental contradiction between the UN's constitutive rules and its international mandate to protect the human rights of individuals" (p. 446). NGOs play a crucial role in bridging this gap. As independent organizations, NGOs are freer than IGOs to act and organize for the achievement of social goals in ways that directly challenge state sovereignty or specific laws as they are enforced in sovereign states (Price-Cohen 1990; Stohl and Stohl 2005; McLaren 2005). While IGOs may be structurally constrained in terms of what they can accomplish through direct action, they can engage the expertise and authority of NGOs to work directly on civil society goals. This constitutes a powerful form of mutual dependence in which resources required by NGOs are balanced against IGO needs for independent organizations to work in ways that IGOs cannot.

However, the NGOs we spoke with overwhelmingly emphasized the power imbalance they experience working with partner IGOs, almost to the exclusion of discussing mutual dependencies. In contrast to their characterization of NGO–NGO relationships as mutually dependent, NGOs defined their partnerships with IGOs as inherently imbalanced, yet the rewards of such partnerships were viewed as sufficient to accommodate those asymmetries.

Although the NGOs we spoke with engaged in IGO partnerships to acquire *access*, much of their discussion actually emphasized the power these organizations have to *exclude*. For example, Article 71 of the United Nations charter states that the "Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence" (United Nations 2012). NGOs have always played an important role in the operations of the UN, but this role has not been without contention. On the one hand, while former UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali has called NGOs indispensable to the UN's activities (DeMars 2005), Otto (1996) notes that "the relationship between the UN and NGOs has always been one of controversy and fluctuation" due in large part to state criticism of NGO interference (p. 113).

Our respondents spoke candidly about the uncertainty inherent in NGO-IGO relationships. In the words of one interviewee, over the course of her career there has been "greater visibility of NGOs and civil society in general, particularly at the UN, the greater openness of many parts of the UN system to input on non-governmental organizations." However, this openness is not without ambiguity: "It's still very touchy and there is no uniformity to it, I mean one part of the UN system will react differently from another part even though it's all supposed to be under the same framework" (Org 22). As well, resources gained through partnership with IGOs were described as having high costs: one respondent raised concerns about power imbalance when she questioned what her organization's work with the UN "actually entailed as a 'partner'? It allows you access to certain things, but doesn't allow you to become involved in the decision-making process" (Org 20).

Another challenge in NGO-IGO relations related to power imbalance is the observation by one representative that in cases where NGOs and IGOs differ in their perspective, recommendations by IGOs are often privileged over those of NGOs. This respondent noted:

> A government can be in a difficult position dealing with the recommendations separately coming from the UN and separately coming from [our organization] or any other organizations. And when the government receives these two different messages, two different recommendations, it is most obvious that it'll accept the UNICEF, the UN recommendation (Org 15).

Noting that IGOs seem to "put the common agenda as it is particularly recognized by governments" (Org 15), the respondent reframes IGOs' power to define and to set the global agenda as problematic. However, despite these challenges, access to financial, legitimacy, and access resources appear to make these challenges worth the cost. As one respondent summarized:

> The UN for example, is slow, cumbersome, difficult to access the right people, all of those usual criticisms about large institutions, but at the same time because it's large, it's got lots of influence, it's got a lot of resources. So when you do get it right, it's a great reward (Org 20).

In our interviews, NGO leaders were more likely to talk about power imbalance than mutual dependence in their partnerships with IGOs.

Discussion

In this study, we sought a more nuanced understanding of the ways NGOs use partnering as both a resource acquisition and dependency management strategy. Our examination of the discourse of NGO leaders shows that NGOs seek different resources, and confront different dependency dynamics, with their NGO and IGO partners. First, we found that in addition to financial resources (the primary focus of much RDT research on NGOs, particularly with regard to donor-NGO relationships; Helmig et al. 2004), information and knowledge-based resources were viewed as most critical within NGO–NGO partnerships. Within NGO-IGO partnerships, legitimacy and access to resources were emphasized most heavily. The complexity of these relationships builds on private-sector research showing that resource-dependent relationships can both foster legitimacy and autonomy for the more dominant organizations in an interorganizational relationship (Drees and Heugens 2013), and also bestow some degree of legitimacy and access on more dependent organizations.

Second, our findings shed light on how leaders conceptualize the temporality of partnerships, for example, when and why organizations begin, maintain, or end partnerships. This approach to examining partnerships provides a unique dimension to research focused on strategies for reducing power imbalances and managing mutual dependencies. These findings also reflect research on interorganizational network governance, where governance encompasses the management and coordination of affiliated organizations through both formal and informal structures such as rules and regulations, trust, norms, and other control mechanisms (Provan et al. 2007). The network governance perspective can provide another avenue for examining these partnership networks in future research.

Third, despite differences in corporate versus non-profit cultures, our results confirm empirical findings from research on private-sector organizations showing that dependence consists of two discrete dimensions: power imbalance and mutual dependence. These dimensions capture different aspects of organizational interdependence, a distinction which may be especially productive for teasing out the subtleties of partnerships in the civil society sector. Examining these dependencies only in terms of power imbalance would obscure the reasons NGOs persist in maintaining apparently suboptimal partnerships with other NGOs.

Leaders emphasized these dimensions differently depending on the type of relationship they were describing. The dominant emphasis on mutual dependencies among NGO–NGO relationships was demonstrated by responses that reflected dyadic dependencies, or dependencies that were perceived as being present on both sides, and sometimes in relatively balanced terms. While specific instances of power imbalance were raised, these were often dismissed or described as acceptable costs of promoting the greater good of the community, its aims and its constituents. Thus, while NGOs were largely accepting of both forms of dependence in pursuit of the community's shared goals and for the "greater good" of the children who are their ultimate constituents, leaders clarified that mutual dependence factors significantly in the strategies NGOs use to manage their dependencies. Looking at both power imbalance and mutual dependence together clarifies that the partnering choices of NGO leaders are indeed strategic, an insight which is masked when the organizationally advantageous goal of protecting autonomy overshadows the community's goal of advancing collective action. NGOs are not simply ignoring power imbalances, or accepting them, but may proactively use imbalance as a strategy for collective action. This insight helps to disentangle the "disparity between rhetoric and reality of NGO partnership" that Lister (2000) describes.

The tendency to privilege collective gains is observed in the reluctance of respondents to dwell on power imbalances in their NGO–NGO relationships. One respondent who did reveal her organization's imbalanced relationship with another NGO circumscribed her discomfort by saying, "It sounds like such a silly problem to bring up" but also allowed that "it's huge" (Org 29). This suggests that these power imbalances may be relatively widespread but deemphasized or hidden, not only in NNGO-SNGO partnerships, but also in the relationships among NNGOs. The fact that NGOs refrain from terminating imbalanced relationships is also reflective of the degree to which mutual dependence factors in NGOs partnering strategies. More attention to the extent and features of this phenomenon constitutes an important avenue for future research, particularly with regard to the unique organizational cultures and missions of NGOs in comparison to for-profit organizations.

Conversely, discourse about IGOs depicted NGO relationships with these partners as dominated by power imbalance. IGOs were described as powerful, not only because of their control over access to resources, but also because of their power to dictate the terms of partnerships, and to frame civil society issues. Assessing both power imbalance and mutual dependence among NGOs and their IGO partners reveals the different challenges NGOs face in negotiating their dependence with each of these members of the civil society community.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how RDT can be used to better understand how resources inform NGO–NGO and NGO-IGO partnerships. This study contributes to theory on power asymmetry and mutual dependence in the arena of civil society partnerships, and expands our understanding of the specific resources that are viewed as most critical to these organizations. Examining both power imbalance and mutual dependence aspects of resource dependence allows us to view the contradictions and challenges inherent to civil society partnering in a new light. While most RDT research warns against power imbalances, this research confirms private-sector studies (by Casciaro and Piskorski 2005; Gulati and Sytch 2007; Villanueva et al. 2012) which show that uneven organizational interdependence can be positive for both organizations, and promote community-level advantages.

This study also has practical organizational implications for NGOs. The resource dependence perspective not only emphasizes the environmental context within which leaders make strategic decisions, but also the ways that environment is perceived and interpreted. Our research shows some differences in how types of interorganizational partnerships are perceived by leaders. Building a greater awareness among NGO leaders regarding how the costs and benefits of partnerships are valued can provide NGOs with greater insights into power imbalances in particular. This includes reflecting upon what gets discussed and what gets ignored or brushed aside when evaluating partnerships.

Additionally, providing both NGO and IGO leaders with greater awareness of how and why partnerships form, are managed, and end can contribute to organizational interpretations of the environment and permit NGOs to act more effectively and efficiently in managing partnerships. For example, if a partnership is failing, deciding whether to end the partnership or to maintain it depends not only on resource considerations, but on the collective goals of the community at large. Future research in this area can compare organizational members' perspectives about resources and partnerships with codified data on partnerships to examine how closely perceptions mirror other data sources about the exchange of different types of resources and the existence of partnerships. Such an analysis would also allow us to determine the degree to which differing perceptions and interpretations of the environment produce different strategies. Additionally, future research can look more closely at the way national and international policy influence the management of partnerships.

This study faces some limitations, including a narrowly targeted sample of organizations. Because the Yearbook of International Organizations focuses on international NGOs, important NGOs in the children's rights community which operate at a local or national level are not represented. Also, our approach allows us to compartmentalize one commonly studied dimension of dependency (north–south power imbalance) by comparing views among prominent NNGOs. Future research would benefit from a comparative perspective among NNGOs and SNGOs. Re-examining NNGO-SNGO relationships with attention to both dimensions of dependence might shed new light on the strategies SNGOs use to manage their reliance on northern partners. As previous research indicates (Parks 2008), NGOs in different geographical and political contexts may experience different power dependencies stemming from the evolution of international, as well as local donor interests and politics over time. This leaves the possibility that the NNGOs represented here may underestimate the power imbalance felt by their southern partners. Along these lines, additional research should examine how cultural contexts (in local, organizational, and national terms; Acosta 2012) influence perceptions about resources and power.

Future research can also apply this interview-based approach to other NGO communities to determine whether and to what extent these findings generalize across other social issue domains, for example, to assess whether or not other human rights or global health communities would reproduce similar findings. Additionally, an analysis of the structure of partnership networks among organizations would be useful in gaining a stronger understanding of how interorganizational partnerships evolve from a network theory perspective. Finally, a comparison between NGO and for-profit organizations can demonstrate similarities and differences in these arenas. This study provides valuable insight, particularly into the persistence of suboptimal civil society partnerships and lays the groundwork for further work on the complexities of power asymmetry and mutual dependence in the civil society sector.

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Appendix: NGO Interview Protocol Excerpts

Partnering

(1) In general, when you think about organizations like your own, what kinds of partnerships between organizations are most common?
(2) If you were to rate it on a scale from 1 to 10, how important is partnering with other organizations for achieving your organization's goals? [1 = not important at all, 10 = extremely important.]
(3) Think of the top 3 organizations with which you are working. For each organization, please tell me how you work with these folks.
(4) What leads you to end a partnership with another organization?

Resources

(5) What are the most important types of resources for a children's rights organization, in general?
(6) What are the kinds of organizations that your organization competes with for resources?

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