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Sarah J. Zuckerman
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, szuckerman2@unl.edu

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Sarah J. Zuckerman

Department of Educational Administration,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA

Correspondence — Sarah J. Zuckerman, szuckerman2@unl.edu,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 141 Teachers Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0360, USA

ORCID — Sarah J. Zuckerman http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3330-6431

Abstract

Cross-sector partnerships, and collective impact, in particular, have gained increased attention as community-level strategies for tackling wicked, complex, social challenges such as child maltreatment. To date, there has been limited independent research on collective impact, especially in non-metropolitan areas with limited capacity. This case study examines the conditions that supported the development of a collective impact effort in a non-metropolitan community to address child well-being. It finds that small communities offer strengths that support collective impact as a social innovation as well as challenges that create vulnerabilities to outside influence that may stymie the development of locally developed social innovations.

Keywords: Case study; collective impact; community resilience; micropolitan; social innovation

Poverty contributes to higher rates of child maltreatment (Eckenrode, Smith, McCarthy & Dineen, 2014), including intentional or unintentional harm or threat of harm to a child and failure to meet a child's

basic physical and emotional needs (CDC, 2020). Placement in the foster care system increases the risk of behavior problems (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006), school failure (Piescher, Colburn, LaLiberte, & Hong, 2014), involvement in the juvenile justice system, teen parenthood, school dropout, and reduced earnings (Doyle, 2007). In rural places, limited access to prevention and intervention services (Grace, Zaslow, Brown, Aufseeser, & Bell, 2011) increases the risk for child maltreatment.

To overcome risk factors and challenges in providing services in rural communities, researchers have recommended states develop plans to support children from birth to age five that align with K-12 schooling and other services (Mann & Williams, 2011). Likewise, the need for cross-sector partnerships in the area of child abuse prevention has drawn the attention of policymakers (Gillam & Counts, 2019). For example, Title II of the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act amended the Community-Based Grants with language around developing, operating, expanding, enhancing, and coordinating initiatives (S. Res 3817, Sec 132 (1), 2010). This requires overcoming siloes between state agencies and nonprofit organizations to develop cross-sector partnerships (Grace et al., 2011; Mann & Williams, 2011). Cross-sector partnerships involve "the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately" (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006, p. 44).

Cross-sector partnerships have gained attention as a strategy to tackle wicked social problems, such as child maltreatment. Wicked problems have a high level of complexity and interdependency, resulting from the interplay of challenges in both the public and private sectors. Wicked problems resist isolated, programmatic approaches within one sector or organization (Biddle, Mette, & Mercado, 2018; Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Kania & Kramer, 2011). However, moving the needle on wicked problems requires more than just sharing resources; it requires members of different sectors to learn together using adaptive approaches to problem-solving in context (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014). Since 2011, *collective impact* has gained momentum as a model for cross-sector partnerships (Weaver & Cabaj, 2019). The collective impact framework is understood as five conditions that support cross-sector partnerships: a common agenda,

shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, constant communication, and the facilitation and logistical support from a backbone organization (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

In the state where this study took place, several partnerships are explicitly using the collective impact framework to guide cross-sector partnerships to address child maltreatment. Several are in rural and non-metropolitan communities, including the Northeast Prairie Coalition (NPC), chosen as the site of this study. This case selection responds to calls for understanding collective impact (Klaus & Weaver, 2019) in rural contexts. By doing so, the study contributes to the small but growing literature on rural cross-sector partnerships (e.g. Biddle et al., 2018; Zuckerman, 2019). Understanding the use of the collective impact framework in these contexts is important as customization to local context is an important principle of collective impact (Brady & Splansky Juster, 2016) and for cross-sector partnerships to be effective, they must be "*fit for purpose, in this place, at this time*" (Lawson, 2013, p. 614, emphasis original). As NPC remains in the developmental stage, this study responds to Henig, Riehl, Houston, Rebell, and Wolff (2016) call to build knowledge of how partnerships using collective impact develop. The focus of the present study is on how members of in a non-metropolitan area make use of the collective impact framework for social innovation in a context that is socially, economically, and politically different from the urban areas where most collective impact efforts are located (Henig et al., 2016).

Literature review

This section provides a brief overview of the collective impact framework, first articulated by Kania and Kramer (2011), as well as research on rural cross-sector partnerships. It highlights the importance of mobilization for common agenda setting, backbone organizations, and community readiness, which emerged as areas of particular importance to the current study.

Conditions of collective impact

The five conditions of collective impact include a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, constant

communication, and a backbone organization (Kania & Kramer, 2011). These conditions have been understood by practitioners as a model, framework, or tool to structure the practice of cross-sector partnerships (Mayan, Pauchulo, Gillespie, Misita, & Mejia, 2019). Framed in this way, the five conditions can be seen as key practices for how cross-sector partnerships effectively engage in collaboration aimed at solving wicked problems, such as child maltreatment. Several authors caution, however, that the conditions cannot be viewed as a checklist or recipe for communitylevel change (Gillam & Counts, 2019; Mayan et al., 2019). Indeed, one of the critiques of collective impact is whether structuring cross-sector partnerships around the five conditions create systems-level change (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016; Mayan et al., 2019; Wolff, 2016). However, Kania, Hanleybrown, and Splansky Juster (2014) caution that those participating in collective impact need to undergo mind-set shifts around who is involved, how work gets done, and how credit is shared for collective impact to succeed where other partnerships have failed. Likewise, they note the need to seek out adaptive, multipronged approaches rather than rely on technical, off the shelf solutions (Kania et al., 2014).

In the context of the case described in this study, the collective impact framework can be seen as a mechanism for increasing the coordination of child abuse prevention activities, as outlined in Title II of the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (S. Res 3817, Sec 132 (1), 2010). For example, according to the regional director of the Department of Human Services, state dollars cannot be used for child abuse prevention activities. Yet there are many organizations in the community that work with children and families that can support prevention by providing parenting classes, addiction recovery programs, parent-child therapy, as well as distributing resources to help parents meet their basic needs and increasing the availability of high-quality childcare. Coordinating these services may contribute to increased support for parents and reduced child maltreatment.

Collective impact operates as a mechanism for coordination of child maltreatment prevention first by bringing together stakeholders from state agencies and community organizations to create a common agenda through setting shared goals, such as reducing foster care placement, as well as a theory of action to meet that goal. This theory of action then guides mutually reinforcing activities or programming

and services offered by various organizations. The collective impact framework also asks partner organizations to collect and share data around common indicators such as the number of families referred to child protection services and the number of children placed in foster care. Constant communication includes regular meetings, as well as e-mails and other communications. Lastly, the condition that most sets the collective impact framework apart from other cross-sector partnerships is the backbone organization that provides leadership and logistical support (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

The following sections expand on three areas of collective impact most pertinent to this study: readiness, mobilization and issue framing as related to agenda setting, and the backbone organization. While the collective impact literature suggests there is no particular order for the five conditions (Mayan et al., 2019), these three elements appear important to creating cross-sector partnerships outside of urban areas (Zuckerman, 2016a).

Readiness

To develop the five conditions of collective impact, several preconditions create readiness: influential champions with the credibility to mobilize leaders and community members to develop the agenda; early financial support from an anchor funder; a sense of urgency that mobilizes members (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012). These prerequisites, particularly an anchor institution that can provide financial and backbone support, appear to support the development of collective impact efforts in rural areas (Zuckerman, 2016a). Previous studies suggest that such institutions can contribute to a sense of urgency through the collection and dissemination of data, as well as through efforts to frame issues and engage community members in dialogue (Zuckerman, 2016a, 2019). Likewise, Klaus and Saunders (2016) identify the readiness in the community to engage in change as a key factor, including the willingness to collaborate and knowledge about the problem at hand. Such willingness to collaborate may be created through previous successes with collaboration (Zuckerman, 2019), limited resources, and recognition of shared stakes in the outcomes (Lawson, 2013). Additionally, existing social networks provide a foundation for collective impact, particularly when individuals have been in their roles for long periods (Miller, Scanlan, & Phillippo,

2017). Lastly, community leaders who serve as champions contribute to bringing people together (Zuckerman, 2016b).

Reciprocity of mobilization and issue framing

In addition to the conditions and preconditions, people must animate the mechanisms of collective impact, and bringing the right mix of the right stakeholders to the table provides direction to the effort. These individuals should bring diverse perspectives, as well as contribute resources, and should hold decision-making power in their organization (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Kania et al., 2014). However, this approach to mobilization has been criticized as bringing a certain type of individual, often male, white, and middle class, to the table (LeChasseur, 2016). Likewise, this focus often overlooks the need to bring those most affected by the problem to generate novel solutions (Klaus & Saunders, 2016). However, long-standing patterns of social isolation and exclusion, and the closed nature of professional and social networks, limit the mobilization of low income and minority community members, requiring deliberate grassroots organizing efforts to build bridging relationships to engage these individuals (Biddle et al., 2018; Christens & Inzeo, 2015; Miller et al., 2017).

The mix of stakeholders mobilized affects the development of the common agenda through the framing of social problems and potential solutions. Framing refers to the ways language is used to communicate about social problems, reflecting particular ways of understanding based on cultural knowledge and values (Goffman, 1974; LeChasseur, 2016). Members of different professions have institutionalized ways of knowing (Hooper- Briar & Lawson, 1996), requiring deliberate dialogue in civic spaces to reach common understandings of problems (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001). Professional ways of knowing and the historical marginalization of minority groups in rural places create imbalances in cultural and institutional power. As a result, certain perspectives are privileged, creating challenges for framing (Biddle et al., 2018). These perspectives limit potential solutions when the voices of those who are most affected are not included (Walzer & Weaver, 2019; Wolff, 2016). Likewise, when abstract liberalism prevails, frames tend to treat outcomes as the result of individuals and are often presented in ways that mask disparities between groups (LeChasseur, 2016). Neoliberal frames that emphasize

individual competition and success have been identified as particularly problematic for rural communities (Casto, McGrath, Sipple, & Todd, 2016). Mobilization and issue framing are cyclical processes: who is at the table contributes to the shared understandings that underlie the common agenda and in turn, the common agenda may or may not mobilize additional stakeholders (Zuckerman, 2016a, 2019).

Role of backbone organizations

Research on cross-sector partnerships identifies a higher likelihood of success when there are one or more linking mechanisms (Bryson et al., 2006). In collective impact, backbone organizations serve as linking mechanisms, through six activities: guiding vision and strategy; supporting aligned activities; establishing shared measurement practices; building public will; advancing policy; and mobilizing funding (Turner et al., 2012). By taking on the day-to-day operations of the collaboration, backbone organizations allow members to focus on problem-solving (Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2011). Backbone organizations preferably remain objective. Backbone organizations been identified as the condition of collective impact that most sets it apart from other collaborative efforts (Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Turner, Merchant, Kania, & Martin, 2012a).

One or more existing nonprofit organizations may take on backbone functions, or a new organization may be formed (Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2011; Turner et al., 2012a). Backbone organizations with legitimacy and a positive reputation in the community can generate trust and buy-in among members (Gillam & Counts, 2019; Zuckerman, 2016a). Backbone organizations provide space and facilitation for dialogue and strategic planning, as well as contribute to the capacity of partners (Banyai & Fleming, 2016). Backbone organizations employ one or more full-time staff members, sometimes referred to as a *convener*, who is responsible for bringing together stakeholders, maintaining their engagement, and facilitating dialogue. Conveners need the skills to bring people together, build trust, focus people's attention, mediate conflict, and frame issues (Zuckerman, 2019). They also need strong strategic planning knowledge and experience, as well as strong interpersonal and leadership skills. Others have identified likability and conveying confidence as key characteristics, in addition to the ability to create a friendly and safe environment, promote

learning dispositions, and establish inquiry-based approaches. Lastly, conveners need to make community-minded decisions (Gillam & Counts, 2019; Kania et al., 2014; Striver, 2019). For non-metropolitan communities, identifying skilled convener and a readymade backbone organization with the capacity to mobilize stakeholders, facilitate dialogue, engage in leadership and capacity building of members, as well as provide support for data and logistics, may be a challenge as these communities have fewer organizations and limited civic infrastructure (Brown, Cromartie, & Kulcsar, 2004; Flora, Flora, Spears, & Swanson, 1992; Zuckerman, 2019)

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on two related sociological approaches to rural community development, social innovation and community resilience, which aligns conceptually with collective impact in non-metropolitan communities.

Social innovation and community resilience

With its focus on building relationships and adaptive problem-solving, collective impact can be seen as a strategy to support social innovation and community resilience, two concepts that contribute to the long-term sustainability of rural and non-metropolitan communities. Both are contested terms, relying in large part on aspects of social and human capital (Bock, 2016; Cheshire, Esparcia, & Shucksmith, 2015). However, they offer a lens through which to examine collective impact. Particularly, Bock (2016) identified social relationships, practices, and community norms as contributing to social innovations, which must be acceptable within a community as relevant and ethically tolerable. Bock (2016) also suggests social innovation must consider equity in the face of broader rural challenges, such as economic restructuring. With its focus on co-construction of solutions, adaptive problem-solving, and customization to the local context (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014), the collective impact framework offers a mechanism to support social innovation. Likewise, collective impact can provide structure for social innovation by developing a common agenda for collective action. Collective impact can also create spaces for new

social learning that provides opportunities for individuals to draw from local, tacit knowledge and engaging with knowledge from outside the local community (Zuckerman, 2019) to address unmet social needs such as child maltreatment.

Further, Bock (2016) suggests innovation has been viewed as a means for rural communities to increase their community resilience, or, "the ability of local communities to adapt to, and recover from, disruptive events," (Cheshire et al., 2015, p. 9). Community resilience has also been described as enhancing community wellbeing by creating a common objective and encouraging collective action, relying on individual and collective capacity (Markatoni, 2019). Community resilience has been identified as a means to further rural community development (Cavaye & Ross, 2019). Collective impact as a framework for social innovation provides spaces and structures for such social learning and cascading levels of collaboration (Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Zuckerman, 2019) to tackle wicked problems, as well as community development to address issues such as poverty that contribute to child maltreatment.

However, collective impact has two limitations for community resilience. First, collective impact requires preconditions of capacity and infrastructure (Cafer, Green, & Goreham, 2019). In non-metropolitan areas, nonprofit organizations that can serve as the backbone and trained facilitators are two examples of preconditions that may not exist (Zuckerman, 2016a, 2019). Second, without attention to power differences, disenfranchisement of certain groups, collective impact may benefit only some members of the community while continuing to maintain social isolation and exclusion of marginalized groups (La-Chasseur, 2016).

Methods and materials

This study utilized an instrumental case study design in which the case is selected to study a particular issue or phenomenon, (Stake, 1995) in this case collective impact in a nonmetropolitan setting. Case study methods are particularly appropriate for collective impact efforts as they are bounded systems deeply embedded in their contexts and include the complex interplay of variables (Gillam, Counts, & Garstka, 2016; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). Case study relies on a variety of data

sources for triangulation to increase credibility (Yin, 2014). In this case, data collection included interviews with members of the collective impact effort, observations of meetings, and document collection over a yearlong period from 2017–18. The length of the study period allowed for the design to evolve matching the evolution of the collective impact effort (Stake, 1995). It also allowed the researcher to be immersed in the field for a significant length of time and to observe repeated patterns in meetings (Yin, 2014) and to engage in follow up interviews with key informants to reflect on the collective impact effort's work across time.

Case selection

The first step was to identify an instrumental case, in this case, a non-metropolitan community that is home to a cross-sector partnership using the collective impact framework. In the Great Plains state where this study was conducted, a nonprofit organization, the Great Plains Children's Foundation (GPCF) provides technical and financial support for several collective impact efforts aimed at improving child well-being outcomes, such as a reduction in foster care placements. From the list available on the GPCF website, the researcher used Census data to narrow the potential cases to those located in a rural or micropolitan area.[1] From this list, the Northeast Prairie Collaborative (NPC) was selected in part due to its proximity to the researcher and the willingness of the convener to participate and facilitate connections with members.

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1. The US Census defines a rural area as any area outside of an urban cluster of at least 2,500 people and defines a micropolitan area as defined as a labor market area on an urban cluster with a population of at least 10,000 but fewer than 50,000 people. Northeast Prairie is a micropolitan community of approximately 25,000, located in a non-metropolitan county, which according to the USDA ERS (USDA, 2017) consists of a combination of open countryside, rural towns of less than 2,500 residents, and urbanized areas of between 2,500 and 49,000. Northeast Prairie serves as a retail and service hub for the rest of the county and a larger, primarily agricultural region, resulting in a large number of low wage jobs in fast food and big box retail establishments, which contribute to a median income that is approximately $7,000 below the state median (U.S. Census, 2017).

Data collection

Data collection occurred from August 2017 to May 2018 under an IRB approval from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Fieldwork occurred at least once a month, consisting primarily of observations of monthly meetings of the early childhood working group of NPC. These meetings lasted an hour and a half. Members discussed their on-going projects aimed at increasing the quality and quantity of early childhood care as well as reducing child neglect and abuse in the community by providing evidence-based parenting programs and mental health services and bringing awareness to child abuse and neglect prevention. During the period observed, the early childhood committee also used this time to work on a grant application for a new early childhood and service center. This included developing plans for conducting surveys and focus groups and reviewing the resulting data. The researcher took notes about the topics of conversations, recording what the individuals who attended said, as well as the tone of the meetings. The researcher also took note of the informal communications between members after meetings, which frequently focused on meeting the needs of individual families in the community. Members included members of the local school district, grant sponsored early childhood home visitors, Extension educators engaged in early childhood programs, and members of nonprofit organizations that work with children, such as the local Community Action agency that oversees the Head Start program in the area. Additionally, a meeting of the full collaborative was observed, along with a steering committee meeting and a focus group conducted by the GPCF as part of their developmental evaluation efforts. Field notes captured the nature of conversations and interactions of NPC members.

In addition to meeting observations, interviews were conducted with 18 NPC members, including four members of the early childhood committee, eight current and former steering committee members, and four additional coalition members. These individuals included nonprofit leaders, such as the head of the local community health center and the regional Head Start Director and district and school leaders. Additionally, interviews were conducted with the convener, a consultant hired by GCFP, a member of GCFP, and two members of a collective impact effort in a neighboring community who

worked with NCP during its early stages and were identified by the steering committee members as influential. Selection of interviews started through conversations with the convener and Extension specialists and proceeded through snowball sampling as individuals were asked to name other key members. Interviews stopped when no more new names were offered. The convener and chair of the early childhood committee were interviewed a second time to provide reflections on the past year.

Semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. They were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview protocols focused on the mobilization of members and their engagement; individuals' understandings of the Coalition's goals and efforts to meet them; whether the Coalition has changed their work in their organization; and what factors keep the Coalition moving forward. Individuals identified as having an important role in the formation of the Coalition were also asked to describe the formation of NPC. These protocols were developed with input from two Extension specialists engaged with NPC. Follow up protocols for the convener and early childhood committee chair were developed from observation notes and previous interviews. Memos were created after interviews to capture emerging themes (Yin, 2016). Documents were collected from the GCPF website, from the convener, and at meetings.

Analysis

Interview transcripts, meeting notes, and documents were loaded into an NVIVO 11 database for analysis. First round coding consisted of open coding, with a focus on in vivo coding, which uses words or phrases from participants to code sections of data, thus maintaining the voice of participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). This resulted in a list of provisional codes, which were examined for similarities around which to consolidate the codebook by merging codes and creating broader categories (Miles et al., 2013). For example, "people wear too many hats" and "barriers" were consolidated as "barriers to mobilization", under the parent code, "mobilization." In other cases, broader categories, such as community strengths were divided into more detailed categories. This included sorting participants' descriptions of their communities into categories such as "schools," "safety," "quality of life," and "social networks." To increase credibility,

the researcher engaged in analytic conversations with the convener and several members of the early childhood committee during data collection and a summary report was provided for feedback. Additionally, inconsistencies and disagreement were sought during analysis and presented in the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Researcher positionality

As noted above, the research is not a member of a collective impact effort but is a faculty member in a university school of education with an interest in cross-sector partnerships that support children from birth to age eight, inside and outside of school. The researcher's interest in NPC includes the reduction of foster placement and increase of early childhood programs as contributing factors to better educational outcomes. The researcher met the convener of NPC during a trip sponsored by the school of education during their first year as a faculty member. From this introduction, the research engaged in conversations with the convener, two Extension faculty members, and a member of GPCF during the design of the study. As someone new to the state, the research brought an outsider perspective to the study; however, this created challenges in gaining trust with members. Due to this, many of the interviews were conducted after the researcher had been to multiple meetings as an observer to gain the trust of NPC members.

Results

After five years, the Northeast Prairie Coalition continues to establish the conditions of collective impact while increasing communication about and coordination of services for children, youth, and families. Participants identified leadership, relationship, and attitudes among members as creating readiness. Participants reported successful mobilization of organizational partners; however, they also identified limited mobilization of marginalized populations and community elites. The range of goals offered by participants suggests a common agenda is still developing. External support appeared to both facilitate and limit innovation.

Readiness: leadership, relationships, and attitude

According to participants, Northeast Prairie had several characteristics that contributed to readiness for collective impact: a core of community leaders; relationships among human service agency members; and attitudes that reflect a commitment to the community and kids.

Leadership

Participants reported the Coalition started with conversations among a group of agency and nonprofit leaders, many of whom had been in their field, if not their position, for decades. A member of NPC credited this group as having the vision and the ability to bring people together. Participants frequently mentioned the importance of their leadership in starting the Coalition and their continued leadership on the Steering Committee that provides direction for the Coalition. According to a member of GPCF, the willingness of three to five highly respected local leaders to engage in collective impact as servant leaders, without their egos, generates buy-in from others in the community.

Relationships

According to participants, the small size of Northeast Prairie facilitates relationships. The early childhood chair, Tara, reported Northeast Prairie is a "bigger version of a small community . . . I can go to places like our coffee shop and run into somebody I know." As a result, convener Isabel stated, "Somehow everyone . . . knows each other," and regional agency director Charles reported this makes "it easier to interact and easier to run into [people] in different places . . . So I think that makes it easier to get things started."

Likewise, previous collaborative efforts created stocks of bonding relationships. For example, Tara reported previous collaborative efforts in early childhood went back "a good eight years . . . so some of us are tried and true for a long time." The length of relationships in the early childhood committee appeared to contribute to the friendly interactions during meetings, which frequently felt like a monthly gathering of friends. Among some, these friendships spilled out into their personal lives. Maria, a member of the early childhood working group stated, "I use Isabel as support person a lot." When asked to clarify if she meant help with the families

she serves or herself, she exclaimed, "Both, both!" She continued, "Because we serve a very similar population that can be pretty high stress . . . So it's nice to be able to have somebody that understands those stresses that you can process things with." These relationships appeared to provide a foundation for NPC and to lubricate the work of the early childhood committee.

In addition to bonding relationships, the regional nature of social service agencies provided opportunities for linking relationships. Two members of NPC were involved in a collective impact effort in another community in the region, Larkspur, allowing them to see the model in action. According to Isabel, "They started saying, 'Why can't we do something similar here? We have the capacity to do that, we have great organizations here, and we have a great community." Charles reported that from the interactions with the Larkspur Coalition, calls were made to GPCF to start the ball rolling to get backbone support. Members of the Larkspur Coalition traveled to Northeast Prairie to discuss their work; however, NCP did not simply replicate the Larkspur model, but rather learned through "people talking to people." A NCP member reported the value in going through the process to identify what would or would not work in their community. The adaptation of the collective impact model to their own community was evident in several participants' reference to NPC partnership as "community impact," emphasizing community working together and reflecting their understandings of their work.

Attitudes

Participants also identified a commitment to community and kids as another form of readiness. Charles attributed this commitment to the small size of the community, stating, "In [the capitol] you get invested in your neighborhoods. But in the smaller towns . . . you get more invested in your community." Steering committee member Jane attributed this attitude to the agricultural origins of the community, describing a "rural mind-set" defined by autonomy paired with neighbors looking out for one another. This shared commitment allowed members to "take off their agency hats." A founding member reported the small size of the community reduced barriers to collaboration "because [partners] are all kind of focused on the same groups of people." She also stated, "I think [the community] is really cohesive." She also stated that there are many volunteers

in the community. However, the high level of volunteerism, particularly among people who work in the social services, reportedly contributed to burnout.

The commitment to community was particularly strong when it came to children. A steering committee member reported this included all the children in the community, stating, "They are all our kids." Among the early childhood committee, participants reported that the commitment to community and children maintained their engagement in the Coalition. For example, committee member Maria reported this mind-set coupled with teamwork was a "key ingredient" to the success of NPC, stating:

> Y'know, I feel like most of us are in it because our hearts are in it. It's not just a job. We actually care for the people that we serve. We want to fight for them. We advocate very hard for these families. We want to see them be successful. And we go above and beyond to try and see them be successful.

Coming together: mobilization and issue framing

Commitments to community, previous relationships, and leadership contributed to mobilization of members to the Coalition. A presentation of community data by GPCF brought members together to identify needs in the community. While this spurred some members to action, it did not bring everyone to the table. In particular, participants reported they wanted to see local businesses at the table, beyond annual donations to coalition activities, but to date, they have not succeeded in involving local businesses, despite their multiple attempts. This was particularly striking as a founding member of the Coalition moved into a new role as the director of Chamber of Commerce, but dropped out of the Coalition, reportedly due to time constraints. Likewise, a handful of participants reported a need to mobilize marginalized low-income and nonwhite community members, but had not yet found strategies to do so.

Additionally, mobilization was challenged by turnover, which partially depended on changes within partner organizations. For example, an active member from the faith community was moved to another parish, which then left the Coalition needing to recruit a new

member to represent the many churches in the community. Convener Isabel reported that seeking out new members proceeds through one-on-one conversations in which she tries to identify overlap in interests with potential members. When initial findings were presented to the Coalition a year after data collection, there were many new faces, which a coalition member reported was due to turnover at partner organizations.

In addition to bringing people together, the community data began conversations to identify needs. In terms of identifying problems and potential solutions, notably, participants reported a wide range of goals, including rebuilding social capital in the community, increasing communication of and access to existing services, and creating self-sufficient families, as well as specific indicators such as reducing foster care placements and teen pregnancies. The range of goals, however, suggests a common agenda has not yet fully developed.

However, it was noted that participants frequently framed their efforts as supporting "the working poor," – a term that seemed to suggest moral judgment about who was deserving of help. Likewise, there appeared to be limited understanding among members about why parents, many of whom reportedly worked multiple low-wage jobs, were unable to make ends meet. Toward the end of data collection, a greater understanding of the root causes of poverty seemed to be emerging. During a meeting of the early childhood committee, one member exclaimed, "Why do we let them get away with it?" referring to the low wages paid by employers in town. Similarly, Isabel mentioned a need to rethink strategies for helping families meet their basic needs as they were seeing the same families repeatedly needing help with utility payments or clothing.

Backbone to the backbone

In addition to inputs from the community, the NPC received significant support from GPCF. A member of GPCF described the organization as "the backbone to the backbones," including NCP, Larkspur, and other community-based collective impact efforts across the state. In part, this reflects the limited organizational capacity in smaller communities. Larkspur housed their coalition in the local United Way office. In Northeast Prairie, the United Way served as the fiscal agent initially.

This reportedly created some tensions and at the start of the study, NPC applied to start a new nonprofit organization to fulfill backbone functions. Unexpected delays left them waiting nine months later.

GPCF's also influenced NPC as a funder. When asked where the idea of collective impact came from, the convener of Larkspur stated, "I would tell you some of it was driven from the funders at the beginning as a suggested model to create community change." GPCF also exerted influence by using NCP as a subcontractor on federal grants to deliver evidence-based programs. However, Tara reported some of these programs were not well attended, despite providing food and childcare. When asked if they had thought of other interventions, she responded they would continue to try to find better times and locations for these programs. Although some members did not seem to question whether these interventions were a match for the community, the convener spoke about going off script from a grant-funded intervention, which she felt did not match the culture of the community and failed to engage parents in conversations.

While GPCF had outsized influence, participants reported the convener as a key ingredient of the Coalition. Although none wanted to speak ill of the former convener, many seemed to indicate that NPC gained traction after finding the right person to fill the role of convener several years ago. Participants described Isabel as "the central cog" that keeps things connected and moving forward, stating "she does not give up." Her leadership style was described by Matthew as "empowering" and "facilitative," in that she works to help others meet their goals, rather than exerting top-down leadership. Members described Isabel as "a big thinker," "able to translate that into ways that grab people," willing to learn, and genuinely invested in the community and collective impact as a strategy to improve the community for all. Participants also praised her personality as "open, positive, and outgoing." Similarly, Tara stated, "People enjoy [Isabel] and having that great personality really pulls other people in and helps us. She listens, she's really good at listening to everybody and listening to her committees and, and helping the drive, drive us that way too." At the time of writing, the convener had moved to another state with her family and a new convener has been hired.

Early impacts

One of the Coalition's espoused goals is reducing the number of children who enter foster care. Many viewed connecting families to existing services as a key prevention strategy. For example, according to the annual report for 2017, the biggest accomplishment of NCP was a collaboration with local police to provide a single referral card to a central navigator in the Coalition. Rather than a trunkful of program brochures, the single referral card helped police connect families with someone who will follow up and help connect them with services. One officer reported the value of this connection "Rather than waiting for the next call, and the next, until it's a really bad one for them and it's more than just a referral." The convener worked with police to streamline the process and provide training, which resulted in buy-in.

As noted previously, one of the programs that originated with GPCF failed to reach the intended population. This fact was reiterated in the annual report that stated no families had participated, despite providing incentives. However, the following spring, Isabel reported completing this parenting program in a bilingual English and Spanish format, cofacilitated by Maria. She reported that the parents who attended engaged in cross-cultural exchanges, sharing nursery rhymes from their home countries and building relationships across language barriers based on their shared experiences as parents. This innovation appeared to better meet the needs of those in the community that members reported is hard to serve due to the language barriers. Like going off-script in another program, as described above, when the Coalition adapted these grant-funded programs to their setting, they had greater success.

Limitations

Before drawing conclusions from this study, it is important to recognize the limitations of this study. The case study design created limitations including the selection of a single collective impact effort, which limits the generalizability of the findings (Stake, 1995) to other non-metropolitan communities. Thus, findings should be applied

cautiously. Second, the sampling strategy focused on active members of NPC, which like other cross sector partnerships in rural areas (Zuckerman, 2016b), consisted largely of middle-class professionals. As a result, the voices of those who received services provided by NPC are missing, as are those of community elites.

Discussion

This instrumental case study examined the use of the collective impact framework in a cross-sector partnership in a non-metropolitan community. Although NPC remains a work in progress, the findings extend the knowledge of how cross-sector partnerships use the collective impact framework, their development, and the challenges of collaboration (Henig et al., 2016) in non-metropolitan communities. Like previous research in this area (Zuckerman, 2016a, 2016b, 2019), the findings identified the importance of readiness and the impacts of social networks on mobilization and issue framing. However, it extends the knowledge base by examining the impacts of an external backbone organization. Each of these will be discussed below.

The findings indicate sources of community readiness for a cross-sector partnership using the collective impact framework in the area of child maltreatment. These included several leaders who acted as champions, stocks of bonding relationships among social service professionals, and the commitments of members to kids and community. Previous research suggests that prior collaborative efforts and bonding relationships facilitate commitment to collective impact (Zuckerman, 2016a). The findings also corroborate previous research that suggests smaller communities offer opportunities for social innovation in their tight-knit social networks, which promote bonding relationships among human service professionals and the kinds of informal relationships that support collaboration (Gillam et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2017; Shucksmith, 2010; Zuckerman, 2016a). A unique finding of the study is that the regional nature of social service provision in a largely rural state contributed to the creation of social frontiers (Burt, 1992; Miller et al., 2017) that allowed the idea of collective impact to spread across communities. This occurred through a variety of social learning opportunities. Likewise, GPCF's role as a backbone

organization to partnerships across the state created additional forums for social learning.

However, like previous research (Zuckerman, 2016b), this study found that the degree of closure and the strength of ties within social networks appears to have limited the participation of those who are most affected by the issues of poverty and child maltreatment. The mobilization of such individuals has been identified as a key in changing power dynamics and developing better solutions (LeChasseur, 2016; Walzer & Weaver, 2019), as well as possibly realizing social innovation's potential for equity (Bock, 2016). Yet, bringing marginalized individuals into cross-sector partnerships may be challenged by rural social geography that includes difficult terrain, long distances, limited transportation, rigid social boundaries, and social isolation and exclusion, (Zuckerman, 2016b), or the mechanisms that deny individuals access to and participation in mainstream society, informal networking, and civic life (Granovetter, 1973; Levitas, Pantazi, Fahmy, Gordon, Llyod, & Patsios, 2007). The overabundance of strong ties and a lack of weak ties (Miller et al., 2017) appear to have affected the mobilization of the right mix of the right stakeholders (Lawson, 2013) by limiting the available perspectives at the table and limiting the ideas available for framing and social learning (Zuckerman, 2019) that contribute to social innovation (Bock, 2016). Despite this, NPC's use of collective impact appeared to provide strategies and a container for social interactions among members that led to social innovations, such as the development of a bilingual parent program that proved more successful than the standard-issue, off the shelf English only version.

Lastly, the limited capacity in the community to provide backbone support contributed to the involvement of a statewide organization. GPCF provided resources and capacity that allowed NPC to come together to engage in a broader collaboration than previous work, but at the same time may have hindered local social innovation through the emphasis on scaling up research-based solutions. These solutions were more successful when tailored to the local community, reinforcing the importance of acceptability of social innovation (Bock, 2016) and the need for solutions driven by adaptive, social learning strategies (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014).

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of individual case studies for generalization (Stake, 1995), this study provides knowledge on how cross-sector partnerships in non-metropolitan communities can engage with the collective impact framework in ways that may support social innovation for wicked problems, such as child maltreatment. First, it corroborates the double edge sword of strong social networks in smaller communities, which may make it easier to bring partners together, yet also limit the participation of those most affected by these problems. As a result, limited ideas are available from which to frame problems and solutions and to engage in social learning for social innovation. Second, the findings along with previous research (Zuckerman, 2019) suggest that despite these limitations, collective impact as a framework for cross-sector partnerships provides spaces and mechanisms that allow for social innovation and new ideas to generate local solutions to local problems. While the potential of collective impact for social innovation for community development and resilience remains to be seen, having structures and processes in place for collaboration, and developing capacity of members, can contribute to communities' ability to bounce back without government support (Cheshire et al., 2015).

Third, the case study provides a contrast to previous studies of a collective impact effort in a non-metropolitan community with a private foundation that provided significant capacity and resources to support the initial development efforts (Zuckerman, 2016b, 2019). Together, these studies suggest that there is a need for resources and capacity to engage in social innovation. While advocates of social innovation as a rural development strategy promote opportunities for civic initiatives to empower local communities (Bock, 2016), this study suggests that as a strategy for community development and resilience, collective impact alone cannot allow communities to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. With continued political climates of austerity in the US and abroad, there is a shift of responsibility for the common good, in this case, child well-being to the private rather than public sector (Bock, 2016), therefore leaving communities to rely more and more on nonprofit organizations. For many rural and non-metropolitan communities, there may not be such an organization, leaving them to turn to external agencies such as GPCF for resources and capacities.

This appeared to hamper the social innovation of NPC. Further, such reliance on nonprofit organizations for the resources and capacity to use the collective impact framework as a vehicle for social innovation may further the inequities between rural and nonmetropolitan communities, some of which Bock (2016) points out, are thriving, while others are not.

Further research on the use of the collective impact framework in non-metropolitan communities needs to move beyond individual case studies (e.g. Gillam & Counts, 2019). This could include cross-case analysis that brings together in-depth stories with comparative analysis to explore complexity over multiple contexts (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). The use of comparative study is particularly warranted by the variation of collective impact efforts and their contexts (Cooper, 2017; Gillam et al., 2016). Likewise, further research in this area needs to engage more deeply in questions of inequities between rural and urban places, as well as within rural places (McHenry-Sorber, 2014).

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