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Rethinking Perspectives of Power in Collaborative Governance

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Power is an important concept in understanding collaborative governance, however, the existing research is largely dominated by the functional and critical perspectives of power. Aided by a conceptual content analysis of power used in collaborative governance literature in the top public administration journals, we viewed power as a family resemblance concept that should be conceptualized through four perspectives: functional, critical, social construction, and pragmatic. We provide elaboration of each of these four perspectives and propose counterarguments to assumptions that have arisen due to the reliance on a functional or critical perspective of power. We conclude that viewing power as a family resemblance concept with at least four perspectives offers collaborative governance researchers the ability to adopt the best perspective that is the most useful for their analysis and most helpful for public administrators to understand power in their collaborative efforts.

Keywords: Power, Collaboration, Collaborative Governance, Content Analysis

Interorganizational collaboration in the public sector has become the norm. Rarely is a single, traditional government agency solely responsible for addressing a public policy problem. Such collaboration involves working with multiple agencies within the same layer of government, with agencies at different layers of government (Mullin & Daley, 2010), and with private and nonprofit organizations (Bryson et al., 2015). In response to what has been happening in practice, the concept of collaborative governance has flourished within public administration literature in the past thirty years. It has been studied across a wide range of public administration contexts, such as U.S. federal energy policy (Purdy, 2012), marine aquaculture partnerships (Calanni et al., 2014), mental health services delivery (Broer et al., 2012), homelessness service systems (Hafer, 2018), and emergency management (Kapucu, 2005). Such research has created a substantial body of knowledge regarding public sector collaboration—it has provided multiple collaborative governance frameworks (e.g., Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2015; Emerson et al., 2012) and expounded upon numerous concepts that are essential to collaborative endeavors, such as leadership (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Silvia, 2011), trust (Calanni et al., 2014; Moynihan, 2009), and antecedent conditions to collaboration (Chen, 2010; Cigler, 1999).

The concept of power is also closely tied to collaboration—particularly in collaborative arrangements involving traditional government agencies (Provan & Lemaire, 2012)—but has received less attention than that of other essential concepts. This is contrary to calls of some public administration researchers who claim the concept of power is central in understanding

the dynamics of collaborative public management (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001) and collaborative governance (Purdy, 2012). Additionally, the importance of understanding how power is understood and exercised in collaborative governance endeavors has been demonstrated in many empirical situations, including establishing performance measurement systems (Lavertu, 2016), regulatory oversight (Purdy, 2012), and rural economic development (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001). This article provides insight on how public administration researchers have interpreted and conceptualized power in collaborative governance endeavors by using a conceptual content analysis methodology and adopting multiple perspectives of power.

Classic public administration research has stressed the importance of understanding the relationship between power and public administration in general, as best illustrated by Long (1949) who asserts that “the lifeblood of administration is power” (p. 257). Such classic research on power has also provided conceptualizations of how power is largely used to influence or control others. For example, the widely cited typology of French and Raven (1959) categorizes power into five bases (i.e., reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power). This view of power considers it generally as a tangible resource that is a property of a relationship (Ran & Qi, 2019). Research that directly addresses power in collaborative endeavors tends to follow this line of reasoning and also tends to focus on the idea and process of balancing power among the actors (individuals or organizations) involved, which frequently involves empowering weaker stakeholders to participate (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2006; 2015). Purdy (2012) suggests that analyzing the sources and arenas of power of collaborative governance endeavors sheds light on potential power imbalances that may be a concern and require balancing. Additionally, power and power imbalances are important considerations in understanding the antecedents, process, and outcomes of collaborative governance endeavors since the interplay of power mechanisms among actors in the collaboration can impact each (Thomson & Perry, 2006). For example, the creation of “mandated” collaborative governance situations—which form “...when bureaucratic or hierarchical mechanisms are used by a third party to bring separate organizations together to pursue complex objectives” (McNamara, 2016, p. 68; Rodríguez et al., 2007)—is a governance mechanism that is focused on spurring collaborative governance but originates through a top-down power structure. Such arrangements have appeared frequently as service delivery models in the human services field (e.g., Hafer, 2018). Scholars in collaborative public management research often consider public managers as key actors who are critical in ensuring ongoing interorganizational collaboration, thus making them key to power balancing (Crosby & Bryson, 2005; O’Leary & Vij, 2012; O’Toole, 2015; Silvia, 2011).

While this research has laid a foundation of how power is conceptualized in collaborative governance endeavors (and highlighted the importance of understanding how it operates in such), power is not a simple concept and has been studied in multiple social science disciplines. Borrowing from theory and research on power in sociology and organization studies offers insight into how power can be further conceptualized in collaborative governance endeavors. For example, in organization studies, Hardy and Clegg (2002) detail the struggle behind conceptualizing power and reach the conclusion that a general or single theory of power is not desirable. Indeed, viewing power from multiple perspectives assists in preventing the reduction of the concept of power to a single conceptual definition, which limits the potential usefulness of the concept when studying organizations. While some scholars studying organizations have suggested categorizing power as an ‘essentially contested concept’ (e.g., Lukes, 2005), some sociology scholars have claimed that this categorization limits the usefulness of the concept (Haugaard, 2010). By engaging in continual contestation of the multiple conceptual perspectives of power, we are implicitly suggesting that there is one ‘best’ conceptualization. Such a position does not embrace the rich conceptual idea of power and runs the risk of disregarding multiple perspectives as ‘not-the-best’ while they may provide useful insight into how power impacts different social phenomena (Haugaard, 2010).

An established way to move forward with this dilemma, as suggested and demonstrated by Haugaard (2010), is to consider power a family resemblance concept—this is a philosophical notion developed by Wittgenstein (1967) that multiple conceptualizations or categorizations of a concept do not share a single essence and are best viewed as having overlapping characteristics, yet there is not a set of characteristics which all the conceptualizations have in common. In other words, a family resemblance concept will have multiple amorphous conceptualizations with fuzzy boundaries between them. This differs from classical views of categorization where “a category was assumed to be homogeneous in content and separated from other categories by distinct boundaries (Lakoff, 1987)” (Ran & Duimering, 2007, p. 161). When using and describing family resemblance concepts, it is imperative to convene to the receiving audience how the word is being used based on the linguistic and social context of the user (Ran & Duimering, 2007). The quintessential example of the family resemblance concept is that of the concept of ‘game’ (Haugaard, 2010; Wittgenstein, 1967). Leunbach (2021) summarizes this example:

Games have many things in common. There is not, however, any one distinguishing feature or set of features in common to all and only games. Games, in other words, resemble each other in the same way that blood relations might resemble each other—through a series of ‘overlapping’ and ‘crisscrossing’ similarities, but not through a single distinguishing characteristic that runs through the entire family (p. 3).

In addition to the concept of power, the family resemblance approach has been applied to multiple other fuzzy concepts, such as law (Bix, 2003), religion (Harrison, 2006), and entrepreneurship (Leunbach, 2021). Adopting power as a family resemblance concept “give[s] the theorist or scientist freedom to create their own conceptual tools best suited to the task at hand” (Haugaard, 2010, p. 436).

Despite the complexity of the concept of power, this article will reveal that scholars studying collaborative governance endeavors have largely relied on a small family of only two perspectives of power. While not typically expressed by name, both the functional and the critical perspectives of power (Haugaard & Clegg, 2009) are evident in collaborative governance literature. However, limiting the concept of power to functional and critical perspectives restrains both researchers and public administrators in understanding and managing power relations between actors in collaborative arrangement. Our analysis that follows expands the family to that of four perspectives to include a social construction perspective and a pragmatic perspective, two perspectives of power that originate in the organization studies and sociology literature (Hardy & Clegg, 2002; Haugaard, 2010; Haugaard & Clegg, 2009). We elaborate these perspectives and provide evidence of how such perspectives have been applied in collaborative governance literature in public administration by providing results of a conceptual content analysis of articles within public administration journals. It is important to note that we are not intending to draw concrete conceptual lines between these perspectives. Each perspective offers a separate but related way to understand power. Through our analysis we expand the current limited conceptualization of power and increase the usefulness of the concept to understanding collaborative endeavors by discussing and bridging four perspectives of power (Haugaard & Clegg, 2009). This affords future researchers the ability to adopt the perspective(s) of power that is most appropriate for their analysis of collaborative governance (Haugaard, 2010) as such collaborative endeavors vary substantially (Ran & Qi, 2018; Williams, 2016). We argue that both collaborative governance researchers and practitioners ought to remain open-minded about the nature of power and power imbalances and to not preemptively judge whether power imbalances are inherently bad, or good.

We begin the analysis in the following section by providing the methodology of the conceptual content analysis. The results of this analysis are used to inform the discussions of the four perspectives of power that are provided in turn in the subsequent sections. We end with concluding thoughts that, despite the fractured and dispersed nature of collaborative governance literature (Williams, 2016) and consequently the dispersed placement of power in the literature, convene multiple streams of thought and explores potential avenues for knowledge extension (Whetten, 1989).

Conceptual Content Analysis Methodology

The authors conducted a conceptual content analysis—"a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18)—to analyze how power is conceptualized in collaborative governance research. Conceptual content analysis has been employed for a variety of reasons in public administration, including interpreting term obscurity (Li et al., 2015); evaluating the state of research (Sabharwal et al., 2018; Sun & Lin, 2014); and inspecting concepts within academic curriculum (King et al., 2021). For this study a qualitative conceptual content analysis was conducted (i.e., a focus on use of content) in which the authors followed a structured search of journal articles, which included inclusion and exclusion criteria, that resulted in a final sample size of articles that were reviewed and coded for findings.

Step A: Search Method

Web of Science was used to search for journal articles that involved discussions on power in collaborative governance. The authors searched for articles that have the keyword 'power' and 'collaborative governance' in the Topic field. The Topic field in *Web of Science* covers Title, Abstract, and Author Keywords of all the articles indexed in *Web of Science*. The assumption behind this approach is that articles that have the words 'power' and 'collaborative governance' in their titles, abstracts, and keywords, provide a confined and definitive frame for the subject of this article. Using this criterion, multiple search rounds were conducted since the articles are expanding continuously, with the last search conducted in January 2021. This resulted in a total of 574 articles from *Web of Science*.

To the authors' understanding, a conceptual content analysis such as this that focuses on bridging these two concepts has not been completed, thus a logical starting place is to utilize a honed focus on these two terms specifically. There are two limitations to this approach worth noting. First, given the fungible nature of power there may be relevant articles that were not captured in the current search method that use power-synonymous terms such as influence, strength, or capacity. Second, there may be articles where the two search terms do not both occur in the title, abstract, or keywords but may include discussion of power and collaborative governance in the full text of the article. In response to these limitations, the authors were most interested in articles dealing with collaborative governance where the specific concept of 'power' was the central focus; thus, such tangential articles were not intended to be part of this initial analysis, but may be worthy of including in further exploratory research.

Step B: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Following the initial capture of 574 articles in Step A, the authors filtered this result to retain only peer-reviewed articles. The authors believe peer-reviewed articles provide better objective perspectives compared to reports, conference papers, etc. having been scrutinized by editors and reviewers in the field of public administration. This reduced the number of articles to 512.

Table 1. Top 48 Journals in Public Administration Category in 2019 Incites Journal Citation Report and the Number of Articles Retrieved

Full Journal Title	2019 Journal Impact Factor by InCites	5-Year Impact Factor by InCites	Articles Retrieved
Public Administration Review	4.063	6.115	5
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory	3.289	5.464	6
Journal of Policy Analysis and Management	5.018	5.178	0
Public Management Review	4.221	5.049	6
Journal of European Public Policy	4.177	4.366	0
Policy Studies Journal	3.797	4.224	6
Governance—An International Journal of Policy Administration and Institutions	2.899	4.176	0
Climate Policy	4.011	4.061	0
Regulation & Governance	3.375	3.862	2
Policy Sciences	3.609	3.797	2
Public Administration	1.825	3.664	6
Journal of Accounting and Public Policy	2.351	3.560	0
Journal of European Social Policy	2.631	3.379	0
Review of Public Personnel Administration	2.837	3.276	0
Policy and Society	3.050	3.029	0
Policy and Politics	3.069	2.936	3
International Public Management Journal	1.672	2.865	2
Journal of Social Policy	2.592	2.786	0
International Review of Administrative Sciences	2.129	2.692	0
Environment and Planning C-Politics and Space	2.601	2.691	2
American Review of Public Administration	2.168	2.671	7
Public Performance & Management Review	1.510	2.463	0
Public Policy and Administration	1.811	2.437	0
Public Personnel Management	0.897	2.155	0
Science and Public Policy	1.730	2.114	0
Administration & Society	1.564	2.085	7
Journal of Public Policy	1.750	2.011	0
Review of Policy Research	1.548	1.946	0
Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis	1.414	1.938	0
Social Policy & Administration	1.908	1.910	0
Nonprofit Management & Leadership	1.672	1.842	0
Local Government Studies	1.909	1.819	0

Public Administration and Development	1.550	1.686	0
Public Money & Management	1.377	1.619	2
Human Service Organizations			
Management Leadership & Governance	1.145	1.390	0
Contemporary Economic Policy	1.087	1.316	0
Policy Studies	1.200	1.178	0
Australian Journal of Public Administration	1.057	1.129	0
Canadian Public Policy—ANALYSE DE POLITIQUES	0.776	0.897	0
Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences	0.603	0.812	0
Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management	0.394	0.780	0
Canadian Public Administration—ADMINISTRATION PUBLIQUE DU CANADA	0.765	0.778	0
Lex Localis—Journal of Local Self-Government	0.688	0.741	0
Gestion y Politica Publica	0.222	0.396	0
Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia	0.213	0.314	0
Amme Idaresi Dergisi	0.020	0.142	0
Civil Szemle	0.093	0.099	0
Critical Policy Studies	1.868	Not Available	0

Note. Table sorted by Impact Factor, and bolded journals indicate at least one article was retrieved from that journal.

Then, the filtered pool of articles was further filtered by only including the top-ranked journals in the public administration subject category listed in the 2019 Incites Journal Citation Report by *Web of Science* to filter the results (Clarivate, 2019). Forty-eight journals in public administration were ranked in the report. Following this screening process, a final 56 articles were retained and included in the review (see Table 1).

The authors conducted a full text appraisal of the articles with the pre-determined goal of understanding how researchers in the field have interpreted and conceptualized power in collaborative governance endeavors. Upon review of the articles, it was discovered that five of the articles did not provide enough detail or discussion to evidence any clear perspective of power and were deemed not appropriate for this analysis. For example, a comparative case study article by Heikkila and Gerlak (2005) contained ‘Northwest Power and Conservation Council’ in their keywords, but the concept of power was not a focus within the article itself. As another example, the essay by Rosenbloom (2013) focused on constitutional separation of powers and not power within collaborative governance endeavors. The remaining 51 articles served as the final set of articles that informed the following analysis.

The authors then coded these 51 articles based on the coding schema consisting of four perspectives of power described in Table 2. These four perspectives were drawn from research and theorizing on power in sociology and organization studies (Hardy & Clegg, 2002; Haugaard, 2010; Haugaard & Clegg, 2009). The authors coded each article as one that predominantly adopts a functional, critical, social construction, or pragmatic perspective of

Table 2. Four Perspectives of Power

Perspective	Primary Focus	Language	Level of Analysis	Power Imbalances in Collaborative Governance
Functional	Power as a tangible resource	Power over; how much power	Micro	Determining primary causes of imbalances
Critical	Power as an imbalanced resource to be shifted	Power for; who ought to have power	Micro or macro	Uncovering strategies to limit or rectify imbalances
Social Construction	Construction of power structures through social interaction	Power to; collective network power	Micro	Examining imbalance changes through collaborative interactions
Pragmatic	Power as a web of relations impacted by context	All the above	Meso	Immersing in the particular context to understand how legitimacy relates to imbalances

power; documenting evidence (i.e., quotes) of such perspective; and classifying the method of analysis used in the article (e.g., case study). The conceptualization of power was scrutinized in the articles by examining explicit arguments or implicit implications of power, such as through article discussions of power imbalances, resource dynamics, and roles of actors in the collaboration. Each author coded a selection of articles, and each author reviewed each other's coding and discussed any discrepancy to ensure consistency. It is important to note that such conceptual coding is subjective, but the authors were more interested in framing a conceptual analysis than obtaining quantitative counts (although the counts are provided in the following section). Additionally, while the perspectives are different ways to view power and power imbalances within collaborative endeavors, they are related, and multiple perspectives can be displayed or adopted during a single article or analysis. However, the authors coded each article as only one perspective to best understand the most dominant perspectives adopted. For example, some articles that discussed power from a critical perspective also adopted a functional perspective of power (e.g., by viewing power as a resource); however, such articles focused primarily on understanding such concepts as the process of stakeholder disenfranchisement or how to empower such stakeholders, thus articles such as these were coded as adopting a critical perspective.

General Results of Conceptual Content Analysis

The conceptual content analysis demonstrated that public administration research aligns with general social science research regarding its approach to power—it views power as primarily from either a functional or critical perspective (Hardy & Clegg, 2002). Of the 51 articles, 47% (n=24) were coded as functional, 33% (n=17) were coded as critical, 10% as social construction (n=5), 10% as pragmatic (n=5). This distribution, while aligned with general social science research, serves as a motivating signal for further research exploring how collaborative governance scholars conceptualize power (such as exploring additional articles as noted in the

Search Method section); it also suggests that collaborative governance scholars may benefit from adopting lesser-known perspectives of power. Relying on only the common functional and critical perspectives to understand power in collaborative governance endeavors limits the conceptual usefulness of power as a tool to understand collaborative governance dynamics (Haugaard, 2010). The functional perspective focuses primarily on conceptualizing power as a tangible resource to be discovered, manipulated, and managed. The critical perspective focuses primarily on understanding how power is used as a form of domination and how power can be transferred to the less powerful (e.g., balancing power). The following sections use the results of the conceptual content analysis as well as the wider sociology and organization study literature on power to elaborate these two common perspectives as well as expand upon the two lesser utilized perspectives of social construction and pragmatic perspectives of power.

Functional Perspective of Power

A functional perspective of power is what commonly comes to the front of the discussion of power in public administration and policy—how “power ‘stored’ in individuals or organizations allows them to influence policymaking processes” (Broer et al., 2012, p. 800). In interorganizational theory studies, functional power is based in interorganizational (or interpersonal) resource dependence—how power and action is constrained or gained through interdependence between organizations (or individuals) within the same institutional environment (Huxham & Beech, 2008). Conceptualizing power in this manner treats power as a tangible object that can be lost, gained, and exchanged (Huxham & Beech, 2008)—understanding who is in control of relationships, which aligns with the classic bases of social power offered by French and Raven (1959). For example, Fischer and colleagues (2012) conceptualized power as a measurable construct via reputational power—“...our interview partners were asked to mention which actors were, in their view, very influential. Based on these answers, we calculated the reputational power score of each actor, which corresponds to the mean of the total judgments from all survey participants” (p. 444). Adopting this perspective of power implies a perception of collaborative endeavors that focuses on understanding how to improve production (French & Raven, 1959), or how to improve efficiency and effectiveness of organizations involved and/or the collaborative itself (Lotia & Hardy, 2008).

Analyses that adopt the functional perspective tend to be interested in the micro-level aspects of power—who has ‘power over’ who within a collaborative endeavor. The unit of analysis within this perspective includes any entity that has interactions within a collaboration and that is thought to be able to possess power (e.g., individual, organization). This perspective was often found in articles using a case study research approach that included an exploration of the level or type of resource-based power that collaborative actors possessed and how that related to collaboration (e.g., Cain et al., 2020; Painter, 2001). Typical collaborative governance concepts that are mentioned in relation to a functional perspective of power include individual-level concepts, such as identity. This is demonstrated by Conner (2016) who explored how the micro-level variable of identity impacts collaboration. He argued that collaborative partnerships are stronger when the partners have more frequent interactions (Kickert et al., 1997). Using frequency of interaction as a proxy for successful collaboration, he demonstrated that public school officials—the powerful—engaged more frequently in collaborative behavior with the local Native American communities they service—the less powerful—when the official had a shared racial and tribal identity with the Native American nations in their service area. Thus, power imbalances may not be as noticeable, or impactful, when individual attributes of actors involved in collaborative governance are aligned.

A functional perspective of power throughout collaborative governance literature follows an implicit assumption that power is a resource. They suggest that most collaborative endeavors have power imbalances between actors, and this imbalance needs to be managed for

collaborative endeavors to be successful. For example, in the framework of Ansell and Gash (2008) a power asymmetry is illustrated as a problem that requires rectifying before a collaborative endeavor is to begin. Emerson et al. (2012) describe the role of power in a collaborative governance regime as an unevenly distributed resource that may facilitate joint action when redistributed as a shared resource. In their cross-sector collaboration framework, Bryson et al. (2006; 2015) portray power imbalances as ongoing sources of conflict that impact both the collaborative process and the structure of the collaboration. Purdy (2012) attempts to tackle the entire power infrastructure of collaborative processes by constructing a framework that concentrates on functional aspects of power. The framework attempts to capture where (i.e., ‘arenas for power use’) and how (i.e., ‘sources of power’) power is exercised. The framework conceptualizes the ‘where’ as participants, process design, and content (Booher, 2004), and the ‘how’ as authority, resource-based power, and discursive legitimacy (Hardy & Phillips, 1998). She suggests that the framework may be a valuable power management tool by its ability to assess power and identify power imbalances.

Reliance on the functional perspective of power within collaborative endeavors leads to an assumption that an imbalance of power is undesirable and harmful to collaboration. Many times, this comes across in a manner that suggests an imbalance of power undermines success in collaborative governance. For example, Bryson and colleagues (2015) note that “cross-sector collaborations are more likely to succeed when they build in resources and tactics for dealing with power imbalances and shocks” (p. 663). Purdy’s (2012) framework of power that is specific to collaborative governance was designed specifically to identify power imbalances in order to prompt directed action to balance power. In contrast, having a power imbalance may not necessarily preclude success when other elements of the collaboration—such as perceived benefits (Cowan et al., 2015) or goal congruence (Cuevas et al., 2015)—are at desirable levels (Ran & Qi, 2018).

A functional perspective has also been criticized for falling into the trap of attempting to identify an infinite list of sources of power that change depending on the context under analysis (Hardy & Clegg, 2002). While collaborative endeavors may share similar characteristics (Thomson & Perry, 2006), they are by no means standardized across contexts (Williams, 2016). In addition, the perspective has received criticism for describing inherent managerial or hierarchical as legitimate or ‘good’ without question (Hardy & Clegg, 2002). The same problem applies to collaborative governance endeavors: adopting a strict functional perspective of power tends to overlook the potential illusion of neutrality of power among actors, which may provide misguided justification for continuing collaboration (Lotia & Hardy, 2008).

Critical Perspective of Power

In contrast to a functional perspective, critical theorists do not take legitimated power structures for granted. These theorists instead view power through the lens of the process of domination by those legitimated organizational structures (Hardy & Clegg, 2002). Denhardt (1981) asserted that there exists a need to adopt a critical perspective of public organizations to challenge the status quo. Questioning the dynamics of social processes is particularly pertinent for collaborative governance contexts—there are typically many different individuals from many different organizations interacting in varied manners to address a complex social problem. This perspective holds that in collaborative endeavors there are structural power imbalances where domination has developed through resource or status inequality, which dismantles the ability of weak actors to participate in decision making (i.e., some actors hold coercive power; Amsler, 2016; French & Raven, 1959). For example, Crompton and colleagues (2018) note, “We believe that these epistemological differences both reflect and recreate underlying power and status inequalities that were evident throughout the process” (p. 1637). A critical perspective of power assumes that social arenas (e.g., organizations) are inherently

political, thus it is necessary to scrutinize power relations to understand how power enacted impacts the dominated (Lotia & Hardy, 2008). Such scrutinizing provides practical value—it assists public managers by affording the opportunity to engage in critical thought about the power dynamics in collaboration and avoid simple solutions (Lotia & Hardy, 2008). An example of such a simple solution is creating policy that mandates interorganizational (including cross-sector) collaboration based on the assumption that collaboration is the gold standard for any policy context.

Critical examinations of power in collaborative governance focus on either structural power imbalances at a macro-level or micro-level power dynamics. At the macro-level, critical theorists studying collaborative governance have questioned whether policies that mandate collaboration are truly distributing power within collaborative governance or are such power distributions merely an illusion providing a cover for continued traditional government control (Hafer, 2018). Such control of collaborative processes paves the way for nominal participation of actors set by ‘governmental actors’ where power is seen as top-down and hegemonic construct (Berardo, 2009). Prior collaborative governance research identifies micro-level power imbalances a primary concern (Purdy, 2012). It is feared that collaborative endeavors have the potential to appear collaborative but may be masked displays of powerful actors dominating those that are less powerful (e.g., Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Purdy, 2012). This concern of a critical perspective takes ‘power over’ as the starting point—determining where there is an imbalance of power—and moves to the concern of how to shift power to the less powerful.

The shifting of power in interorganizational relationships has been referred to as ‘power for’ (Huxham & Beech, 2008). The shifting of power and correcting power imbalances is the primary concern of studies of power in collaborative governance (Purdy, 2012). This is evidenced by how collaborative governance researchers conceptually frame power and view power imbalances as inherently undesirable. Some scholars suggest that a power imbalance is a source of mistrust and a threat to effective collaboration: “Power imbalances between members are characteristic of collaboration structures and can (if not managed) contribute to loss of trust...power imbalances could cause the trust loop to fracture hindering the achievement of collaborative advantage” (Huxham & Vangen, 2005, p. 170). Most scholars agree that these imbalances require action. For example, Ansell and Gash (2008) suggest:

If there are significant power/resource imbalances between stakeholders, such that important stakeholders cannot participate in a meaningful way, then effective collaborative governance requires a commitment to a positive strategy of empowerment and representation of weaker or disadvantaged stakeholders (p. 551).

To address power imbalances some scholars have recommended using traditional management techniques, such as strategic planning and scenario development (Bryson et al., 2006). Many others have suggested that public managers need to utilize specific collaborative network management techniques, such as mobilizing individuals and organizations and unifying diverse perspectives (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Silvia, 2011). In their discussion of power in inter-organizational relationships, Huxham and Beech (2008) suggest to adequately address and manage the entire power infrastructure requires “...understanding what is going on at both the macro- and micro-levels” (p. 573). They suggest using power management strategies such as diagnosing sources of power (e.g., Purdy, 2012), implementing collaborative leadership styles (e.g., Silvia, 2011), and building capacity for the less powerful (e.g., Ansell & Gash, 2008). Thus understanding power imbalances from a critical perspective in collaborative governance endeavors requires understanding how power is interwoven throughout the entire endeavor: power imbalances at the onset (Ansell & Gash,

2008); power imbalances that place constraints on collaborative structure and governance (Bryson et al., 2006); power imbalances that shape the content of discussion (Purdy, 2012); and power imbalances in the environmental context that may influence the collaborative endeavor (Emerson et al., 2012).

Reliance on the critical perspective of power in collaborative governance endeavors leads to the normative assumption that public managers *ought* to manage power imbalances. As noted earlier, Ansell and Gash (2008) state “...effective collaborative governance requires a commitment to a positive strategy of empowerment and representation of weaker or disadvantaged stakeholders” (p. 551). Such a stance is grounded in the critical perspective of power, which holds the assumption that “others know the real interests of people better than the people do themselves” (Gordon, 2009, p. 265). While engaging disenfranchised stakeholders is certainly well-intentioned, this also highlights a weakness of the critical perspective—if public managers attempt to manage power imbalances, the act of managing the imbalance is itself an assertion of power that may harm the position of other stakeholders engaged in the collaborative process. Such an assertion of power may also harm the internal legitimacy of the collaboration (Ostrom, 2000) and conflicts with the underpinning democratic ideals of collaborative governance. Some stakeholders may perceive the use of certain management skills within a collaboration as a technique to perpetuate the current power imbalance (Gordon, 2009). Indeed, managing power in collaborative governance endeavors may require managing actors’ perceptions of power. This is like Pettigrew’s (1977) idea of managing meaning by which individuals construct legitimacy of their own claims while de-legitimizing the claims of those who oppose. Utilizing such an approach may be perceived negatively as it portrays management using power in a seemingly underhanded manner (Hardy & Clegg, 2002). Thus, on one hand there is reason to question, however discordant it may feel, whether public managers ought to be involved in power balancing in the first place. On the other hand, it would behoove public managers to at least consider how their power-balancing management actions impact all stakeholders involved in the collaboration, not just the disenfranchised, to best understand how their actions may impact collaborative endeavor outcomes.

Social Construction Perspective of Power

Much of the framework-based collaborative governance literature suggests that collaborative processes themselves are best conceptualized as dynamic systems (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2015; Emerson et al., 2012; Huxham & Vangen, 2005). A social construction perspective of power requires researchers to view power as dynamic and a product of contextual social construction: “A person is not ‘powerful’ or ‘powerless’ in general, but only with respect to other social actors in a specific social relationship” (Pfeffer, 2005, p. 290). A social construction perspective of power does not view power as a resource (i.e., functional perspective) and does not focus on the balancing of power in collaborative endeavors (i.e., critical perspective). Instead, it is understanding the process of power construction that is principal—how the interactions within the collaborative endeavor construct a power structure; or in other words, how “power is seen as produced in a relationship” (Broer et al., 2011, p. 801). This perspective incorporates the dynamic nature of social interaction between collaborative actors and holds that any meaning derived from interactions and negotiations between actors hinges on context (Blumer, 1986). Thus, analyses adopting this perspective tend to focus on micro-level interactions between actors engaged in a collaborative endeavor. For example, contemporary research methods such as computational agent-based model simulation have been used in prior collaborative governance research to capture the relation between power and social interaction on collaborative decision-making (Choi & Robertson, 2014a).

Collaborative governance endeavors are built largely around social interaction involving numerous stakeholders to address complex public problems, which leads to frequent change (Popp et al., 2014)—long-term stakeholders leave the arrangement, new stakeholders enter, others are forced by organizational constraints to limit their involvement, and so on. From this perspective collaboration can be associated with understanding diverse levels of power sharing, cooperation, and trust (Ran & Qi, 2019). The usefulness of a social construction perspective of power within collaborative governance is highlighted by Purdy (2012). She suggests that static power assessments may be helpful in identifying power imbalances but are ultimately limited in their usefulness: “Because power is an emergent phenomenon that is shaped by interaction, the static representation of power in [this study] is limited in its ability to describe ongoing power dynamics in a collaborative governance process” (Purdy, 2012, p. 416). Power in this sense, whether balanced among actors or not, can be viewed as an element of collaborative governance that facilitates action, as opposed to preventing action—describing power as ‘power to’ instead of ‘power over’ (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001). In situations of ‘power to’, Huxham and Beech (2008) suggest managing power imbalances involves implementing tools and leadership styles that are “collaborative in spirit” (p. 572).

Certain ‘power to’ situations require accepting the fact that not all power imbalances will inhibit collaborative action (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001). For example, collaborative governance arrangements that are operating with mission urgency, such as those responding to crises (e.g., fires, floods), benefit from temporary centralized control to ensure an efficient and prompt response (Moynihan, 2009). While power imbalances are inherent in hierarchical control situations such as these, an imbalance may not be detrimental to collaboration if balanced over time with collaborative inclusiveness (Koliba et al., 2011; Moynihan, 2009). Emergency management operations at local (Bigley & Roberts, 2001) and national (Moynihan, 2009) levels that utilize an incident command system approach to organizing emergency responses have demonstrated the benefits of having flexibility in the system of network control. There is also the consideration that some organizations may be willing to accept an imbalance of power if they continue to benefit from such relationships and be able to obtain what they want. For example, collaborations between for-profits and non-profit organizations may be successful (i.e., the for-profit makes profit or limits loss and the non-profit is able to carry out its mission) even when the for-profit organization is the clear powerholder (Cowan et al., 2015).

Power as facilitating action is closely aligned with the idea of network power: “...a shared ability of linked agents to alter their environment in ways advantageous to these agents individually and collectively” (Booher & Innes, 2002, p. 225). Such power emerges through interaction and communication, which develops shared meaning and highlights interdependencies (Booher & Innes, 2002). The realization of actors of their interdependence between actors in collaboration is invaluable and has been evidenced in a range of policy domains (e.g., environmental (Booher & Innes, 2002), human services (Keast et al., 2004), economic development (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001)). Fostering network power requires network actor diversity, interdependence, and authentic communication (Booher & Innes, 2002).

Pragmatic Perspective of Power

Like a social construction perspective of power, a pragmatic perspective supports the assertion that power permeates all aspects of social life. Social interactions create a web of power where everyone to some degree is both oppressor and oppressed (Hall, 2001). The central focus is “the type of power relations that one is tangled up in” which manifest in numerous ways (Haugard & Clegg, 2009, p. 444). This is similar to Long’s (1949) analysis of power as multi-directional, in which he blatantly negates the idea that power only flows in a top-down relation suggesting such an idea is “an idealized distortion of reality” (p. 258). The longitudinal

multiple case study approach of three collaborative endeavors used by Rodríguez and colleagues (2007) demonstrates their adoption (although not by name) of a pragmatic perspective: “Finally, the third reading views all organizations as caught up in a systemic web of power relationships that tends to be reproduced over time: In this view, these relationships were destined to block collaboration in one way or another, regardless of the mechanisms put in place” (p. 153).

A pragmatic perspective of power differs from both a functional and critical perspective in that it does not focus on explaining ideal situations of *who ought* to have *how much* power. A pragmatic perspective assumes that “...people cannot divorce themselves from context and time” and that “...having faith in the way things ‘ought’ to be risks blindness to the way things actually are” (Gordon, 2009, p. 266). In other words, adopting a pragmatic perspective of power involves limiting initial preconceptions of what power ought to look like in a certain situation and instead focuses on the how, such as exploring the taken-for-granted assumptions of social systems to understand strategic uses of power (Hardy & Clegg, 2002). Such a perspective has been applied in public administration research by focusing on the role and consequence that techniques of power have for governing a public program and for public managers governing themselves in relation to the program (Broer et al., 2012).

Pragmatic studies of power are similar to what has been termed governmentality studies—those that focus on “the ‘mundane’ and local practices in which governance is done” and how those practices relate to the governing of others (Broer et al., 2012, p. 801). Ethnographic methods—gathering data from multiple sources, such as first-hand on-site field observations and interviews—have proven valuable for studying these types of contexts in public administration and policy (Cappellaro, 2017; Rhodes, 2007). Within single-organization studies, a pragmatic perspective is evidenced by the work of Gordon et al. (2009). They used ethnographic methods to study the everyday practices of the policing of one police station. Through their research they demonstrated how historically constituted structures of power in the police organization were subtly reinforced through supposed organizational change initiatives (i.e., policing reforms), which ultimately led to the initiatives being undermined.

This type of initially unstructured analysis prohibits the researcher from adopting a particular unit of analysis prior to conducting the research. Thus, a pragmatic perspective may focus on micro-level dynamics or macro-level institutional structures and environments. Such an approach affords the opportunity to conduct a meso-level analysis and study how these dynamics and structures interrelate. This is particularly applicable to collaborative governance endeavors as their composition ranges from the individual to the system context (Emerson et al., 2012). For example, adopting a pragmatic perspective of power when studying collaborative governance may help to illustrate the taken-for-granted aspects of power at different levels of construction (i.e., the policy context, the structure of the collaboration, and the multiple participating organizations themselves) that likely have a substantial impact on collaborative processes and outcomes. This is particularly useful for understanding the derivation and influence of governmental mandates to collaborate (Hafer, 2018). Hambleton (2019) takes what may be considered a pragmatic approach to power by exploring the contextual power of place and how it may lead to improving co-created innovation in public policy.

The focus of the pragmatic perspective on the concept of legitimacy coincides well with the collaborative governance context, such that ensuring that actors involved in the collaboration view the collaborative process as legitimate is key to success (Bryson et al., 2006). Establishing internal legitimacy of the collaborative endeavor early within development creates a trusting environment that opens communication among actors (Human & Provan, 2000). Building internal legitimacy is particularly important for interorganizational networks in which a government agency plays a role (Provan & Lemaire, 2012). Thus, if the internal legitimacy of

the collaboration is perceived by members as strong, then power imbalances may no longer be perceived as harmful to collaboration.

Public managers looking to improve perceptions of internal legitimacy of collaborative governance endeavors may benefit by referencing the work of Elinor Ostrom (2000); her design principles for structuring effective collective action have been overlooked by dominant collaborative governance frameworks (i.e., Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2006; Emerson et al., 2012). Based on her empirical research, Ostrom (2000) asserts that "...the world contains multiple types of individuals, some more willing than others to initiate reciprocity to achieve the benefits of collective action" (p. 138), thus certain principles may work better or worse in some situations. The design principles are centered on the idea of having clear rules that guide action related to cooperation among multiple parties for the management of a common-pool resource. Her own words succinctly summarize the first five principles:

When the users of a resource design their own rules (Design Principle 3) that are enforced by local users or accountable to them (Design Principle 4) using graduated sanctions (Design Principle 5) that define who has rights to withdraw from the resource (Design Principle 1) and that effectively assign costs proportionate to benefits (Design Principle 2), collective action and monitoring problems are solved in a reinforcing manner (Ostrom, 2000, p. 151).

She also warns of government overreach: government officials' acceptance of the rules may improve the legitimacy of the rules; yet overreach by officials may be perceived as imposing rules, which will harm rule legitimacy (Ostrom, 2000).

Conclusion

We placed power and power imbalances at the center of discussion in this article to bring needed attention to the importance of this concept in collaborative governance endeavors (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001). The concept of power has a long history in social science. As suggested by contemporary sociology and organization study theorists, conceiving power as a family resemblance concept—whereby various conceptualizations of power exist with no one-best conceptualization—is an advantageous way to move forward (Haugaard, 2010; Haugaard & Clegg, 2009). Borrowing from this literature, we view power as family resemblance concept with four different, yet related, perspectives—functional, critical, social construction, and pragmatic. The appropriate perspective to adopt within a conceptual analysis of a collaborative endeavor depends on which perspective is the most useful for each analysis, like selecting the appropriate tool (or tools) to frame a house (Haugaard, 2010). We believe each perspective has its place within research on collaborative governance, and researchers should be clearer about which perspective(s) they are using. Additionally, each perspective may produce different insights when applied to different collaborative governance arrangements, as there are numerous 'interorganizational arrays' in collaborative endeavors (Williams, 2016) that may differ on multiple contingency factors, such as institutional environments (Ran & Qi, 2018).

We demonstrated that the current collaborative governance literature that relies on only the functional and critical perspectives of power offers a limited conceptualization of power. Reliance on a functional perspective leads to the assumption that it is possible to determine all the 'where' and 'how' of power in a collaborative endeavor. In other words, a functional perspective assumes that power is an observable resource that can be manipulated to remove

power imbalances. It also leads to the assumption that these imbalances are harmful to collaboration and need to be rectified via management techniques for collaboration to be effective, an assumption perpetuated by a strict critical perspective of power. While we believe this to be well-intended, we also believe that balancing power is problematic given the dynamic nature of power and the complex context of collaborative governance. For example, since there are typically a wide variety of actors in a collaborative governance arrangement there is a strong potential for actors to have varying perceptions of power—who has power and how much (Huxham & Beech, 2008). Instead, it may be enlightening to both researchers and practitioners to strive to reach an understanding of how taken-for-granted power and policy structures that underlie collaborative governance endeavors have been socially constructed (Gordon, 2009). This is particularly relevant for future research that focuses on the impact of stakeholders entering and exiting collaborative governance endeavors and could explore how such social constructions of power within the group change during these events. Additionally, conducting historical narrative analyses of why certain organizations and policies and their connected power and knowledge structures are in place may prove useful (Hall, 2001). For instance, beginning in the 1990s the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) tied federal homelessness assistance funding to efforts of regional collaboration between nonprofit organizations and subnational governments. This spurred the creation of hundreds of collaborative governance arrangements across the United States that were formed through ‘mandated’ collaborative governance. While certain power imbalances clearly exist, many of these collaboratives have been successful in reducing homelessness (Hafer, 2018).

Additional research has suggested that certain power imbalances may be acceptable given their impact on effectiveness (Choi & Robertson, 2014b; Milward & Provan, 1998; Provan & Kenis, 2008). Collaborative governance endeavors are not simple solutions and require deliberation, compromise, and sacrifice. Ostrom (2000) highlights the possibility for give-and-take in collective action by suggesting that “Individuals who think a set of rules will be effective in producing higher joint benefits and that monitoring (including their own) will protect them against being a sucker are willing to undertake conditional cooperation” (pp. 151–152). An appreciation and acceptance of inevitable power imbalances in collaborative governance is required (Vangen & Huxham, 2014). If actors in collaborative governance endeavors attempt to create implausible distributed power scenarios that result in stagnation and inaction (i.e., collaborative inertia; Vangen & Huxham, 2014), stakeholders may become frustrated with the process and leave the collaboration or exert dominating power to make things happen. Perhaps what is important is to understand how much of a power imbalance is acceptable within the context of specific endeavors to still obtain positive outcomes. In other words, a power structure that has achieved an agreed level of social consensus among collaborative stakeholders (i.e., the collective institutionalism of a power structure), may lead to effective collaborative interactions and outcomes. For example, Milward and Provan (1998) demonstrated that in collaborative governance endeavors that are based in interorganizational networks of mental health service delivery having power concentrated in the hands of a single stakeholder rather than in the hands of the many may lead to improved effectiveness. Future collaborative governance research that explores group consensus on imbalanced power structures may benefit from adopting a pragmatic perspective of power to best understand how on-the-ground, “mundane” practices lead to such consensus. Ethnographic (Cappellaro, 2017) or grounded theory methodologies (Hafer, 2021) are particularly applicable for such research.

We suggest that when considering the concept of power in collaborative governance, it is best for both researchers and public manager practitioners to remain open-minded about the nature of power and power imbalances. To best understand the collective institutionalism of a power structure within collaborative governance arrangements requires adopting multiple perspectives of power, such as the four proposed in the current article, and to not preemptively judge whether power imbalances are inherently bad, or good. As detailed earlier, the often-adopted critical perspective of power supports a normative assumption that power imbalances

are inherently bad, and that public managers ought to use management techniques to manage power (e.g., Ansell & Gash, 2008; Crosby & Bryson, 2005). On the other hand, Miller (2005) has argued that the perhaps well-intentioned actions of the state that attempt to empower the disempowered stakeholder may be acts of government overreach and a threat to the value of personal liberty. In more metaphorical words, “A government that cultivates civic space is, from another perspective, a trespassing government that drives its big clumsy tractors through the gardens of supposedly free property owners” (Miller, 2005, p. 113). Adopting a single perspective of power, such as the critical perspective, may lead to misguided conclusions about the nature and impacts of power within unique collaborative endeavors. Using multiple perspectives of power to consider how power has evolved and how power imbalances have shifted throughout the duration of a collaborative endeavor will lead to well informed conclusions.

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