When non-profit partnerships equal big profits: A closer look at an exemplar non-profit organisation relationship

Lucinda L. Austin, University of Maryland

Abstract

Working with publics and organisations at the community level has become increasingly important for government and non-governmental organisations, although little is known about how to foster development of these relationships. Through the case study of an exemplar relationship between a national organisation and a community-based organisation, organisation-public relationship theory is expanded upon to explore relationship cultivation strategies in an interorganisational setting. Methods within the case study include in-depth interviews with organisational members, participant observation, and analysis of documentation. Cultivation strategies of networking, sharing of tasks, and access emerged most strongly. Additionally, themes of customer service and attentiveness emerged as new cultivation strategies. Two existing theoretical strategies, positivity and conflict resolution, were not stressed by organisational members. This study has implications for fostering relationship development with other organisations at the community level, especially in health and social contexts.

Introduction

Government organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have increased their focus on community-based organisations (CBOs) to aid in connecting to and communicating with publics (Briss, Brownson, Fielding, & Zaza, 2004). CBOs can be important to larger organisations because "these organizations also have the ability to influence the attitudes and behaviors of their community members by building on relationships of trust and respect" (PEPFAR, 2007, ¶ 5). If CBOs build on established relationships with publics and community members, how do larger NGOs build, maintain, and understand relationships with these CBOs?

This study seeks to increase understanding about relationships with CBOs by examining a best-practices, exemplar (AOA, 2006) community-based health initiative involving a relationship between a CBO—Partnership for Healthy Aging—and a NGO—the National Council on Aging. Through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document review, this paper explores what led to this programme's successful outcome—an effective and useable model programme that significantly reduces older adult falls—and how these two organisations make meaning of their relationship. As an exemplar case, study of this relationship can contribute to understanding about the nature of successful interorganisational relationships and partnerships on the community level. The framework of a case study allows in-depth insight into the inter-oganisational relationship through multiple sources of rich detail and examples of actual communication (Yin, 2003).

In the unique context of an interorganisational CBO to NGO relationship, this study explores relationship cultivation strategies—derived from organisation-public relationship (OPR) theory—used to foster relationship development (Grunig & Hon, 1999) and CBOs' needs for a successful and continuing relationship in this health context. Interorganisational relationships have largely been unexplored using OPR theory, as OPR has focused more on organisations' relationships with publics instead of other organisations.

Additionally, few scholars have studied the OPR or interorganisational relationships qualitatively (Hon & Brunner, 2002; Hung, 2001; Rhee, 2004, 2007). In Ki and Shin's (2005; 2006) study of OPR articles published between 1984 to 2004, only five out of 38

articles used qualitative methods to study OPRs. Although there is little consensus on how to measure OPRs or interorganisational relationships (Ki & Shin, 2005; 2006), most OPR research has focused on establishing quantitative research measures of relational outcomes (Grunig & Hon, 1999; Kim, 2001; Ki & Hon, 2007; Jo, Hon, & Brunner, 2004; Huang, 2001b; Hon & Brunner, 2002).

While it is important to establish measures in order to better craft theories, qualitative research can help to explore theories on a deeper level. Grunig (2002) states that "relationships cannot always be reduced to a few fixed-response items on a questionnaire" (pp. 2-3); qualitative research may provide a more complete and candid assessment of the relationship. Rich descriptions of both parties in a relationship are important to assessing the relationship, since both are involved in creation and maintenance of the relationship. As relationships are inherently subjective (Greenhalgh, 1987), qualitative research provides additional insight (Huang, 2001a; 2001b).

The main research questions asked for this study are:

RQ1: Which relationship cultivation strategies were used in the specific case study?

RQ2: How did these cultivation strategies contribute to the interorganisational relationship?

Literature review

Health risk of older adult falls
To situate the case study in context, knowledge on the issue of older adult falls is important. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), falls are the principal cause of injury deaths and non-fatal injuries among older adults (CDC, 2009). In the US over one-third of this population will fall each year (CDC, 2007b). Rizzo, et al., (1998) found that the average health care cost of falls in those 72 and older was over $19,000, not to mention the indirect costs including disability, hardship on loved ones, and reduced quality of life (CDC, 2007a). Because effective fall interventions

generally involve some element of supervision and resources that the average member of the public would not have, community-based interventions have been ideal for fall prevention.

Community-based interventions and CBOs
There are many advantages for larger NGOs to forming participative relationships with CBOs. For example, who knows a community better that the individuals within the community itself? Involving individuals within a community helps to keep researchers/agencies apprised of the community's needs and resources (Israel, Shulz, Parker & Becker, 1998). NGOs can also build relationships with publics through CBOs, who ultimately know the needs of their communities better than national organisations and may already have contact or relationships with community members who place trust in them (Clarke, Evans, Shook, & Johanson, 2005; PEPFAR, 2007). CBOs can be key to a health campaign's success because of their access to and influence with community members (Stephens, Rimal, & Flora, 2004).

A community-based partnership places the onus on the individual communities to help others within their communities and allows the communities to make decisions based on what is best for the community, increasing community members' self-efficacy (Ohmer, 2007). Efficacy, first conceptualised by Bandura (1977, 1986), is individuals' belief about their own ability or capability to perform a particular action. Self-efficacy is one of the most effective theoretical constructs in health communication, in that increasing individuals' confidence in their ability to take action helps to lower perceived constraints (Baranowski, Perry, & Parcel, 2002). Derville and McComas (2003) state that community-based interventions may also help to promote even severely constrained publics to act by reducing barriers.

One of the most famous examples of a successful community-based initiative was the Stanford Five-City Heart Health Campaign (Stephens, Rimal, & Flora, 2004; Winkleby, Flora, & Kraemer, 1994), in which close to

two-thirds of at-risk individuals decreased their risk of heart disease. The Five-City campaign, funded by the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, employed traditional mass media efforts, but also worked with local CBOs to educate community members about heart disease risk factors and create a self-sustaining health promotion structure. At the end of the campaign, CBOs continued community education on their own without government funding (Jackson, et al., 1994). Other successful community-based interventions employing the help of CBOs have included the ACCESS Breast Cancer and Education Outreach Project (Rapkin et al., 2006), the "How to Talk to Your Doctor" community education initiative (Tran, et al., 2004), and many others targeting older adult health (Center for Home Care Policy and Research, 2003).

Literature on health communication campaigns has largely neglected to cover the role community organisations may play or offer guidelines for a community-based approach (Baker & Rogers, 1993; Stephens, Rimal, & Flora, 2004). What is mentioned, however, is that for community initiatives to be successful, organisations must feel connected to the cause, believe in the change advocated, and be part of the planning and execution of the initiative (Baker & Rogers, 1993; Thomas, 2006). Building an effective CBO collaboration depends on the formation of an exchange relationship—organisations must show the potential gain and negotiate an exchange that will be beneficial for both parties (Nelson, Brownson, Remington, & Parvanta, 2002). Communication should focus on establishing relationships through long-range collaboration, building trust, and working with organisational leadership (Baker & Rogers, 1993; CDC, 1997; Clarke, Evans, Shook, & Johanson, 2005).

The organisation-public relationship: Focusing on relationship cultivation strategies

Based on an extensive survey of the field of public relations, Ferguson (1984) called for focus on the OPR as a neglected but important area in the field of public relations. Ferguson argued that the focus of study should no longer be the public, the organisation, or the communication alone, but instead the actual OPR should be the unit of analysis.

Part of Ferguson's (1984) call for an extended focus on relationships was also for a consistent definition of relationships. Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997) echoed that call, adding that the lack of a conceptual definition limits theory building. Since then many scholars have responded with their own definitions of the OPR. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined the OPR as "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (p. 62). Hung (2001) stressed interdependence and consequences to either party, stating "organization-public relationships arise when organizations and their strategic publics are interdependent and this interdependence results in consequences to each other that organizations need to manage" (p. 10). While these relationships have "properties that are distinct from the identities, attributes, and perceptions of the individuals and social collectivities in the relationships" (Broom, et al., 2000, p. 18), literature about relationship cultivation strategies emerges from interpersonal relationship literature and recognises the role that individuals play in the formation of relationships (Grunig & Hon, 1999; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Rhee, 2004, 2007). Bruning and Ledingham (2000) present relationship management as "combining symbolic communication messages and organizational behaviors to initiate, build, nurture, and maintain mutually beneficial organization–public relationships" (p. 87).

OPR theory is composed of the study of relationship types, antecedents, cultivation strategies, and outcomes. Relationships occur within interpersonal, professional, and community public relations contexts (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999). Relationship types describe the benefits that groups receive and include communal, exchange, exploitive, covenantal, and contractual relationships (Grunig & Hon, 1999; Hung, 2001).

Relationship antecedents refer to the reasons why organisations and publics enter into relationships and what influences or causes these relationships to form. Grunig (1997) stated that relational antecedents, much like publics, are situational (Aldoory & Sha, 2007). Little theorising has been devoted to the formation of categories for antecedents. Much of the focus on the OPR has been in the outcomes of the relationship (Grunig & Hon, 1999; Ki & Shin, 2005, 2006). While many relationship outcomes have been proposed, the most support has been found for trust, control mutuality, satisfaction, and commitment (Grunig & Hon, 1999). Full descriptions of these theoretical components is not listed here, but can be found in the sources listed above—the main focus of this study is relationship cultivation strategies.

Relationship cultivation strategies.
Borrowing from interpersonal communication (Stafford & Canary, 1991), Grunig and Huang (2000) developed maintenance strategies for the OPR. Grunig (2006a) most recently called for maintenance strategies to instead be labelled cultivation strategies, arguing that relationships can rarely be "maintained" because of their continual metamorphosis. Grunig instead offers the term "cultivation" comparing the process of developing relationships much like growing crops using the conditions that affect them. Grunig (2002) defines cultivation strategies as "the communication methods that public relations people use to develop new relationships with publics and to deal with the stresses and conflicts that occur in all relationships" (p. 5). Grunig (2006b) calls for us not only to "measure the nature and quality of relationships to establish and monitor the value of public relations" but also to evaluate "public relations strategies and tactics to determine which are most effective in cultivating relationships" (p. 6). This study focuses specifically on relationship cultivation strategies as part of OPR theory.

Grunig and Hon (1999) identified cultivation strategies likely to lead to desirable relationship outcomes on the OPR level. Since then support has been found for these cultivation strategies (Ki & Hon, 2006, 2009; Rhee, 2004, 2007), although more exploration of cultivation strategies is needed to determine if additional cultivation strategies should be added or if some are more effective than others. Grunig and Hon (1999) and Grunig and Huang's (2000) selected set of relationship cultivation strategies are access, positivity, openness/ disclosure, assurances, networking, sharing of tasks, and conflict strategies.

Within this framework access is defined as allowing public opinion leaders access to the decision-making group of an organisation. Additionally, members of the public should allow public relations professional access to public opinion leaders. This concept refers to reciprocal access or access by both parties. *Positivity* refers to an organisation doing whatever it must to help a public feel content, similar to being unconditionally positive. *Openness and disclosure* refer to the sharing of information and transparency. Openness of thoughts and feelings should be present among both parties involved. *Assurances of legitimacy* validate the public's voice and assure them that the organisation values what they have to say— ideally these should occur among both parties involved and may include affirmations of commitment to the relationship. *Networking* refers to the organisation building social networks among groups with which publics are also affiliated. *Sharing of tasks* includes the organisation including the public in actual tasks surrounding the organisation. Within this concept, "organizations and publics do their fair share to solve problems of concern to the other" (Hung, 2001, p. 18).

Conflict strategies for relationships are grouped under three distinct categories: integrative, distributive, and dual concern (Grunig & Hon, 1999). *Integrative* strategies are symmetrical and seek a win-win solution for both parties in the relationship, where parties collaborate to seek out the best possible solution for each party involved. *Distributive* strategies are asymmetrical and involve one party benefiting over another in a win-lose scenario. *Dual concern* strategies have "particular relevance for public relations

because they take into consideration the dual role of balancing the interests of publics with the interests of the organization" (p. 16). Asymmetrical strategies focus on only one party's interest and as such will not be "effective in developing and maintaining the most positive relationships in the long term" (Grunig & Hon, 1999, p. 16).

Interorganisational relationships

Taylor and Doerfel (2005) explicate a normal model of public relations that describes relationship building in public relations in civil society. In their model there are seven partners for public relations: the public, societal institutions, media, NGOs, international NGOs, business organisations, and government. They argue that the most crucial relationships in this context are "the NGO–NGO relationship, the NGO–media relationship, and the NGO–donor relationship" (Taylor & Doerfel, 2005, p. 122). The NGO-NGO relationship, or interorganisational relationship, is the focus of this study. Interorganisational relationships describe a relationship between two organisations, such as partnering or competing organisations.

Interorganisational relationship theorising has drawn on the OPR literature (Taylor & Doerfel, 2005), interorganisational domains literature, and literature on power in relationships (Hardy & Phillips, 1998), among other frameworks. Previous research, however, has not looked at how relationship cultivation strategies in OPR could be applied to interorganisational relationships, which this study explores. Since relationship cultivation literature is rooted in interpersonal communication scholarship, these cultivation strategies may or may not be appropriate for application in a NGO-NGO context. This study will explore how these strategies fit the interorganisational context (or not).

Case study background

By examining a 'best-practices' intervention and the relationship between a CBO— Partnership for Healthy Aging (PFHA)—and a NGO—the National Council on Aging (NCOA), the elements of an exemplar interorganisational relationship are explored. This relationship led to translation of an extremely successful intervention programme—the *Matter of Balance* programme—that has proven to be successful for significantly reducing older adults' self-reported falling and fear of falling. The programme has been highlighted by the US Administration on Aging as a best-practices model (AOA, 2006) and was chosen as one of six to receive the national ASA Healthcare and Aging Network Award for innovation and quality in programme implementation (PFHA, n.d.).

NCOA is a national non-profit organisation that initiates programmes to "help older people remain healthy and independent, find jobs, increase access to benefits programs, and discover meaningful ways to continue contributing to society" (NCOA, 2007, ¶ 3). NCOA's Center for Healthy Aging (CFHA), specifically, has been engaged in this relationship with PFHA. NCOA's CFHA "encourages and assists community-based organizations serving older adults to develop and implement evidence-based health promotion/ disease prevention programs" (NCOA, 2007, ¶ 1). PFHA, a local organisation, is a collaborative effort of several CBOs to create a community-based non-profit program specifically for assisting with older adult health issues. PFHA was established jointly by MaineHealth and aging organisations (NCOA, n.d.), including MaineHealth, Maine Medical Center, Community Health Services, and the Southern Maine Agency on Aging.

NCOA has served as the National Resource Center for the AOA evidence-based health promotion grants since 2003; PFHA received a community grant in 2003 for which NCOA provided technical assistance and support. NCOA and PFHA had no direct financial ties to their relationship. Initially PFHA worked directly with other organisations and older adults in the *Matter of Balance* programme as developed by the Roybal Center at Boston University. Because the original programme required healthcare professionals to be trained to lead the programme, the programme was

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rather costly and widespread dissemination was limited. PFHA later sought to translate the programme into a lay-leader model, which could make the programme more widely available to organisations with limited resources (PFHA, n.d.). PFHA is now working by training master trainers in other locations who can then train lay leaders to implement the programme in their communities. With NCOA's assistance, PFHA has become a leader in helping other CBOs across the US to adopt this initiative—the *Matter of Balance* translation developed by PFHA has been adopted by organisations in over 25 states.

Method

Procedures

Through this case study, multiple sources of information were triangulated, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, internal and external document analysis, and analysis of multimedia formats such as online video feeds and broadcasts, web pages, online polls, and blogs (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number/type of case materials analysed per organisation

	NCOA	PFHA	Other
Interview transcripts	7 (101 pp)	4 (66 pp)	1 (15 pp)
Observation notes	10 pp	10 pp	
Newsletters	31		1
Presentations	7	3	
Audio/video presentations	1	1	
Conference handouts	7	4	
Web pages	9	6	2
Reports	3	1	1
Miscellaneous	2	1	
Press releases	1	2	2
Issue briefs	2		
Manuals	2		
Factsheets	3	5	
Internal emails	10	10	

Sources of documentation, archival records, and physical artefacts (Yin, 2003) were reviewed until the data reached a saturation point. Internal documents such as email correspondence, presentations, reports, organisational statements, and other documents were sent to the researcher by both organisations and found online and at a national conference. External documentation consisted of third-party reports from agencies such as AOA, press releases and media coverage, web pages, and publicly available award documentation.

Interviews

A total of 11 individuals participated within both organisations and one outside member who had an oversight role also participated in the research. PFHA had a small staff of five individuals in the office who had worked with NCOA throughout the course of the programme. Four of the five PFHA staff members were available for interviews—the programme director, two programme managers, and a programme coordinator. NCOA's Center for Healthy Aging also has a small staff with only six individuals working in the centre at the time of this research. Interviews were conducted with all six of NCOA's Center for Healthy Aging staff—the senior vice president, two vice presidents, two senior programme associates, and an administrative assistant. Additionally an interview was conducted with a programme director from AOA who had worked with both organisations on the programme and had an outside perspective to the relationship.

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Interviews were conducted over the phone with follow-up interview calls and follow-up questions occurring via email. Interviews were audio-taped and notes were taken after each interview to record important themes and concepts. Interviews were fully transcribed by the author and observer comments were added during transcription.

Participant observation

Participant observation took place at the Aging in America Conference in Washington, D.C., March 26-30, 2008. Members of PFHA and NCOA attended the conference and attended sessions together, such as partner meeting and coalition-building workshops. At the conference the researcher was able to meet with research participants, attend presentations by participants, and observe non-verbal communication and behaviours in formal and informal settings. Detailed observation notes were taken during the conference.

Consent and confidentiality

Before conducting interviews and observation, approval from the researcher's Institutional Review Board was obtained. Participants were asked to sign consent forms with information about the purpose of the interview and observation, guaranteeing confidentiality, and allowing the researcher permission to audiotape the interviews. Although the participating organisations are named, actual participants' specific identities were kept confidential and were not connected to specific quotes.

Data analysis

Data themes were analysed line-by-line through open coding of interview transcripts, notes, and memos (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Themes were coded based on expectations from the theoretical constructs, while still being open to the possibility of new themes. Emergent themes that did not fit within the theoretical frame were coded separately using open coding via a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1997; Potter, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Patterns found through coding of interview transcripts were matched to documentation, archival resources, and participant observation notes, and analysed using pattern matching (Yin, 2003). Member checks were conducted with research participants to ensure that the researchers' interpretations of interviews and written communication matched participants' intended meaning.

Results

The relationship between PFHA and NCOA was unique in a variety of ways, including the power dynamics, the balance of a formal and informal relationship, and the context within which the relationship takes place. In regards to power structure, NCOA is a national organisation that is widely recognised for its role in older adults' wellbeing and health, while PFHA operates largely at the community level, although efforts of PFHA have spread state-wide and are growing nationally within the United States of America. NCOA has not been directly responsible for administering grants to PFHA; however, NCOA has administered other funds to assist PFHA at various times. NCOA is not in a direct oversight role over PFHA, but instead seeks to have a mentoring, assistive, and collegial role with PFHA.

Most of the relationship cultivation strategies identified by the OPR literature (Grunig & Hon, 1999; Hung, 2001) were used in some capacity within the relationship. Some themes such as networking and sharing of tasks were mentioned much more frequently throughout interviews and highlighted through participant observation and documentation. Other themes emerged that were not specifically mentioned within the relationship cultivation strategy literature, including what participants labelled "customer service" and attentiveness. Two themes, positivity and conflict resolution, were not mentioned as widely and not stressed by organisational members.

Access

Members of PFHA seemed to feel as though they had good access to members of the leadership within NCOA and vice versa. There was a direct connection between the

management of both organisations in this case, with regular contact occurring between them. A member of PFHA described a specific memorable interaction in this regard,

> They spent two days with us and met with various people. They met with our steering committee. They were willing to meet with our executive leadership at our health system to talk to them about what we were doing and why they were interested.

Another member of PFHA noted that "We know that they're there as a resource center, but it isn't just that they're there, and we know that whenever we need to contact them that we can. (They) contact us, too…they initiate so much." A member of NCOA stated, "We're really open and willing to hear what other people have to say and what they have to teach us."

Access was not just from one organisational leadership to another—leadership of the community-based organisation PFHA to the leadership of NCOA. The connection also existed from within other levels of the organisation. For example, although one of the programme coordinators and former administrative assistant communicated frequently with the administrative assistant at NCOA, she also communicated with the highest level of management at NCOA's Center for Healthy Aging and other levels as well. Another member of the organisation stated about PFHA's relationship with NCOA, "Oh, I think it's very positive, and it's very open. I feel very comfortable going to them and asking them any questions and (at) multiple levels throughout the organisation."

These organisations communicated to each other through various methods, including in-person meetings and site visits, conference calls, annual grantee meetings, and person-to-person phone calls. The most common form of communication, though, was email correspondence. As one member of PFHA noted, "We do a lot of communication via email, and if I need to pick up the phone I will". Another staff member from NCOA stated that interaction took place via "Email, telephone calls, monthly state grant conference calls, annual site visits, and annual meetings".

Another NCOA staff member stated similarly, "We all are very comfortable with just emailing or picking up the phone and calling one another all the time. I probably email them or they email me, I should say, every week if not several times a week."

Positivity

Of the relationship cultivation strategies, positivity appeared to be used the least. While the organisations were positive with one another, they were also honest and open and let the other organisation know when something wasn't going to work, even if it meant they couldn't always be positive. For example, one member of PFHA said about NCOA, "I mean they don't always tell you necessarily the thing that would be the happiest news, but it's always constructive advice." This example seemed to emphasise more the importance of openness and disclosure over positivity.

Openness and disclosure

When asked about the relationship strategies that were helpful in fostering a relationship, openness and disclosure were mentioned often by participants. In addition, general themes of openness and disclosure prevailed throughout many of the discussions. Both organisations felt like it was important for them to discuss issues with the other and to keep an open dialogue going. As one member of NCOA noted, "We've stressed from the get-go that we don't necessarily have the answers, that we expect them to do a lot of peer-problem solving". Another NCOA staff member states that "honesty of course is just very necessary". The relationship was also described by a NCOA staff member as a "very open, congenial… very open relationship". This same staff member stated that, "A lot of what we try and do is to really promote sharing of lessons learned and that is definitely the cornerstone of our relationship, a willingness to share in both ways, everything that we know that's good and bad".

Assurances of legitimacy

Assurances of legitimacy also emerged. Because of the power dynamic, the assurances

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of legitimacy seemed to appear more from NCOA directed towards PFHA than vice versa. NCOA often took measures to let PFHA know that they valued its opinion and expertise and were committed to the relationship. A participant from PFHA highlighted the concepts of assurances of legitimacy when she stated that effective relationship building efforts are:

> When they approach us and ask us to take an active role in their work, whether that be presenting at a conference… so inviting us to be part of the work, and showcasing our work… I think that really is one way that they demonstrate that appreciation and also showcase our work to others around the country. That really helps us to stand out.

This participant went on to say that she felt NCOA valued her organisation's opinions and treated PFHA as equals in their relationship. NCOA and PFHA were both responsive to each other in their concerns about the programme and the relationship.

A NCOA staff member discussed assurances of legitimacy by describing a relationship with a PFHA member by:

> …making sure she knows that she's a really valuable resource in more ways than just as a creator of the volunteer lay leader *Matter of Balance*. She knows a lot more about programme development in general. So we try and make sure that she knows how valuable that is to us.

Another NCOA member described external validation and assurances to others in the field:

> We give them credibility, we sort of bless them in a way, and people look to us to do that. You know somebody from Idaho wants to do some programme and calls us, and we'll recommend *Matter of Balance*, not only because of the intervention, but also we know they'll get good customer service from the Partnership team (PFHA). And so we give them that kind of external validation and we give them connections to really smart people who

are doing the same hard work that they are doing all over the country.

In addition to the participant quotes, in many of the documents on NCOA's website, PFHA was mentioned and given recognition as a "best practices" or "exemplary" intervention and effort. Additionally during the participant observation at the aging conference, members of both organisations mentioned or referenced each other during their presentations.

Networking

Networking seemed to be one of the most central themes that emerged, both for how often this occurred and the importance and significance it held for the organisations involved. When asked what they got out of the relationship with NCOA, one of the most common answers was the networking with other organisations. Additionally, PFHA talked about how important this networking was to its organisation. When asked what she believed her organisation got out of the relationship with NCOA, a member of PFHA noted, "They've made wonderful connections for us throughout the country, both for the *Matter of Balance* project, but also for other projects that we've worked on."

Another PFHA member praised networking as a positive component of the relationship:

> They made connections for us around the country, and I learned so much from them that we were able to use here in Maine as we began to make connections and to disseminate the programme here and began to make conference calls and learn ways to work with others. Over time certainly they've been so supportive in making connections for us with others around the country.

NCOA also talked about how networking with PFHA was helpful to them. Because PFHA was directly connected to other local and state organisations, it was able to help other organisations implement their programme and was able to share knowledge directly with other organisations. These organisations could work together to discuss similar problems and issues that arose on the local level. As a member of PFHA stated:

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They helped develop a network among the grantee sites so that we could have some learning teams, because even though we were doing different grants, sort of the same issues were coming up for all of us. And those relationships are still pretty strong. We're implementing programmes from other sites; some of the other sites are implementing our programmes; so that network development piece was really important.

Sharing of tasks

The most frequently mentioned cultivation strategy was sharing of tasks. Both organisations worked together to share tasks in a variety of ways. NCOA would help PFHA with tasks by coming to present at functions, publicising trainings and programmes on its website and in its newsletters, giving PFHA technical support and funding when possible for specific tasks, and even going so far as to help PFHA with its organisational business plan to disseminate the lay-leader intervention model nationally.

At the conference where I observed members of both organisations, NCOA had reserved a room for PFHA to do its own presentation, so PFHA would not have to pay for a room. As one NCOA member stated:

> We have free meeting space assigned to us at the conference and are letting them use one of the rooms for a meeting of *Matter of Balance* master trainers, otherwise it would be pretty expensive to them to try to get a room.

Another member from PFHA stated, "If we ever had questions or if we ran into experiences that weren't successful, they would recommend we try certain types of strategies. They've provided a lot of funding and what I would say is non-monetary support, too." The same PFHA staff member emphasised further:

> Anytime we've had, I don't want to say a problem, but a problem, it seems like with their help we've been able to resolve it. And they have a more global view… so sometimes they can get at something that we can't.

A member of NCOA said of their efforts with PFHA they had:

> Gotten them (PFHA) access to other resources and national partners, and certainly we provided them with some seed money for their business plan so that they could figure out how to nationally disseminate *Matter of Balance*… I think they view us as really helping to facilitate their work on a national level. I think on a local level they were doing fine. They needed some 'oomph' to get to the state level, and now they're national.

Another staff member from NCOA described this problem-solving task as "being a sounding board when they've got some stumbling block back home, (when)… they want to talk to somebody outside of the state of Maine. To say, you know, 'here's what we're up against. What are you thinking?'"

The sharing of tasks between organisations was reciprocal. PFHA adopted recommended programmes and interventions, presented with NCOA at conferences and functions, and were generally willing to help with any tasks that were recommended or asked of them as was noted earlier.

Conflict resolution

Because the relationship between both organisations was so positive, the organisations did not have to resolve conflicts often. As one organisational member said, though, they had a professional relationship and were able to handle problems in a professional manner. This was the only mention of anything that resembled conflict resolution between the two organisations.

Emergent themes

Two themes emerged that were not found within the previous relationship cultivation literature. These two themes were attentiveness and customer service.

Attentiveness

In addition to listening to publics, which participants mentioned as being very important, the concept also emerged of actually taking

time to get to know publics and developing an understanding of them, including their goals and their unique environment. One member of PFHA noted that a visit by NCOA was:

> an intense couple of days for them but I think it really gave them a strong understanding of our goals and our challenges and kind of the culture of our organisation, and that allowed them to really target their assistance to us, I think.

As another member of PFHA stated they "encourage us to connect with other people. So as they hear of work that's going on, they might link us in. So they *think* of us… you know they're *thinking* of us." While this statement highlights networking, this statement also emphasises the importance of thinking about and understanding of needs. To stress this concept of really becoming involved and developing understanding, a PFHA staff member notes, "(NCOA member) herself was actually trained as a Master Trainer." This NCOA staff member took the time to actually visit and take the training for the programme to be more familiar with what this part of the programme entailed.

NCOA also echoed the necessity of really understanding PFHA and its needs. As one member from NCOA stated, "I'd like to say that we're very attentive. And the reason, we need to understand what's going on with them in order to disseminate to all of the other states, so I think we're attentive."

Customer service

Another emergent theme was that of good "customer service," as several participants stated. This encompassed concepts of timely communication and prompt response and availability of staff when others had a concern or request. This concept was different from other cultivation strategies in that it did not necessarily involve access to leadership, just access to staff representing the organisation. The concepts of timeliness and prompt attention were also grouped frequently with this concept of customer service.

As one member of PFHA noted, efforts that really made a difference were "just being

available through email, and if we need to speak with them directly, they make time for us as well". The same PFHA staff member stated:

> If we have a question we can send an email, and their answer is readily available to us... Whenever we've have a question about anything, you can send an email and before you know it, you've got the answer and more.

NCOA staff also mentioned this concept of customer service. When asked about their own abilities and responses, a member of NCOA stated that:

> I think that we're very good at meeting deadlines. We have some expected response rates to when things come in that we respond to the issue, depending on what the issue is, within hours or days, and depending on how much time we have to go around and gather everyone's opinions. So customer service is something we talk about at the staff level, good customer service and getting back in a timely manner with people.

Discussion

Relationship cultivation strategies of networking, sharing of tasks, and access were stressed most frequently. From the CBO's point of view, networking was highly prized and helpful. While PFHA relied on NCOA for a lot of its resources and assistance, PFHA also had a need to connect with more organisations than just NCOA. PFHA connected with many organisations through NCOA and on its own and valued what it gained from these relationships.

This organisation-to-organisation relationship took place in a very unique context because of the specific health issue and the community of supporters for this issue. This case could prove to be a valuable learning tool for government and non-profit organisations that are seeking to affect health and social issues within communities. Because organisations in these contexts are generally working towards a greater good, these organisations can identify with a larger goal

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and view other organisations or publics more readily as partners. These organisations seemed to share many of the same ideals and had very similar missions and goals. Because of this, helping the other organisation achieve its programme goals was in a way helping the organisation to achieve its goals.

Through the interviews and most especially through the participant observation it became apparent that there was a general atmosphere of collaboration. Individuals and organisations were networking, working to form partnerships, and working toward common goals. These common goals are driving these organisations. In this example, the issues of older adult health and older adult fall prevention are the issues that both of these organisations are working to improve. They were drawn to these partnerships and these opportunities because of their common goals. The real question here may be, though, not just how relationships work between organisations who are very sure of their goals and vested in the same issues, but how does an organisation form great relationships and involve others who aren't yet on board?

Perhaps the lesson here for these types of issues is that encouraging community organisations to work together can be a valuable commodity for national organisations. Connecting CBOs with other local and national organisations that have similar goals can help them to find necessary resources. This study has shown that regarding social issues such as these, where profit is not the objective, but instead the objective is improving certain health or social conditions, there aren't really 'competitors', just collaborators together towards a common goal. While these organisations still want to become known as experts in their field and become successful, they can be successful by collaborating with others and by getting involved in issues together.

This may be different for for-profit businesses, however. For example, in for-profit settings, companies may not want to encourage their publics to go to a competitor, depending on the strength of the relationship. For-profit businesses may feel that they shouldn't direct

their publics towards other organisations for a fear of losing stakeholders. While directing publics to competitors can be a debatable issue, perhaps this case study does still hold some additional relevance for businesses. This idea of connecting 'publics' with other 'publics' seems to be effective. For example, for a business this may mean connecting publics who have had a positive experience and have a strong relationship with newer publics to help with outreach. PFHA gets a lot out of its connection to other organisations; PFHA has the opportunity to speak about its positive experiences, but in turn it is connecting with organisations that would like to take on the *Matter of Balance* intervention and spread the programme, helping to decrease falls more nationally, which is an important issue for PFHA. Through the relationships and connections they are forming, they are increasing the overall reputation of their organisation and their programme.

Sharing of tasks was also important to the organisational relationship. NCOA seemed to fit naturally into this problem-solving role, because of its original role as the National Resource Center, providing technical assistance to grantees. NCOA went beyond this role, though, helping to solve problems on a variety of issues, not just *Matter of Balance*, and working to figure out solutions collaboratively. The words "problem solving" appeared quite frequently throughout the interviews.

Additionally, new themes of customer service and attentiveness emerged from participants' responses. The way these concepts were described seemed to distinguish them from any of the pre-existing relationship cultivation strategies. The concept of *customer service* in this case was taken directly from participants' own words to express the concept. Customer service involved access to members of each organisation at all levels and a quick and timely response. Additionally, *attentiveness* focused on the need to get to know publics, to listen to them, and to try to understand their point of view and their needs. This concept was similar to Kent and Taylor's (2002) principles of stewardship and having a dialogic orientation. Organisations should be attuned to

their publics' needs and interests even when immediate actions are not needed. This was illustrated by the many times that members of NCOA and PFHA said they had the other organisation "in mind".

The cultivation strategies of conflict resolution and positivity were not referenced or displayed often in this case. Positivity was mentioned very few times, and the organisations seemed to prefer full openness and disclosure as opposed to being unconditionally positive or doing whatever it would take to make the other organisation happy (Grunig & Huang, 2000). The conflict resolution strategies did not emerge in the findings, because of how positive the relationship was. Members of either organisation could not recall dissatisfying interactions or conflicts. While one member of NCOA did say that conflicts were always handled professionally because of their good relationship, no specific examples of conflict were given when probed upon.

Suggestions for future research

More work should be done to explore the new themes that emerged within the relationship cultivation strategies. Research should explore if the concepts of customer service and attentiveness are mutually exclusive from the other relationship cultivation strategies, and if so, if these strategies hold true in other settings and relationships as well.

Also, literature on power within public relations should be considered for its implications within this study. Within the relationship cultivation strategies power played a large role. Even though this was an interorganisational relationship, the national organisation had greater perceived power because of its role in the relationship as well as its reputation and contacts nationally. This perception of power influenced what these organisations expected to get out of the relationship and how the relationship was enacted. Future studies could explore how different levels and types of power imbalances affect relationships.

Additionally within the OPR and relationship management literature, there is little mention of interorganisational relationships. Expansion of organisation-public relationship theory is needed to fit the organisation-to-organisation context. Although this case study uses organisation-public relationship theory as a framework for an organisation-to-organisation relationship, a better framework is needed from which to study relationships between organisational partners and stakeholders. Many of the elements of the organisation-public relationship theory do hold true in this context; however, expansion of the theory is needed to fit the organisation-to-organisation context.

Further research might also explore how the emergent strategies of attentiveness and customer service overlap with Kent and Taylor's (2002) dialogic principles.

Limitations of the study

Because these organisations were active with limited availability of staff and resources, the time they could allow for participant observation was restricted. In addition, while participant observation was helpful in building rapport and seeing these individuals interact, observation took place at a location neutral to both organisations, a national conference. Lengthier participant observation of interactions at each organisation could have helped to provide additional insight into the relationship. Although most research communication took place via a distance, this communication was similar to how these organisations communicated with each other, since they also did most of their communication with each other electronically or over the phone.

Another limitation stems from the nature of organisational relationships as a continuous process. This study presents only one snapshot of a lengthy and satisfying relationship. Further study of interorganisational relationships prior to formation, during formation, and throughout the relationship would provide a stronger glimpse into the entire relationship, including relational antecedents and outcomes. Lastly, although this case study suggests results for further consideration, findings from this study highlight one specific interorganisational

relationship and cannot be generalised to other organisational relationships.

Conclusion

Specific cultivation strategies that were the most successful included networking, sharing of tasks, and access. New cultivation strategies of customer service and attentiveness emerged. Study of interorganisational relationships in the context of partnerships with CBOs has the potential to contribute to relationship management theory, public relations, and health communication. Learning more about how positive relationships are enacted between national NGOs and CBOs can further understanding of how to involve community-based partners in specific health and social efforts for greater impact in communities. Because CBOs know their communities best and have greater reach within communities, they can prove to be valuable partners for NGOs in these efforts.

This study also helps to contribute to the dearth of qualitative research on the OPR and interorganisational relationships. By exploring qualitatively interorganisational relationships, this study helps to provide more depth and understanding to how an exemplar relationship is enacted between NCOA, a national non-profit organisation, and PFHA, a CBO.

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Author contact details:

Lucinda L. Austin, M.A.
Ph.D. Student, Instructor
Department of Communication
2130 Skinner Building
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742-7635
USA
llaustin@umd.edu