Research Article

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Loosely Defined Partnerships: A Case Study of Three Refugee-Serving Nonprofit Organizations

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This article uses a case study approach to explore how U.S.-based nonprofit organizations collaborate to serve immigrants and refugees and identifies characteristics that are essential to successful partnerships. While other studies have documented the challenges immigrants and refugees face in relocating to a new community and the ways community-based organizations help them through the integration process, this project brings together migration studies and nonprofit management studies to interrogate the concept of partnerships based on the lived experiences of organization staff. Partnerships are essential to providing programs and services, and this project seeks to explore the tension inherent in partnering with other organizations that have similar missions and goals. This project captures the stories of three refugee-serving nonprofit organizations in a midsouth city. Utilizing in-depth interviews to analyze the interorganizational collaborations that the three organizations have formed to provide holistic support to immigrants and refugees, the findings here suggest that partnerships are essential but often fraught. These organizations, like many nonprofits, face limited capacity and form community partnerships to alleviate these limitations. As defined by improving an organization's ability to fulfill its core missions, successful partnerships rely on relational embeddedness and a shared mission. Findings demonstrate the necessity and benefit of a network of partnerships to meet the needs of this unique population.

Keywords: Refugees; resettlement; nonprofit organizations; partnerships; collaboration

Even before the federal government took responsibility for resettling refugees in 1980, nonprofit organizations have been responsible for refugee resettlement in the United States (Zucker, 1983; Darrow, 2015). Since 1980, the Department of State has shared the responsibility of resettling refugees with the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) who partners with nine national voluntary agencies. These national organizations have local affiliates working on the ground to resettle and integrate refugees into their communities. Each individual and family arrives at their newly assigned home with complex needs, expectations, and assets (BenEzer & Zetter, 2015; Cortes, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). While previous studies have examined how nonprofit organizations provide services and programming to refugees and immigrants in the United States (Mott, 2010; Dubus, 2018; Mullins & Jones, 2009; de Graauw & Bloemraad, 2017; Gonzalez Benson & Pimentel Walker, 2021), the strategies and nuances of partnering between and beyond immigrant-serving nonprofits has been less thoroughly documented.

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This study builds on existing research by shifting the focus to nonprofit organizations that support resettlement and integration. Here, I combine literature on the refugee resettlement processes with literature on organizational collaboration to contextualize resettlement efforts in the United States. Because studies have shown that nonprofit organizations face competition over limited resources, as with their for-profit counterparts, the nonprofits tasked with serving refugees face similar challenges as their clients (Darrow, 2015; Bunger, 2013; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Nevertheless, the idea of nonprofit organizations competing with one another in a resource-scarce environment can seem counterintuitive to their benevolent missions; as such, they reframe their relationships with other organizations as collaboration and partnership (Curley et al., 2021). This study focuses on three U.S.-based nonprofits serving immigrants and refugees in the same midsouth city to better understand how these organizational dynamics affect the refugee resettlement process within the context of the United States.

The two questions guiding this study are: (1) *How do nonprofits collaborate to serve immigrants and refugees?* and (2) *What characteristics are critical to successful partnerships?* I explore these questions through in-depth interviews with staff and directors at three nonprofit organizations, two of which are designated refugee resettlement agencies and one of which is a grassroots nonprofit founded by immigrants over 20 years ago. I also interviewed Somali refugees, a group served by all three organizations since the 1990s, to triangulate the data collected during interviews with organization staff.

My approach reveals the importance of partnerships, especially with community partners who could provide services and programs adjacent to but not overlapping with the focal organizations. I argue that supporting organizations collaborate to expand their limited capacity to serve immigrants and refugees, with the most successful partnerships relying on a shared mission and relational embeddedness. My argument aligns with what seminal organizational theorists have suggested are true for profit-seeking organizations (Moran, 2005; Gulati, 2007). However, within the nonprofit sector, these qualities can be particularly problematic considering the risk of mission drift and high staff turnover that undermine shared mission and relational embeddedness respectively. I find that, while nonprofit staff focus on partnerships as a positive consequence of their limited capacity, their definition of *partnership* is loose and ambiguous. Nonprofit staff are typically eager to name any type of collaboration and funding as a partnership (Mendel & Brudney, 2018), but this ultimately opens their organization up to collaborations that may be unproductive or even counterproductive to their work. Thus, this study has significant implications for nonprofits and others working within refugee resettlement and for the ways immigrant- and refugee-serving nonprofits sit at the crossroads of scholarship on migration and nonprofit management.

For this study, it is essential to address some of the terms used. *Immigrant* and *refugee* refer specifically to people who voluntarily migrate to the United States and those who are resettled in the United States upon fleeing conflict in their home country, respectively. When referring to these groups, I use the terms *foreign-born*, *internationals*, or *newcomers* to include various experiences. *Receiving communities* are communities where immigrants and refugees settle. *Supporting organizations* are nonprofit agencies providing direct services to internationals. As integration is a vital part of this study, I differentiate the integration process from assimilation. *Integration* is the incorporation of newcomers into a receiving community without a complete transformation to the receiving community's culture. On the other hand, *assimilation* is a one-sided expected or required transformation to the receiving community's culture by the newcomer. This study focuses on how supporting organizations facilitate the integration process by providing services to newcomers and forming partnerships in the community.

Literature Review

Resettlement and integration into a new community is a widely varied process, even within the context of the United States. As nonprofit organizations facilitate this process, they must adjust their programs and services to meet the diverse needs of refugees and immigrants. Nonprofit organizations face challenges fulfilling this role, often because their limited capacity mirrors the limited capital of migrants, and strategically fill this gap with organizational collaboration.

Refugee Resettlement Processes

Scholars of migration studies highlight the transformative, unique, and often traumatic experiences characterizing refugees' journeys from their home country to a second country (sometimes in a refugee camp) and finally to their host country (BenEzer & Zetter, 2014; Brown & Scribner, 2014). While many studies have focused on how experiences differ for refugees and immigrants (Hein, 1993; Cortes, 2004; Garip, 2008; Lamba & Krahn, 2003; Connor, 2010; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014), BenEzer and Zetter (2014) highlight the uniqueness of the refugee journey as a point of study. Some refugees leave their country by boat or makeshift raft; others walk across nation-state borders to make their way to official United Nations-run refugee camps. Each of these journeys is "profoundly formative and transformative" in shaping refugees' psychological, social, and emotional conditions (BenEzer & Zetter, 2014, p. 302). Several studies have documented the impacts of trauma through the resettlement journey (Hess et al., 2019; Brown & Scribner, 2014). The amount of time spent and the types of experiences in the second country or refugee camp varies. This study focuses specifically on resettlement in the United States and the variations within the process.

Furthermore, personal characteristics such as gender, age, ethnic ties, and access to capital affect variations in integration. Women and youth often take on new roles within families, particularly in building linguistic, financial, and social capital (Lamba & Krahn, 2003; Hess et al., 2018; Garip, 2008; Albrecht & Upadhyay, 2018; Boyle & Ali, 2010; Forrest & Brown, 2014). Capital, especially social capital, is critical to establishing a life in a new community for migrants (Garip, 2008; Ziersch et al., 2023). However, the refugee process often strips people of all sources of capital as they arrive in a new country without linguistic knowledge, employment, assets, knowledge about accessing resources, and social ties. Nonprofit organizations in the receiving community must fill gaps in capital, helping newcomers become self-sufficient.

Role of Nonprofit Organizations in Refugee Integration

As previously addressed, nonprofit organizations bear the brunt of responsibility for facilitating refugees' integration. Resettlement agencies manage the initial three to six months of resettlement and often strive to promote long-term self-sufficiency (Mott, 2010; Sidney, 2014; Frazier & van Riemsdijk, 2021). The initial resettlement period requires organizations to provide healthcare, housing, English language classes, employment, and education (Dubus, 2018). However, the question remains: What is the goal of refugee resettlement? The Office of Refugee Resettlement's (ORR) publicly stated goal is to "provide people in need with critical resources to assist them in becoming integrated members of American society" and to "assist refugees with accessing mainstream opportunities and resources" (Office of Refugee Resettlement). Of note, a content analysis of the ORR's actual policy reveals a focus on self-sufficiency and employment rather than integration (Gonzalez Benson, 2016). While each nonprofit agency working with immigrants and refugees has its specific mission and vision, the ORR provides guidelines to define successful resettlement (Forrest & Brown, 2014; Darrow, 2015).

Beyond resettlement, Graauw and Bloemraad (2017) describe migrants' process of establishing roots in their new country as *integration*. Integration rejects Park's assimilation theory, which focuses on a one-way function of erasing migrants' cultures (de Graauw & Bloemraad, 2017). I

would argue that integration is a concept rooted in neocolonialism and may not be a beneficial measurement for migrants or the nonprofits serving them. However, migration studies currently use *integration*, which I cannot thoroughly critique here (see Schinkel, 2018; Saharso, 2019; Dubus, 2018; Phillimore, 2021).

To measure integration, nonprofit organizations look at economic self-sufficiency, secondary migration after initial resettlement, a sense of empowerment and self-determination, and language acquisition (Lumley-Sapanski, 2019; Forrest & Brown, 2014; Mott, 2010; Steimel, 2017; Dubus, 2018). Language and employment acquisition are often the easiest to measure, and Dubus (2018) suggests supporting organization staff focus on these outcomes. In many ways, language and employment acquisition play a significant role in providing migrants with sources of capital; they also demonstrate that the newcomers are not a drain on the economy or community. Steimel (2017) discusses how the idea of "empowerment" is used differently by resettlement agencies and refugees to characterize integration, suggesting that the field—of research and practice—should take a broader and more inclusive approach to defining empowerment, particularly as it may be understood beyond economic self-sufficiency. Regardless of how integration is defined or measured, nonprofits face various challenges affecting the success of their outcomes when supporting refugee integration.

Organizational Challenges

A surge in immigration and resettlement at the end of the twentieth century meant the landscape of welcoming immigrants and refugees has changed (Wilson & Svajlenka, 2014; Stewart, 2012; Winders, 2014; Rodriguez, 2018; Santiago & Smith, 2019). For example, Winders (2014) focuses on new immigrant destinations to argue that the factors informing where immigrants settle are complex; political shifts as well as economic opportunities are critical to understanding who settles where. Restrictive state laws and changes in the political climate at the national level have increased the strain on supporting organizations (Browne et al., 2016; Brown & Scribner, 2014; Santiago & Smith, 2019; Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2018). All refugee resettlement agencies and many other supporting nonprofits receive funding from federal and state governments, which means financial support waxes and wanes with changing administrations (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Of note, a series of executive orders signed by the Trump Administration disrupted the ways nonprofits served refugees and immigrants by changing the climate in which nonprofits operated and the challenges migrants faced (Darrow & Scholl, 2020). Even when there are high funding levels for these organizations, there is competition among organizations.

Competition—and ultimately the threat of extinction—drives organizations regardless of profit-seeking status (Gulati, 2007). For nonprofits, the threat of extinction is less about being taken over by a competing organization and more about competing for limited resources, especially funding and staffing. The nonprofit sector is resource-scarce and has notoriously low staff retention rates. Nonprofits cobble together funding through government dollars, grants, contracts, and donations; nonprofits working toward similar goals or in a similar region are likely to be competing for funding and highly qualified staff members (Bunger, 2013; Curley et al., 2021). Competition has also led to a phenomenon known as *mission drift*, where nonprofits expand, distort, or shift their services and beneficiaries to make themselves more competitive for funding (Bennett & Savani, 2011). From a neo-institutional perspective, mission drift can play an essential role because rational and bureaucratic organizations become increasingly similar over time (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Mission drift and other negative effects of nonprofit collaboration remain understudied phenomena (Gazley & Guo, 2020). As Curley et al. (2021) find, for example, competition feels counter to many nonprofits' missions and ways of operating; as such, nonprofit staff focus instead on the ways they collaborate with other nonprofits as a strategy to help them accomplish their core functions within a competitive environment.

Organizational Strategies

Mirroring how migrants build social capital to navigate resettlement, nonprofits may also look to increase their social capital through resource development, organizational collaboration, and referrals to and from other agencies (Schneider, 2009). Collaboration among organizations involves shared efforts toward a shared goal and can take various forms related to formality, capacity, and trust (Gazley & Guo, 2020; Mendel & Brudney, 2018; Gazley & Guo, 2020). Nonprofit collaboration is the practice of nonprofit organizations joining efforts toward a mutual goal (Gazley & Guo, 2020). Collaboration facilitates resource sharing, capacity building, and enhancing services. Partnership, at varying levels of formality, is a key part of collaboration.

Organizational collaboration can happen internally, externally, and programmatically, but competition can also occur at those levels (Curley et al., 2021). Because cooperation and competition overlap so frequently in the nonprofit sector, organizational scholars use the term "co-opetition" to describe the duality of many interfirm relationships (Bunger et al., 2021; Bunger, 2013; Walley, 2007). Indeed, Bunger (2013) demonstrates how competitors who perceive each other as highly trustworthy are more likely to collaborate, pooling funding, space, and staff, ultimately making them more competitive with other organizations. Gulati, Wohlgezogen, and Zhelyazkov (2012) also emphasize the necessity for coordination in interorganizational collaborations, which includes an integration of activities, capabilities, and resources. The authors argue that coordination is the key to realizing the benefits of collaboration. Understanding the tenuous relationship between collaborating/competing organizations and how they coordinate activities can help to refine how nonprofits serve newcomers. With this article, I build on organizational theory and relevant concepts, including competition, co-opetition, and partnership, to locate refugee-serving nonprofit organizations within the larger theoretical conversation.

Currently, the literature lacks comparative studies of nonprofits serving immigrants and refugees that could inform nonprofit management and migration studies. I build on studies beginning to locate organizational theory within refugee-serving nonprofits with a case study of three organizations, which have formed an elaborate network of partnerships to fulfill their missions (Kombassere, 2013; Darrow, 2015; Gonzalez Benson & Pimentel Walker, 2021; Yeo 2022; Parada et al., 2020). Still, further research is needed to explore the inner workings of the partnerships supporting organizations form and the consequences of those partnerships.

I explore how nonprofits collaborate to support refugees' integration into the United States and identify successful partnerships' qualities within this context. This article, then, demonstrates how nonprofits have figured out ways to partner to provide the services they claim to provide. While the elaborate network of formal and informal partnerships is not always apparent to the staff working in the field or the population they serve, both groups' success relies on loosely defined partnerships.

Research Methods

To investigate the research questions, I focused on three nonprofit organizations located in a medium-sized city in the U.S. midsouth, where the foreign-born population is at least 7% of the 1.2 million people living in the metropolitan statistical area. The number of foreign-born residents is likely higher than stated due to underestimates of undocumented immigrants and the influx of refugees in 2016. The selection of the city and organizations is a convenience sample, as I had spent a couple of years in the area developing rapport with staff, leadership, and clients of each organization.

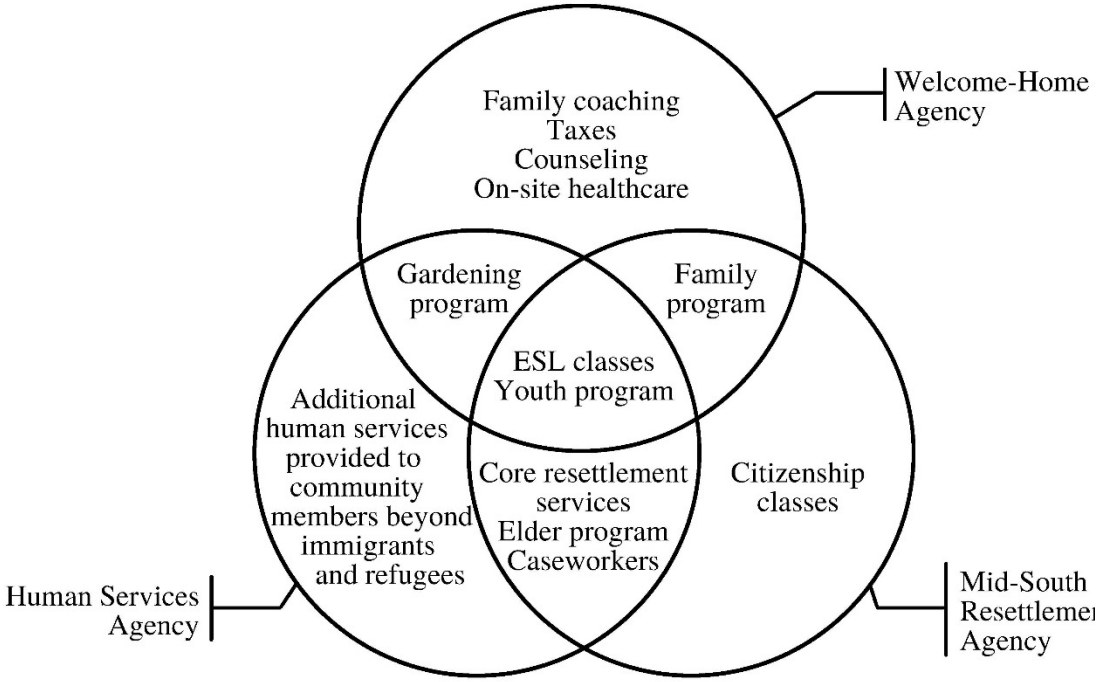
The organizations, which I call Human Services Agency, Mid-South Resettlement Agency, and Welcome-Home Agency, provide services to refugees and/or immigrants during the initial resettlement period, usually the first three to eight months in the United States, or beyond that period. As U.S. government-designated refugee resettlement agencies, their funding agencies limit Human Services Agency and Mid-South Resettlement Agency to serving refugees, asylum-seekers, parolees, and secondary migrants for a limited resettlement period. Their programs focus on immediate self-sufficiency and rely on a team of caseworkers, case managers, and specialists addressing employment, housing, and more. Welcome-Home Agency, an independent nonprofit, chooses to serve refugees, immigrants, and low-income individuals, focusing on foreign-born families. Their services pick up where the refugee resettlement agencies stop, focusing on more long-term self-sufficiency and fewer direct services. Welcome-Home Agency has a smaller staff and provides fewer intensive services.

While the designated resettlement agencies receive funding from a variety of sources, including federal and state governments, grants, and private donors, Welcome-Home Agency receives almost all its funding from grants. Grant-funding is particularly competitive, as the three organizations were often applying for grants from the same foundations and organizations. More research is needed on how different funding streams and related competition may affect partnerships. With this article, however, I focus on more of the programmatic partnerships developed.

Despite foundational and funding differences, all three supporting organizations provide services with similar goals based on the unique challenges of being an international in the United States (see Figure 1). All three organizations provide or host educational programs, including English as a second language classes and after-school/summer programming for youth. Other programs offered focus on key ORR resettlement areas: core services; health (gardening program, counseling, on-site healthcare); employment/economic development (taxes, family program, caseworkers); and integration (elder program, family coaching, citizenship classes). Initially, my interest in this project began as a way to understand the often-overlapping programs and services; however, as I discuss, the focus shifted to understanding partnerships.

The data discussed here are part of a larger study that utilized interviews, participant observation, and content analysis of public-facing documents with the three organizations identified. For this article, I focus on 15 semistructured interviews with staff members at each nonprofit organization and Somali refugees who had utilized services from at least one of the organizations. Each of the 10 semistructured interviews with staff focused on the organization's services, partnerships, and experience with successful and unsuccessful partnerships. I selected staff interviewees using stratified sampling based on their position with one of the three nonprofits. The interviewees included caseworkers, program directors, grant coordinators, program staff, and the directors of Welcome-Home Agency and refugee resettlement department at Human Services Agency. Except for the executive-level directors who were older men, all of the staff interviewees were women, and most were young professionals. These gender and age demographics were representative of the organizations' staff. Interviewees' experience working with newcomers ranged from 18 months to more than 20 years, and many of them had worked at one of the three organizations other than the one where they were currently employed. With just a couple of exceptions, they were white, not Hispanic/Latino, and U.S.-born, unlike the populations their organizations serve.

Figure 1. Comparison of the Services Provided by the Supporting Organizations



I also conducted five semistructured interviews with Somali refugees who had participated in programs offered by at least one of the organizations. Somalis were one of the few refugee groups that all three organizations had served, and focusing on just one country of origin allowed for interesting comparisons across their experiences with the organizations. I used snowball sampling with this population, asking for recommendations from staff at the organizations I interviewed. These interviews focused on experiences coming to the midsouth city, what services were helpful for them, and the challenges they still see for refugees like themselves. The Somali interviewees included two men in their twenties and three women in their thirties who had been in the United States for a range of eight to 21 years. Their English language skills varied, e.g., while I needed an interpreter to interview two women, one of the men was an interpreter for one of the agencies. Because the interviews focused on the participants recalling what programs and services helped them since they initially resettled in the United States, recall bias likely affected the data collected from these interviews. Despite this, the data demonstrates which programs and services are significant enough in their integration experiences to leave a lasting effect.

All interview participants gave informed consent before beginning the interview, and all except one permitted me to audio-record the interviews to transcribe later. I have changed the names and identifiers of the interviewees. I conducted the interviews at the organizations' offices and at a religious organization's office where one of the Somali interviewees worked. These locations allowed me to understand how the supporting organizations deliver their programs and ensure the interviewees were in a familiar and comfortable environment, especially as none of the refugee interviewees had previously participated in a research study. Conducting interviews in these locations also meant that many of the interviews were interrupted by phone calls, clients stopping by with questions, and other everyday occurrences for the organizations.

I used an abductive approach to collect and analyze the data. Initially, my focus was on understanding the dynamics of overlapping programs and services provided by the three

organizations, but a recurring theme—tension around partnerships—became a valuable discovery. I used qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti, to identify codes and themes appearing in the interviews, focusing on the interviews with organization staff. The interviews with the Somali refugees verified and provided an essential perspective on the other interviews' themes. After the initial coding, I grouped similar codes and identified the most prominent themes in my findings below. My discussion integrates the organizational theory, especially relational embeddedness, shared missions, and partnerships, into my findings.

Essential to the context of this study, I collected my data in 2016. The annual ceiling and the actual number of refugees resettled in the United States were at their highest point since 2001 (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Furthermore, immigration was a focal issue in the U.S. presidential election of 2016, not only in the candidates' platforms but also in the rhetoric and media coverage surrounding the election (Darrow & Scholl 2020). Thus, while immigration and refugee resettlement were polarized and politicized issues before the 2016 election, they rose to the forefront of public sentiment. While this context likely shapes interviewees' responses, it is a critical moment to explore what partnership looks like for refugee-serving organizations, as they navigate a fraught political landscape.

Data and Analysis

Out of necessity, supporting organizations leverage a network of partners to expand their limited capacity. I allowed organization staff to define *partnership* in the interviews. To summarize their working definitions, they consistently referred to their partnerships with a loose definition, which included any organization, agency, or individual helping the supporting organization or clients in some capacity and did not necessitate reciprocity or a recognized relationship with the partnering organization. In addition to the importance of partners, the most successful partnerships are grounded in interagency relationships and shared missions. When partnerships lack those qualities, collaboration itself becomes a challenge.

"We cannot run our programs without them": Necessity of Partners

Each organization has an expansive network of partnerships with banks, churches, employers, ethnic community groups, government agencies, healthcare providers, higher education institutions, K–12 institutions, housing entities, local businesses, volunteers and donors, and other nonprofits. These partnerships provide additional resources for the supporting organizations. Partnerships include on-site and off-site partners. Some partnerships are distinctly defined and highly collaborative, such as all three organizations' partnerships with the local school district. In contrast, other partnerships are loose and informal, such as referrals made to a network of health centers.

Critically, nonprofit organizations offer a massive list of services, programs, and types of support they provide to their clients: from the core resettlement services to "providing ongoing education and communication with the community" (Mikayla, Welcome-Home Agency). However, based on their stated missions, the organizations' core functions are to guide newcomers from survival mode to self-sufficiency. To do so, they provide for basic needs like housing and benefit programs, offer services to equip clients with skills like English language acquisition and job readiness/development, and prepare them to be self-sufficient by showing them how to navigate cultural institutions.

When asked about their services, staff interviewees almost always spoke about their partners' services in the same breath as their organizations' internal services. For example, helping newly arrived refugees access healthcare is an essential component of three levels of services: basic needs; skill development; and self-sufficiency. Christine, who was a current program manager at

Mid-South Resettlement Agency but who had worked at two of the organizations, described how critical the healthcare providers were:

> Our healthcare providers are up there, although I think they're better to us than we are to them. [laughs] Yeah, they're just infinitely patient. We're trying to get the Medicaid approved, and they're just taking losses.

Healthcare providers offer a highly specialized service the agencies cannot offer in-house. Christine says that the partnership with the healthcare providers is skewed: The agencies and their clients receive more from the relationship than the healthcare providers. Partners allow nonprofits to provide the services they need and want despite mismatched reciprocity. To respond to the comprehensiveness of the needs of refugees and immigrants, the staff interviewees all talked about how necessary partners were. They frequently made statements like Hailee, a frontline staff member at Welcome-Home Agency, did: "We cannot run our programs without them, and there's a true give and take to running those programs." As necessary as partnerships are in general, the most impactful and beneficial partnerships were rooted in relationships and shared missions.

"They know your history and your story": Interagency Relationships

The relationships among organizations took different forms, and there was no one type of model organizational relationship. Instead, the staff mentioned individuals who worked at partner organizations and the significance of their interpersonal relationships in accomplishing organizational goals. For example, all three organizations described their relationship with the police department as a partnership. Still, the staff at the different organizations specified that the partnership only goes as far as relationships with individual officers and districts. For example, Christine, a Mid-South Resettlement Agency staff member with eight years' experience supporting immigrants and refugees in various capacities, recalled:

> [The police department] is increasingly partnering, but really just with one district. You know, there are all these different districts and each district is like its own universe. So the [Welcome-Home Agency] area, the District 4 officer has been a partner … But we've got a lot of folks in District 6. We've had some contact with them, but nothing as promising.

The partnership with the police department is not longstanding but is increasingly a target for supporting organizations. Christine describes how the relationship with District 4, the area where many internationals live, is good. Still, they have not fostered as much communication and partnership with other districts, like District 6, where newcomers do not have as much of a presence. When the partnership does not flourish with the police, organization staff must intervene on behalf of clients more often than when there is a standing partnership. For Christine, having a partnership with the police department means more than a relationship with staff; it also means responding directly to refugees and immigrants' needs out in the community.

Almost every staff interviewee mentioned a staff member at a partnering organization by name, underlining the frequency of establishing a partnership because of a pre-established relationship with an individual or maintaining a partnership by developing an individual connection. Beyond creating and maintaining partnerships, interpersonal relationships can help in other ways, as Rebecca, who works with refugee youth at Mid-South Resettlement Agency, says:

> When [the health insurance marketplace] was being cut, I think a lot of people individually made phone calls and … healthcare providers coming in the building and saying this is about to happen, you know, you might want to advocate for this.

The relationship with healthcare providers allowed staff at supporting organizations to have a heads up about changes in policies and procedures, which would significantly alter their abilities to fulfill the core functions of their jobs. Furthermore, the healthcare providers were a source of information and advocacy. Interpersonal relationships help nonprofits accomplish their core functions by expanding their social capital (i.e., benefits like information and advocacy derived from relationships).

While relationships with staff at partnering organizations can be helpful, there is a significant drawback to building partnerships on interpersonal relationships: sustainability. Hannah had worked or interned at all three of the supporting organizations in just eight years of professional experience touched on the issue:

> There's been significant staff turnover. But not like at the management level. They switched from having a case management system like ours where you would go to the food stamp office, you have a caseworker, their name is on your documents, when you go back, you talk to that person, they know your history and story, but in the past two years, they didn't want anybody to specialize in anything.

Here, she explicitly talks about the impact of staff turnover at the food stamp office on refugees accessing benefits easily. Still, implicit in her example is that the staff serving refugees also lose a point of contact—and with it a shared history and story—when people at a partnering agency leave. Interestingly, Hannah had been on the other side of the high levels of staff turnover but focused on how people who left partnering organizations had an impact on the core functions of the supporting organizations.

"When the aims are identical": Shared Mission and Goals

Interpersonal relationships are an essential source of resources, knowledge, and connection, but staff interviewees described other successful partnerships rooted in shared mission and benefit. As aforementioned, the three organizations have similar missions and core functions; their similarities likely explain why they do not partner with each other. They seek to form partnerships to fill gaps in services instead. As one staff member at Human Services Agency, Pat, noted, "It just depends on where we feel like the need is, if there's a hole in our capacity, you know, which organization, which company could fill it? We'll reach out if they have not already approached us." The two resettlement agencies participate in quarterly community education and engagement meetings. Still, those meetings focus on developing partnerships with external agencies rather than strengthening a partnership with each other.

At Mid-South Resettlement Agency, Rebecca described a mutually beneficial partnership with the WIC office:

> We all take families to WIC all the time, you know, to register. And it's so much transportation and time. So WIC actually reached out to us to say, hey, we might want to do some site-based registrations, and they actually wrote a grant to do it … like why would they want to do that? … For [the resettlement agencies], it's really beneficial. But then for them, they said it could open up doors where they could do more research to figure out why is this so successful.

Rebecca questioned why WIC would want to put the time and resources into applying for a grant on their behalf. However, she rationalized that there is a mutual benefit since WIC will

evaluate what is successful about the partnership. At Welcome-Home Agency, Hailee described the difference between successful and unsuccessful partnerships using similar terms:

> When the aims are identical or similar, so we both have the same objectives, when we both have the same amount of investment and accountability, that's nice. Like sometimes you find yourself in a situation where you really need somebody, they don't need you that bad, they like will fall apart on you, and it really, it can really affect you but doesn't affect them.

In this example, it is not just mutual benefit but also shared goals and investment. Shared investment is not as essential as shared goals; this interviewee used examples of successful partnerships where the investment is lopsided. For example, Christine spoke about the WIC partnership, and the partnership with healthcare providers is uneven in their investing resources. Still, it works because their missions align with those of the supporting organizations.

Indeed, Hannah at Welcome-Home Agency underlined the significance of shared mission and goals in discussing unsuccessful partnerships. As the person responsible for managing partnerships and overseeing programs, she had a different perspective than some staff members whose jobs involved working directly with refugees and immigrants. Successful partnerships, in her view, must be:

> Based off the needs of the participants … we've turned partners down before because it's just not something that we saw as a need or that our participants thought was a need. What's the point in having that program if no one's going to show up to it?

Turning down a partnership did not align with the staff's wide-reaching definition of partnerships, where they deemed everyone interested in working with them a partner. Nevertheless, as someone managing partnerships, she recognized that maintaining an organization-level relationship takes capacity, particularly staff's investment. It was not worth the investment if the goals did not align with the nonprofits' core function of meeting the needs of their clients.

Mutual investment most often occurred with the public school system, which was, in many ways, the model partner for the three supporting organizations. Hailee, a frontline staff member at Welcome-Home Agency of five years, called the school district an "invaluable partner" and said the relationship with them in terms of providing services is highly reciprocal:

> We do a lot of the coordination with [the Family Education program] with them. So, we set up the waitlist and identify who's going to be in that program, and check-in with them regularly. The local school district teachers are implementing the program … Some of our teachers are doing the homework help, some of their teachers are doing the other parts, so we meet monthly to shore up those things and make sure we're on the same page.

The program Hailee mentions is the most collaborative program interviewees described, with half of the staff employed by the local school district and half employed by Welcome-Home Agency. According to the executive director, this is a long-standing partnership dating back to the founding of Welcome-Home Agency. They maintain the partnership through regular meetings, constant communication, and a formal memorandum of agreement. The partnership works well because of mutual benefit for the organization and school district, expanding both groups' reach.

A beneficial partnership is a delicate balance for these nonprofit organizations, which rely on partners to fill holes in their limited capacity. However, the staff members relied most on

partnerships with a shared mission and benefit and interpersonal relationships with staff at partnering agencies.

"We've gotten burned": When Partnerships Are Unsuccessful

While many of the interviewees highlighted the benefits of successful partnerships, they also had stories about partnerships that had not been successful. As demonstrated above, partnerships are not always institutionalized; rather, they often hinge on interpersonal relationships and taking the time to critically evaluate whether missions and benefits align. In this way, the partnerships, as defined by the organization staff, are precarious. Furthermore, each partnership was an exercise in navigating power differentials, as I discuss here.

A critical power difference is between organizations and the people they serve. Often, organization staff use the social capital they have in the community and with partners to bridge social capital gaps that refugees and immigrants have in their new hometowns. This particular difference in power may be a reason for organizations to develop and maintain partnerships, but it also exposed examples of partnerships that either never got started or were abandoned. Pat, a staff member at Human Services Agency, brought up how one challenge that had seemingly been resolved had reemerged for clients with whom she worked:

> So, after two long years of fighting, I really felt like we were finally at a good system where we had a system in place to make sure that our clients could get through the glitches of the Medicaid and [state healthcare marketplace] system. And unfortunately, all of that just went away this year. Yeah. Which is a real, real travesty.

Pat's frustration is directed at systemic issues, but she brings up her ability to leverage power in a way that the refugee clients cannot. In all of the interviews I conducted, including those with Somali refugees who had utilized the organizations' services, the power differential between organization staff and refugees was described as beneficial and leveraged in support of refugees' well-being.

However, another important difference in power arose between the grassroots, immigrant-founded and run organization, Welcome Home Agency, and the designated resettlement agencies. The executive director of Welcome Home Agency shared several stories from his experiences trying to partner with the Catholic Diocese in the area, local government, and the public library. In each example, he discussed how the designated refugee resettlement agencies received benefits and opportunities to partner that Welcome Home Agency did not. The director felt that his positionality as an immigrant with a heavy accent and more limited connections to the midsouth city often prevented Welcome Home Agency from forming beneficial partnerships and receiving funding, especially from local government and private donors, that the resettlement agencies did.

Most of the organization staff were reluctant to refer to a partnership as "failed," but each interviewee had examples of partnerships that were tense, unproductive, and ultimately no longer a partnership. The program director at Welcome Home Agency shared an example of a local dance studio, which came to teach a dance class during youth programming and then never returned or responded to communication from organization staff. Rebecca, a staff member at Mid-South Resettlement Agency, reiterated the importance of interagency relationships in talking about how their organization's partnership with the local social security office seemed to disappear overnight:

> All of a sudden, everybody we knew at social security doesn't work there anymore. And there's all these new people that don't know how to process social security applications for

> refugees. So nine out of 10 of our refugees are not getting social security cards, which means we can't get their social security number to the food stamp office, which means their food stamp is getting cancelled, and they can't apply for jobs. It's like one little change in the system, this ripples out everywhere else. And for the caseworkers, who are just like going to the airport, doing their home visits, like they can't fight the systems. They've got to just make it work, how it's working.

Partnerships allow organization staff to increase their power within the community, but, when partnerships dissolve, so does the power.

Relying on partnerships can mean more work for already overworked staff, especially when the partnership is unsuccessful. Several staff members talked about how partnering with volunteers could be incredibly valuable; indeed, all three organizations relied on volunteers to support many of their programs and services. However, when volunteers did not have the same level of commitment or a shared sense of mission and values, the staff—and the refugees and immigrants receiving services—found themselves at a disadvantage. Hailee highlighted an example of how an overreliance on volunteers backfired:

> The volunteers came. They didn't have a lot of the resources they said they might. And they said they would plan activities [for the youth], but they didn't. So we kind of scrambled to pull that together last minute because we were really relying on that volunteer group to pull through, and it just didn't happen … we needed to occupy 75 kids for three hours and all the volunteers needed was to get some kind of class credit. There's not a lot of accountability. It was low-risk, low-cost to them, but much higher for us.

Indeed, the executive director at the same organization shared with me that he discouraged his staff from saying "no" to volunteer groups out of fear of losing a potentially valuable partnership. By trying to work with everyone interested in volunteering, it seems that the organization may be opening itself up to more frequent failures. However, the executive director felt that the organization did not have the power or luxury of turning away eager collaborators.

While the staff I interviewed would not use the word "failed" to describe partnerships, they had ample stories about when partnerships caused more work for them or, even worse, caused harm to the people that the organizations sought to serve. In several examples, the staff spoke about how lack of cultural competence, evangelizing activities, and lack of sustained commitment damaged the relationships that staff worked to develop with refugee families and communities. Questions of who has power and how they use that power are important considerations in partnerships, but often nonprofit staff do not have time to sort through those dynamics in their day-to-day efforts to support refugees and immigrants.

Discussion

This study explores how organizations collaborate to mitigate refugees and immigrants' integration challenges based on interviews with staff and Somali refugees. Supporting organizations provide comprehensive services to provide for basic needs, develop skills, and foster self-sufficiency, but many of the services would not be possible without an extensive network of collaborations. Overall, the data demonstrate how essential it is to form and maintain partnerships to increase the organizations' capacity, but there is tension between the lived experiences of partnerships in my data and the definitions used in the literature.

The three supporting nonprofit organizations are similar in their services and how they partner with community agencies, likely from a rational response to the clients and organizations' needs

(DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Logically, the organizations would compete with one another for grants, funding, volunteers, and other sources of capital, and I had hoped to better understand the relationship among the organizations to see where they fall on a spectrum of competition to collaboration—perhaps with co-opetition at the middle of the spectrum (Bunger, 2013). Instead, the staff focused on the positive consequence of their limited capacity: partnerships. In the process of helping refugees rebuild capital in their new homes, the nonprofits are also building and maintaining capital of their own through organizational collaboration.

The role of organizational collaboration in resettlement and integration efforts needs further exploration. Previous studies looking at partnerships within this area have found that the level of partnerships is low between community-based organizations and resettlement agencies (Kombassere, 2013), a complex web of informal collaborations helps refugee resettlement agencies provide more efficient support to refugees (Parada et al., 2020); further, interorganizational partnerships supporting immigrant integration often form based on interpersonal staff relationships rather than shared organizational traits (Yeo, 2022). It is crucial, however, to understand what partnerships actually look like on the ground of immigrant- and refugee-serving organizations. The partnerships described here suggest that partners provide services and access to resources—both tangible and intangible—the home organizations cannot offer on their own (Gulati, 2007).

For example, sharing information with supporting organization staff regarding a change in healthcare policies is an intangible resource alleviating the work of supporting organizations and relies on interagency relationships, or relational embeddedness (Moran, 2005). A tangible resource provided by partners is the on-site English classes. Partnering organizations provide teachers and curriculum at their own expense, which would be too costly for supporting organizations. Sharing resources in this way relies on a shared mission: The school district's adult and continuing education program needs to provide classes to a wide range of students, and the supporting organizations can provide students who need those classes. As findings from my study demonstrate, collaborative partnerships are thus most robust when there are interpersonal relationships and a shared mission.

As findings from my study demonstrate, the most successful partnerships hinge on interagency staff relationships and shared mission and benefit. In contrast, unsuccessful partnerships lack shared expectations or a shared commitment to serving the population. My data underscore the importance of relational embeddedness and similar goals in navigating networks (Moran, 2005; Gulati, 2007). However, partnerships create opportunities for expanded services without addressing the actual issue at play, i.e., there is not enough money or staff-power for nonprofits to do what they want—and claim—to do. In many ways, organizations have been developing these workarounds for decades and are reproducing a need for their services. The failure of the nonprofits ultimately recreates the need for nonprofits because the work is never fully funded or staffed. Partnerships ensure their survival, but at what cost?

In direct opposition to this explanation of why relational embeddedness and a shared mission are critical to nonprofit organizations providing comprehensive services is the catch-22 that nonprofits have high staff turnover rates and are often plagued by mission drift (Nonprofit H.R., 2019; Bennett & Savani, 2011). High staff turnover undermines the benefit of relational embeddedness because when staff embedded in relationships with community partners leave an organization, the partnership falters. Mission drift undermines shared missions on both sides of the partnership because it can effectively mean that the success of partnerships is constantly shifting. The partnership strategy nonprofits use to address the challenges in limited capital they face ultimately introduces new challenges.

One such challenge is navigating power dynamics steeped in varying levels of social capital. Refugee and immigrant clients have low levels of social capital, which the supporting organizations attempt to mediate with their programs and services. My findings also support the idea that immigrant-led organizations may have less power in their communities than federally contracted organizations (Gonzalez Benson & Pimentel Walker, 2021). Ultimately, organization staff use a loose definition of *partnership* to increase their power and social capital within a community even when that opens them up to unreliable and potentially counterproductive collaborations.

The "loose definition" of *partnership* that the nonprofit staff continued to return to is a critical example of what Mendel and Brudney conceptualize as "partnership hyperbole" (2018, p. 26). In their discussion of the variety of definitions that different fields use to describe collaborations, Mendel and Brudney (2018) suggest that nonprofit organizations are quick to identify any type of collaboration, especially related to funding, as a partnership. The loose definition of *partnership* from which all of the organization interviewees in my study operated aligns with this eagerness. Additionally, my findings expose opportunities for more critical work on the ground to refine standards, expectations, and goals of partnerships and for the literature on migration studies and nonprofit studies to examine disconnects between scholarship and practice.

Conclusion

The findings analyzed here have programmatic and policy implications. For example, organizations serving immigrants and refugees should identify the ways their capacity is limited and form partnerships to address those gaps. Alternately, agencies and businesses in communities with significant migrant populations should consider the ways they can form partnerships with supporting organizations to expand their capacity.

Furthermore, while the supporting organizations may not intentionally compete for resources, they are inevitably doing so, even as staff reframe competition as collaboration. Instead of directly and efficiently supporting refugee and immigrant integration into U.S. communities, the federal government has, at least in this midsouth city, tasked multiple refugee resettlement agencies and, to a lesser extent, grassroots agencies with a monumental goal and limited resources that do not match the task at hand. As opposed to a shared mission, this overlapping mission undermines an organization's ability to partner with others in healthy and meaningful ways. Ultimately, the organizations compete for limited resources, devoting precious capacity to managing partnerships, making them less effective at serving people like the Somali refugees featured in this study.

Suppose local, state, and federal governments continue to task nonprofit organizations with supporting the integration of newcomers. In that case, they must create policies with the actual challenges and assets of immigrant and refugee populations in mind. Local governments should provide additional resources and support to enable agencies to make linguistically appropriate services available in the community. All community agencies and businesses must understand and attempt to address the challenges newcomers face because, as studies show, a welcoming community is more likely to thrive (Majka & Longazel, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2018).

As noted, I was initially interested in the relationship among the three supporting organizations. Organizational theory would have predicted that, if they were structurally embedded, there would be higher levels of trust among them (Moran, 2005). However, my findings related to structural embeddedness are limited, and I could not analyze the effects of this embeddedness on interorganizational relationships, specifically regarding collaboration among the three supporting

organizations. The lack of detailed data about their relationships would indicate they tend toward competition rather than collaboration with one another. Still, there are not enough data to make this conclusion.

Throughout the study, questions and topics for potential future research emerged. Closely related to my research, future research must deepen the understanding of the partner networks through network analysis. Similar studies should be conducted in other cities to compare how supporting organizations collaborate to offer programs and services in different locations, which will help identify best practices. Future research should seek to understand how family dynamics shift as children learn English faster than parents and as many women work outside the home for the first time, ideally longitudinally. Furthermore, my research suggested ethnic leaders naturally arise in the communities, as some integrate more quickly and help others navigate language and cultural systems, thus forming a microcosmic representative democracy. However, these leaders often have one foot in the ethnic community and one in the world of supporting organizations, limiting the community's trust. Exploring the dynamics of ethnic leaders in the communities from multiple perspectives is vital to innovate ways supporting organizations form partners and offer programs and services.

Challenges for newcomers have shifted in small ways throughout the past century. Still, even as administrations and rhetoric around immigration have changed, we continue to see that the needs of refugees and immigrants have primarily remained the same. We must understand the role of supporting and partnering organizations in helping refugees and immigrants integrate into their new hometowns. We must be aware of and sympathetic to the difficulties internationals face, and we must be committed to fostering welcoming communities for immigrants and refugees.

Disclosure Statement

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