Critical Synthesis Toward Transformative Collaboration: A Dialectical Analysis of Functionalist and Critical Paradigms

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Abstract

Social workers are required to become effective boundary spanners to address complex social problems with community-based and cross-system collaboration. However, substantial tensions exist in the literature about how to build successful collaboration, stemming from the massive use of the two competing paradigms: functionalist and critical paradigms. Using a dialectical analysis, this article attempted to uncover and synthesize paradoxical understandings of the major elements of successful collaboration. Significant contradictions between the two contrasting paradigms are identified at the multidimensional levels, including (1) member capacity for developing objective/consensus knowledge vs. subjective/dissensus knowledge, (2) unity vs. diversity in membership, (3) centralized vs. decentralized network governance, and (4) stable/standardized vs. flexible/responsive coordination. The results suggest that there is no consensual approach to developing transformative collaboration that promotes members’ critical capacity, equal relations, democratic governance, and empowering coordination. Social workers should identify and utilize inherent contradictions as a catalyst for developing and maintaining transformative collaboration by considering its dynamic process, context, and interconnection with other systems.

Keywords: collaboration, partnership, critical theories, empowerment, social justice
Introduction

In recent years, collaboration has been recognized as one of the fundamental approaches to social work policy and practice. Collaboration has become popular because of the current political and social climates. For example, social policies, characterized as devolution of responsibility as well as privatization, have increasingly required community-based, cross-system collaboration to secure funds from governments in providing social and human services (Bailey & Koney, 1996; Mulroy & Tamburo, 2004). In addition, various social problems that are root-caused by social injustice and oppression have become more complex to address. There is a common consensus among organizations in the fields of social work that they should work together because no one has enough knowledge and resources to effectively address complex social problems and promote social justice alone.

Because of the growing popularity and potential benefits of collaboration, many researchers and practitioners have strived to develop an effective framework and identify its major dimensions for successful collaboration across settings and sectors (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bailey & Koney, 1996; Bryson et al., 2015; Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Seaton et al., 2018; Thomson & Perry, 2006). Despite the current efforts, there is no unified knowledge of collaboration, especially in social work settings. Rather, substantial contradictions have been identified in the literature on collaboration with respect to how to build and maintain successful collaboration (Bailey & Koney, 1996).

One possible reason for such a conflicting understanding of successful collaboration may stem from the massive use of multiple paradigms explicitly or implicitly without considering paradoxical tensions across different paradigms. Burrell and Morgan (1979) suggest that a paradigm is a meta-theoretical assumption that encompasses a set of theories with shared standpoints, but each theory under a given paradigm also has different ways of understanding a shared reality to some degree. In other words, different paradigms provide different assumptions, theories, and methods in understanding organizational and social realities. However, similarities and differences can coexist within the theories corresponding to a particular paradigm.

Paradigmatic debates about collaboration are not entirely new. Although previous research on collaboration is predominantly grounded in the functionalist paradigm, the critical paradigm increasingly emerges with a clear intention to oppose and resist the core assumptions of the functionalist paradigm (Lotia & Hardy, 2008). Previous studies provide useful insights into understanding how functionalist and critical paradigms offer different approaches to building collaboration. However, many unanswered questions remain in this area. More specifically, there has been little discussion about what actual tensions exist between the two competing paradigms and how to resolve their paradoxes in terms of the core components of successful collaboration.

This paper attempts to answer those questions to uncover a paradoxical understanding of building successful collaboration posed by the contradictions between the functionalist and critical paradigms. A dialectical analysis can provide a useful framework that synthesizes paradoxical tensions, rather than ignoring or resisting them, to achieve goals or to create alternative approaches (Alvesson et al., 2008). It is important to note that this paper does not take a neutral position. It has a clear intention to embrace critical-oriented perspectives into building
transformational collaboration that promotes members’ critical capacity, equal relations, democratic governance, and empowering coordination as the processes and outcomes of collaboration to achieve the mission of social work. Kim (2019) suggests that transformational collaboration is instrumental for effectively addressing power-related issues that have been identified as the most common barriers to the success of collaboration. Furthermore, it is normative because it primarily aims at promoting social justice and social change through equal, democratic, and empowering collaboration with multiple stakeholders.

**Overview of Collaboration**

A simple definition of collaboration would be a form of working together among independent organizations. However, the nature of collaboration is “complex, dynamic, and multilevel systems” (Bryson et al., 2015, p. 1). Several researchers have defined collaboration in many different ways (e.g., Bailey & Koney, 1996; Gray & Wood, 1991; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Gray and Wood (1991) provide a useful definition that involves the common elements of collaboration and answers the important questions about why, how, and with whom organizations participate in the collaboration. According to Gray and Wood (1991), “collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engages in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain” (p. 146).

Based on this definition, major stakeholders in collaboration are individual organizations with common decision-making power although their autonomy is often constrained by shared rules and norms (Gray & Wood, 1991). Furthermore, collaboration is not just a single strategy, but an interactive process with multiple stages. There are generally three phases of collaboration: formation (antecedent or precondition), process (implementation or action), and outcome (impact or production) (Gray & Wood, 1991; Thomson & Perry, 2006). The formation represents the antecedents that encourage or discourage the involvement of collaboration. The second stage indicates the process of implementation to achieve shared purposes. Finally, the outcome refers to the final achievement or evolution throughout collaborative work.

Although all stages are equally important, this paper focuses primarily on the process stage of collaboration because many researchers have paid more attention to identifying the core components at the multidimensional levels that are necessary to manage day-to-day operations for successful collaboration (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2018; Bryson et al., 2015; Bailey & Koney, 1996; Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; San Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2005; Seaton et al., 2018; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). For example, Bailey and Koney (1996) offered eight core components of collaboration: leadership, membership, environmental linkages, strategies, purposes, tasks, structures, and systems. Thomson and Perry (2006) suggested that the key components should include collaborative governance, administration, organizational autonomy, mutuality, and norms. Foster-Fishman et al. (2001) developed an integrative framework with core elements of successful collaboration, including member capacity, relational capacity, organizational capacity, and programmatic capacity. Mattessich and Monsey (1992) also identified six significant components, including external environments, membership, process/structure, communication, purpose, and resources.
Despite the diversity of the core components in the process stage, most of the components offered by previous studies can be organized into four broader categories, although they are not entirely independent, but mutually interconnected: (a) member capacity, (b) member relations, (c) network governance, and (d) collaborative coordination. Each category also includes a variety of specific factors for successful collaboration. Specific factors representing each process component are further diverse and highly fragmented across the literature because each study tends to focus on different aspects of collaboration based on different ideological and theoretical frameworks.

Two Paradigms in Collaboration

A multi-paradigmatic approach is useful for evaluating social work theory and practice from multiple ideologies. In particular, this study selected two contradictory paradigms within the multi-paradigmatic framework originally suggested by Burrell and Morgan (1979): functionalist and critical paradigms. They developed this framework to explain how different paradigms can provide the different assumptions of organizational behaviors. Although it was originated in sociology, the same framework has been used in the field of macro social work, including organizational and community practice (Netting & O’Connor, 2005; Thomas et al., 2011).

Functionalist Paradigm

The functionalist paradigm is well-developed and prevalent in Western society. Although many sociological and social work theories can be categorized in the functionalist paradigm, systems theory can best reflect the major assumptions of this paradigm. Thus, it assumes that society is composed of multiple systems, yet each system is interdependent with one another (Mullaly, 2007). In this sense, a change in one system can affect others, and all systems of the society can contribute to the support, maintenance, and stability of the entire social system by conforming to shared values and norms (Deetz, 1996). The functionalist paradigm also believes that humans are naturally competitive, individualistic, and rational; therefore, human behaviors are motivated by self-interests (Mullaly, 2007). Based on its underlying assumptions, the functionalist paradigm is more concerned with “the status quo, social order, consensus, social integration, solidarity, and need satisfaction” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 26).

Many popular organization theories that examine collaboration are rooted in the functionalist paradigm: network theory, resource dependence theory, institutional theory, and transaction costs theory. The detailed descriptions of each theory go beyond the scope of this paper (see Lotia & Hardy, 2008 for more information). In this paper, we discuss how the four theories suggest similar principles for the successful implementation of collaboration below.

In general, the functionalist theories view collaboration as the efficient and effective organizational form which benefits collaborative members through shared understandings of collaborative goals and strategies (Hardy & Phillips, 1998). They offer useful information about reducing the complexity of organizational environments by increasing organizational adaptability, enhancing efficiency through formalization, and establishing trustful relationships with shared values (Lotia & Hardy, 2008). They also have a similar political position on preserving existing structures so that collaboration successfully adapts to social norms and rules. In addition, they tend to consider power as the ability of different members to achieve their own
or shared goals while ignoring the negative impacts of power, such as exploitation, unfairness, and abuse (Lotia & Hardy, 2008).

**Critical Paradigm**

The critical paradigm has been developed towards radical or progressive-oriented views about organizations. This paradigm considers oppression as the root cause of social problems, assuming that the oppressed are excluded from gaining access to rights, power, and resources by dominant groups (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006). Unlike the functionalist paradigm, the critical paradigm perceives human nature as cooperative, collective, and social (Mullaly, 2007). Thus, human relationships can be understood as the means to secure collective goods rather than individual benefits. Consistent with these basic assumptions, the critical paradigm is more concerned with social and individual transformation by addressing injustice, oppression, and inequality.

However, there is little consensus about which theories can be categorized into the critical paradigm. The critical theory has been considered as one that best represents the critical paradigm and is frequently used to examine collaboration (Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Hazen, 1994; Lotia & Hardy, 2008). However, recent researchers who explicitly or implicitly support the basic tenets of the critical paradigm in examining collaboration have paid additional attention to the empowerment theory (Bryan et al., 2020; Himmelman, 2001) and the social justice theory (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Marullo & Edwards, 2000). It seems reasonable to categorize these theories into the critical paradigm because empowerment and social justice are the key principles of the critical paradigm as a goal or a process or both. The detailed descriptions of each theory go beyond the scope of this paper. Each theory’s assumptions about collaboration have been described elsewhere (Kim, 2017).

Similar to the functionalist theories, critical theories share a common understanding of collaboration. They acknowledge that collaboration is a social, political, and dynamic process. Thus, they focus on addressing the issues around exploitation, oppression, unfairness, and power imbalance within collaboration (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006; Lotia & Hardy, 2008). Critical theories also recognize that there are inevitable conflicts among members within the collaboration, which may have both positive and negative impacts on the development of collaboration (Hardy & Phillips, 1998). Finally, they emphasize democratic decision-making and empowering processes that provide collaborating members with equal power and opportunity (Hazen, 1994; Wolff et al., 2017).

**Contradictory Factors of Successful Collaboration**

This section critically analyzes how two contrasting paradigms and relevant theories offer paradoxical factors for successful collaboration with a specific emphasis on the four components: member capacity, member relations, network governance, and collaborative coordination.

**Member Capacity**

Previous studies examining collaboration have found that member capacities are important factors to ensure the effectiveness of collaboration. Various knowledge and skills are commonly identified as the core competencies for successful collaboration across various types of
collaborations. These include organizing/management, analysis, and interpersonal skills (Bayne-Smith et al., 2008; Bryson et al., 2015; Pfeiffer & Cundari, 2000; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Korazim-Körösy et al., 2007). However, functionalist and critical paradigms suggest somewhat different factors for the success of collaboration.

For the functionalist paradigm, the transaction costs theory considers collaboration as a specific form that can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of individual organizations as well as collaboration itself (Lotia & Hardy, 2008). Therefore, members’ strategic management skills are necessary to improve the efficiency of the flow of information, the allocation of resources and incentives, and service coordination through rigorous processes (Bayne-Smith et al., 2008; McNamara et al., 2020). Members’ scientific analysis skills are also important from functionalist theories because these skills enable them to assess objective needs, identify the best intervention, and examine the effectiveness of collaboration through scientific rigor (Pfeiffer & Cundari, 2000). Finally, functionalist theories, such as social network theory and institutional theory, emphasize interpersonal skills for building trustful relationships and reaching consensus among members. Many studies have shown that these skills allow members to identify their common values and create shared visions (Bayne-Smith et al., 2008; Korazim-Körösy et al., 2007).

On the other hand, the critical paradigm suggests different member capacities for the success of collaboration. For example, the critical theory requires members to improve their critical consciousness about the root causes of social problems (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006; Wolff et al., 2017). Other studies have also shown that interpersonal skills for respecting, negotiating, and advocating diverse ideas had positive effects on the empowerment and effectiveness of collaboration (Himmelman, 2001; San Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2005; Korazim-Körösy et al., 2007). Critical theorists argue that respecting diverse ideas is necessary to avoid coercive decisions by dominant groups (Agger & Löfgren, 2008). Furthermore, empowerment theorists suggest that advocating skills are necessary to engage less powerful members by enhancing their voices in collaborative decision-making (Himmelman, 1996).

**Member Relations**

Collaboration is ultimately related to developing both internal and external relationships (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001). Positive member relations promote access to critical resources, increase members’ commitment, facilitate effective program implementation, and ensure long-term sustainability in collaboration (Alves et al., 2020; Chandler, 2017; San Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2005). Despite the significant effects of member relations, the two contrasting paradigms tend to show different answers to the question about how to build member relations and who can become potential members.

Functionalist theories commonly highlight mutual dependence (resource dependence theory), unified membership with shared culture and values (institutional theory), and trustful and reciprocal relationships (social network theory and transaction costs theory) within the collaboration. Institutional theorists suggest that successful collaboration should obtain both internal and external legitimacy through mutual understanding, interdependence, and trust (Bryson et al., 2015). Almog-Bar and Schmid (2018) found that members in cross-sector collaboration were more likely to share their resources, information, and capacities when they
had a higher level of trust. Chen (2008) also found that the reciprocal relationships built by shared norms and trust reduced complexity as well as transaction costs in providing human services. Consequently, functionalist theorists argue that it is more effective to engage members with similar characteristics in collaboration because they can easily build trust based on their commonality.

Although critical theorists acknowledge the positive effects of trust, they focus more on ensuring diverse membership with equal power because collaboration does not always provide equal opportunities to join the collaboration and share benefits with all members (Lotia & Hardy, 2008; Ran & Qi, 2018). Lotia and Hardy (2008) asserted that collaboration can be used for powerful organizations to control marginalized organizations or preserve their dominant positions. Equal power relationships can be also explained by an organizational justice theory that proposes the three dimensions of fairness at the organizational level: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice. Interactional justice is defined as fair treatment between members (Colquitt et al., 2001). Weiner, Alexander, and Shortell (2002) showed that perceived fair treatment especially in resolving conflict was positively associated with collaborative outcomes, such as satisfaction with decisions, personal engagement, and organizational integration.

Network Governance

Network governance refers to a joint decision-making structure and process in collaboration (Provan & Milward, 2010). Many studies showed that an effective governance structure is strongly associated with the success of collaboration (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2018; Provan & Kenis, 2008; San Martin-Rodriguez et al., 2005; Weiner et al., 2002). However, a governance structure can take different forms with different purposes and procedures. These different forms are usually characterized by vertical and horizontal structures.

Given the emphasis of the functionalist paradigm on efficiency and effectiveness to improve the organization’s functioning and system stability, functionalist theories often emphasize a vertical and centralized governance structure because the centrality is beneficial for developing a clear communication system and making collaborative decisions in efficient ways (Provan & Milward, 2010; Thomson & Perry, 2006). Jones et al. (1997) developed a conceptual framework for network governance based on the transaction costs theory and social network theory. They insisted that a governance structure should be created by a rational choice to maximize collaborative benefits and minimize coordination costs. To do so, one of the effective strategies is to restrict access to decision-making processes because it helps create an efficient mechanism in managing collaboration (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

In contrast, critical theories stress that a horizontal governance structure that allows all members to equally engage in collaborative decision-making can produce better outcomes of collaboration. This horizontal structure can ensure democratic decision-making, undistorted communication, and equal participation among members (Himmelman, 2001; Lotia & Hardy, 2008; Wolff et al., 2017). Osei-Kojo et al. (2020) found that when individual members had equal power in making decisions, their collaboration produced a high quality of member relationships and effective outcomes. Organizational justice theory also suggests that the concept of procedural justice can be used for fair and democratic decision-making. A decision-making
process appears to be fair when it is consistent across people; is unbiased to suppress self-interest; is guided by accurate information; offers opportunities to modify incorrect decisions; is representative of all stakeholders’ needs, and is congruent with one’s ethical values (Leventhal, 1988).

**Collaborative Coordination**

Collaboration requires another structural characteristic to coordinate collaborative policies and programs on a daily basis. Major tasks in collaborative coordination include goal settings, planning, developing operating procedures and roles, monitoring, and providing technical and administrative support for the successful implementation of collaboration (Pfeiffer & Cundari, 2000). Collaborative coordination often occurs after members make collaborative decisions. Therefore, the different modes of collaborative coordination are highly correlated with network governance. For example, a formalized and standardized procedure is mainly derived from the vertical governance structure, whereas the flexible and responsive procedure results from the horizontal governance structure (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

Functionalist theories, such as transaction costs theory, posit that rigid and standardized coordination is beneficial for collaboration because it provides members with stable and predictable coordination systems with codified rules, clear divisions of responsibilities, detailed work plans, efficient time management (Jones et al., 1997). Previous studies constantly report that this type of coordination procedure can enhance task and goal accomplishment (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001), promote a consistent member commitment (Bailey & Koney, 1996; Butterfoss & Kegler, 2002), minimize coordination costs (Jones et al., 1997), and increase accountability and sustainability (Seaton et al., 2018).

Conversely, critical and empowerment theorists stress flexible rules, interactive roles, and responsive work plans. They argue that the flexible, interactive, and responsive coordination is beneficial for ensuring meaningful engagement among members, allowing for free exchanges of resources and services to meet the complex needs of service users, and promoting the constructive use of conflict (Bryan et al., 2020; Himmelman, 2001; Kim & Siddiki, 2018). Flexibility is necessary for empowerment because it enhances the active engagement of diverse members in collaboration and provides enough time to deal with ever-changing needs and challenges (Kim & Gentle-Genitty, 2021). Flexibility is closely tied to responsiveness. Flexible procedures encourage members to negotiate their differences and restructure an existing coordination system so that they can be more responsive to their varying requirements and changing environments (Bryson et al., 2015; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992).

**Dialectical Discussions**

Functionalist and critical paradigms generally agree that collaboration is an ongoing process with multidimensional components at the individual, relational, and structural levels. Some similar suggestions are found regardless of different paradigms to improve the successful implementation of collaboration. For example, both paradigms emphasize open communication although they have different reasons why it is important. The functionalist paradigm stresses open communication to increase efficient decision-making, whereas the critical paradigm emphasizes it to avoid dominance and ensure democracy in network governance. However, they
also offer somewhat paradoxical suggestions, given that increasing one paradigm’s element inherently decreases the other’s contradictory one. The results of this critical review raise an important question about whether the two paradigms can be commensurable to enhance the success of collaboration. If so, to what extent they can be integrated without seriously impinging on each other’s major ideological perspectives, values, and purposes?

A dialectical analysis can offer a useful framework and principles to identify and integrate each paradigm’s strengths and limitations in a constructive way. Benson (1977) suggests that dialectical analysis can be conducted with a cyclical process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis using four principles: (1) social construction refers to the continuous and dynamic process of constructing social reality; (2) totality assumes that a certain social phenomenon consists of multiple parts as a whole and the parts are interconnected with one another; (3) contradiction indicates that every social phenomenon contains contradictory natures that shape the basis for change; and (4) praxis emphasizes humans as active agents for social constructions to develop practice-oriented knowledge that reflects their own contexts. Drawing on these dialectical principles, significant contradictions between functionalist and critical paradigms are identified at the individual, relational, and structural levels, including (1) member capacity for developing objective/consensus knowledge vs. subjective/dissensus knowledge, (2) unity vs. diversity in membership, (3) centralized vs. decentralized network governance, and (4) stable/standardized vs. flexible/responsive coordination. Ultimately, the synthesized results of the dialectical analysis will be used to develop a conceptual framework for building transformative collaboration. In other words, we attempt to maximize the positive outcomes of transformative collaboration and minimize its negative outcomes through a dialectical use of the functionalist paradigm.

Members’ Critical Capacity

At the individual level, analytical skills are critical for members to assess social problems and service users’ complex needs to successfully achieve their shared goals in collaboration. Analytical skills are also necessary for planning collaboration, monitoring the progress of collaboration, and evaluating its multidimensional outcomes. However, functionalist and critical paradigms seem to offer different sets of analytical skills to accomplish these major tasks. Their significant contradiction stems from their philosophical and ideological understandings of how to understand social problems and create knowledge, as well as epistemological stance.

Since the functionalist paradigm emphasizes the interconnectedness of society by assessing how each part influences and is influenced by other parts, cause-and-effect relationships are clear and pervasive. Consequently, the functionalist paradigm tends to be grounded in positivistic viewpoints that seek a parsimonious understanding of social problems through more likely objective, quantitative, and value-free procedures and methods (Deetz, 1996). On the other hand, the critical paradigm often seeks to develop subjective or local knowledge through historical, qualitative, and participatory processes and methods (Deetz, 1996). The two paradigms also have somewhat different purposes of knowledge building. The functionalist paradigm is more concerned with preserving social order and enhancing social consensus, whereas the critical paradigm is more concerned with disrupting imposition and promoting social change (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).
The critical paradigm can provide useful skills for the development and evaluation of transformative collaboration. First, it produces local and contextual knowledge that best reflects community perspectives. It also enables for identifying multiple stakeholders’ diverse values and interests and avoiding a powerful group’s domination. Finally, it enhances members’ empowerment in collaboration through ongoing negotiation and advocacy. However, the critical paradigm has some limitations. For example, it highlights subjective values. Thus, when multiple stakeholders have value conflicts, answering “whose values should be prioritized” is often filled with much conflict and debate. Also, it may be less effective for developing evidence-informed programs to effectively and efficiently solve social problems, although it is beneficial for raising critical consciousness about the root causes of the social problems (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006).

These inherent limitations may be resolved by combining some strengths of the functionalist paradigm, such as solving social problems and developing effective programs with objective and scientific methods (Creamer, 2003). Indeed, for critical theorists, the intent of building knowledge (i.e., social justice) is more important than the philosophical debate about subjectivism versus objectivism (Deetz, 1996). Therefore, building analytical skills that integrate both objectivism and subjectivism may be more effective for better understanding the complex and dynamic nature of collaboration and addressing its paradoxes (Vangen, 2017). Such a mixed-methods approach may also be appropriate to analyze and address injustice and oppression. For example, collaboration members may begin with a phenomenological study to focus on the commonality of a lived experience with a historically marginalized community to assess injustice issues and then collect quantitative data to demonstrate whether the initial findings from the phenomenological study are credible and representative (Mertens, 2007). Furthermore, the mixed-methods approach can be beneficial for building trust between participants and enhancing their active engagement in collective action to transform communities (Sweetman et al., 2010).

**Equal Member Relations**

Another significant contradiction was identified at the relational level of collaboration between the functionalist and critical paradigm: unity with trust versus diversity with equal power. These two concepts are contradictory because increasing diversity can inherently undermine unity in collaboration. The critical paradigm places more emphasis on diversity over unity because it is critical for ensuring the voice and representativeness of marginalized populations, gaining equal power between diverse stakeholders, developing alternative approaches to social change (Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 1993; Vangen, 2017). However, diversity may not be a panacea for the success of transformative collaboration. As the functionalist paradigm argues, there may be potential negative consequences if diversity is too much emphasized without an adequate level of unity that motivates people to work together through shared goals and values. High diversity may reduce members’ sense of belonging, increase confusion and conflict between members, and even require more time to create and achieve shared goals in collaboration (Kim & Siddiki, 2018; Saz-Carranza & Ospina, 2010).

In this regard, there is a common agreement that successful collaboration requires balancing diversity and unity. However, an additional discussion is necessary regarding to what extent and when they can be balanced. One possible solution from a dialectical perspective is that members can address different dimensions of diversity and unity in recruiting and managing.
membership in collaboration. The unity-diversity tension can exist in a wide range of dimensions, such as goals, ideologies, outcomes, power, and other individual characteristics (Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 1993). Saz-Carranza and Ospina (2010) suggest that collaborative members can unify their vision and goals to promote collective action while diversifying members’ backgrounds, knowledge, skills, and resources to enhance the inclusiveness and effectiveness of membership for successful collaboration. They also suggest that specific dimensions for reconciling unity and diversity should be determined carefully after taking into consideration the particular context or progress of collaboration. For example, collaboration may begin with homogenous groups so that they can easily reach a consensus about their mission and goals. After that, they can invite diverse members to bring new ideas and resources into collaboration.

Drawing on the concept of the totality, it is also helpful to link other elements of collaboration to managing the paradox of diversity in transformative collaboration. Kim and Siddiki (2018) showed that the positive effect of the diverse membership on procedural justice in collaborative governance decreased when the level of diversity was too low or too high. The negative effect of diversity was particularly greater when power differentials were evident among members. Diverse membership without equal power could engender the potential exploitation and domination of a powerful group in governing and coordinating collaboration. Therefore, if diverse membership is inevitable in building collaboration, it is important to develop democratic network governance that encourages diverse members to develop unified goals with fair, inclusive, and transparent decision-making processes.

**Democratic Network Governance**

At the structural level, one of the paradoxical tensions occurs in creating a network governance structure that allows members to engage in and make collaborative decisions. The critical paradigm argues that horizontal and decentralized governance is necessary to ensure democratic decision-making with all members’ full participation, whereas the functionalist paradigm argues that hierarchical and centralized governance is necessary to control the flow of information and improve the efficiency of collaborative decision-making. These two arguments are contradictory, in that increasing inclusive democracy can decrease efficiency (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

Although critical paradigm would place more emphasis on promoting democracy over efficiency, some significant challenges are identified in engaging diverse representatives in collaborative decision-making, including extensive conflicts because of involving too many members, each members’ unclear responsibility because of shared leadership, and the vulnerability of small organizations because of their limited time and resources (Huxham & Vangen, 1996). Furthermore, horizontal and decentralized governance may increase members’ burn-out and decrease their enthusiasm as the collaboration evolves because it requires all members’ extensive time and efforts to participate in collaboration (Provan & Kenis, 2008). These challenges may be more salient when collaboration involves a larger number of members from multiple sectors and settings (Provan & Kenis 2008) and responds to changing needs and problems (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

Provan and Kenis (2008) suggest an alternative mode of network governance that balances inclusiveness and efficiency in collaborative decision-making, called Network
Administrative Organization (NAO). The NAO model is designed to create an independent organization that governs collaboration and coordinates its routine administrative tasks without engaging in actual decision-making. It is characterized as a moderate level of centrality in network governance, where NAO serves as a network facilitator or broker in collaborative decision-making. The NAO model has been demonstrated to be effective for reducing the complexity of horizontal and decentralized governance while ensuring representative participation, especially when the collaboration involves diverse members with lower levels of trust and goal consensus (Dal Molin & Masella, 2016). Furthermore, this particular model may be effective for reducing power inequality issues in collaboration because the NAO does not make decisions and plays an important role in monitoring the fair distribution of power among members.

**Empowering Coordination**

Another paradoxical tension at the structural level is concerned with rigidity versus flexibility in collaborative coordination. The two concepts are also clearly in the nature of competing forces; rigidity will decrease when flexibility increases (Das & Teng, 2000). This contradiction is also closely tied to the paradoxical tension identified in network governance. As the functional paradigm suggests, centralized governance aligns well with rigid coordination because it provides formalized, standardized, and stable structures to efficiently implement their collaborative activities. However, with increasing complexity in society, collaborative coordination that adapts and balances flows between individuals, institutions, and structures are needed than ever before. The critical paradigm insists that flexible coordination could be more beneficial to accomplish collaborative decisions because it empowers members to change their coordination structure to respond quickly to their changing needs. It also facilitates open dialogue for negotiating their different interests and developing innovative ideas (Lewis et al., 2010).

Despite the potential benefits of flexibility, the literature on collaboration has shown some unexpected outcomes when collaboration operates with too much flexibility. For example, flexible coordination can make the progress of collaboration slow because of ongoing learning and negotiation processes between members, which is what Huxham and Vangen (1996) called collaborative inertia. Furthermore, high flexibility with low rigidity can decrease members’ abilities to control their collaborative coordination due to the lack of a clear protocol that provides members with formalized rules, roles, rights, and responsibilities (Das & Teng, 2000). Therefore, flexible coordination often requires more time, effort, and resources to successfully coordinate collaboration than does rigid coordination (Vangen, 2017).

From a dialectical perspective, the paradox of flexibility can be addressed by maintaining a relative balance between flexibility and rigidity for transformative collaboration. Although many people would agree with balancing the two contradictions (e.g., Das & Teng, 2000), there is still a lack of research on how and where to balance in building transformative collaboration. One possible strategy is that rigidity and formalization can be used to legalize the democratic and empowering process of collaborative coordination. In fact, legalization is necessary to ensure democracy and fairness and prevent domination and opportunism (Lewis et al., 2010). However, flexibility is still essential to empower members to develop their own best solutions. To do so, transformative collaboration requires a monitoring system as an ongoing learning process with
members’ frequent interaction and open dialogue to assess whether collaboration is responsive to changing contexts as the collaboration evolves. For the critical paradigm, it is also important to monitor certain members’ marginalization, exclusion, and power inequality in coordinating collaboration (Hardy & Phillips, 1998). Finally, technical support that ensures financial, human, and social resources enable marginalized members to be empowered by improving their capacity and power to engage in collaborative coordination (Gutierrez et al., 1995; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

**Conclusion**

Due to the increasing complexity of social problems, social workers are required to become effective boundary spanners who build, implement, and evaluate collaboration across settings and sectors. However, there is still little understanding of how to build transformative collaboration to promote social justice and equity in the field of social work. The main purpose of this paper was to critically analyze and synthesize paradoxical contradictions between functionalist and critical paradigms with regard to the key factors of successful collaboration. The results of this dialectical analysis are used to develop effective strategies for promoting the core dimensions of transformative collaboration: members’ critical capacity, equal relations, democratic governance, and empowering coordination.

However, dialectical analysis is a continuous process to identify further contradictions from the initial syntheses and suggest an alternative approach to new theory building (Benson, 1977). Therefore, ongoing research should be conducted to elaborate more on the core dimensions of transformative collaboration and translate them into actual practice. For example, collaboration operates with multiple stages from formation to evolution. Potential contradictions could also exist at any stage of collaboration. Furthermore, each dimension of transformative collaboration may interact with one another or even this interaction may be further influenced by external factors. In other words, a change in one dimension may engender inherent tensions in others. Finally, it is important to develop practice-oriented and contextual knowledge that best represents each collaboration’s internal dynamics and external environments (Bryson et al., 2015). These future efforts can provide useful insights into developing a holistic, comprehensive, and contextualized model of transformative collaboration.
References


